

A Flash of Something Human

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A Flash of Something Human

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Summary

On a mission to investigate a possible Super Soldier, Sam and Bucky encounter a middle-aged Steve Rogers chasing down a Winter Soldier. In the course of a day, Sam and Bucky help Steve figure out how he can get out of his frustrating cycle of missions, everyone has some good talks, and Bucky gets to compete with his past self for Sam's affection. It's a good time, except for the parts that are absolutely horrible.

Notes

This is a hard to tag warnings for, because most of it is non-explicit and in the past, but the implied past is horrible. A lot is implied about how Bucky was used and abused as the Winter Soldier. There are some vague references to Bucky having wanted to die, but nothing super specific. Non-specific references to Sam experiencing racism. Minor violence. Steve is pining for Sam and Bucky in different ways but he's not here to start trouble, he understands he is in a SamBucky story. Let me know if you see other things that should be tagged.

My Favorite Sam

Sam sees a flash of something human in the distance.

"This way!" He yells as he starts running down the hall of an abandoned industrial building.

They are two blocks from the townhouse Sam shares with Bucky. He has no idea what they are looking for, but Torres had been adamant that Sam needed to get there quickly and in uniform. That Bucky would also be there seemed to be a given.

As he runs, Sam hears one set of footsteps echoing down the hall, his own. He intentionally changes his cadence for a moment and briefly hears Bucky's footfalls before the soldier falls back into Sam's rhythm. Bucky gets annoyed when Sam compliments him on what Bucky sees as basic competence, but Sam has spent almost two decades trying to be the perfect wingman, both literally and figuratively, and he appreciates Bucky's skill at taking a support position. He may be grumbling and glaring, but Bucky is always right where Sam needs him to be.

"He's moving up!" Bucky yells from behind. "Jumping up. Looks like another fucking Super Soldier."

Sam engages his goggles for a better view but the man is barely more than a blur as he leaps up the stairwell in the distance. Given the speed and ease of his jumps, Sam has to agree it is either a humanoid with superhuman strength or a video game character come to life.

When Sam hits the stairwell, he uses his thrusters to shoot straight up to the top floor, but his quarry is already nearly out of sight and the corridors are not wide enough for Sam to fly. He'll never catch up on foot.

"He's most likely heading to one of the two stairwells that lead to the roof. I'll take the short cut and see if I can cut him off," Sam says into his comm before using his shield to break through the nearest window.

Before Sam is out the window, he can hear Bucky's footfalls in the corridor. He is now running at full speed rather than at Sam's very human pace.

Sam lands on the roof between two stairwell doors that are about twenty feet apart and facing each other. He can clearly hear Bucky loudly taking about five steps at a time in one stairwell, while the stealthy footsteps in the other are only audible with the help of Redwing. Sam focuses on the stairwell with the quiet footsteps as Bucky loudly kicks open what must have been a heavily (based on the sound of grinding metal) pad-locked stairwell door and steps onto the roof behind Sam.

Later, he would be able to identify that something had sounded Wrong, but in the moment, Sam responds by instinct before there is a clear thought. He gets his shield up in time to block the first knife Bucky hurls at his back and blocks the second more by luck than anything. When Sam turns around, Bucky's face is the stuff of nightmares. There is no sign of humanity in his nearly covered face as he stomps his way towards Sam.

Sam yells, "Bucky!" as the door behind him opens and a shield identical to his own goes flying past him. The shield hits the wall behind Bucky, ricocheting and hitting the Super soldier in the back with enough force to knock over a normal human; it causes Bucky to stumble forward slightly. Sam throws his own shield for a similar ricochet off the back of Bucky's legs. Bucky can and will catch anything thrown in his direction. Sam has seen Bucky catch and throw back a bullet. Hitting him on a ricochet is the best bet to actually do damage. As Bucky staggers at the impact on his calves, Sam again yells, "Bucky", hoping to trigger some recognition.

Bucky's in full Winter Soldier gear. Something has gone terribly wrong, but there is precious little time for thinking as Bucky is in full murderous cyborg mode. Sam jumps in the air, engaging his wings, as Bucky hurls the shield back at him at an alarming speed. The shield hits Sam square in the chest and the force knocks him several feet backwards but physics is on his side in the air, protecting him from the full impact of the hit. Sam is grateful Bucky doesn't hold back in their training sessions. Sam has had plenty of experience having the shield whipped at him with the speed and strength of a locomotive.

Sam hears the words "Who the hell is Bucky?" coming from two different directions, from Bucky and a second voice behind him. Sam doesn't dare take his eyes off Bucky to look back, but his heart pounds at the familiar voice.

"You say it every time, Buck. Every goddamn time."

Sam would know that voice anywhere, but it sounds older, rougher. Sure enough, Steve Rogers leaps out from somewhere behind Sam, straight at Bucky, and the two are a whirl of color and movement. Sam watches for his moments when he can get in a hit without risking permanent damage to Bucky. It was impossible to fight the Winter Soldier back when he was a terrifying stranger, but it's even worse when he is inhabiting the body of a friend. The soldier is relentless and so very skilled; he leaves no room for punches to be pulled. The soldier can clearly see Steve and Sam are holding back and he takes full advantage. While Steve grapples in close with the Soldier, the Soldier takes every opportunity to attack Sam, forcing Steve to try and protect his more breakable friend rather than remaining focused on bringing the Soldier down. Sam hates that it works, but is impressed by the strategy, and how quickly the Soldier identifies and plays on Steve's weakness.

Sam flies off, giving Steve a moment to properly focus on the fight, before dive-bombing Bucky from behind, knocking him to the ground. There is a flash of blue from Steve and the Soldier is unconscious on the ground, with Steve quickly restraining him with vibranium cuffs.

Bucky's hair is long. His arm is shiny metal. This is definitely not Sam's Bucky, at least not the same one who followed Sam into the building. Steve has lines on his pretty boy face and strands of white in his blond hair.

But the smile is just as Sam remembered.

"Sam! Look at you! You look amazing! You have the wings and the shield! I always hoped you would, but I have never gotten to see it. I only get to see you... It's so good to see you, Sam."

Steve is walking towards Sam with his arms extended but he stops a few steps away.

"It's me, Sam. The me that you know... Well. It's me from this timeline. I didn't know if I would be able to tell you were the real Sam... They were all the 'real Sam' but you're my Sam. God, I've missed you so much."

Sam half expects an attack, but Steve simply gives him one of those big hugs that make you feel warm for the next half hour.

"You look so cool!" Steve gushes as he holds Sam tight. "I told Bucky that if anyone could make Captain America cool, it was you. This tech has Wakanda all over it. How did that happen?"

The best Sam can manage is, "Bucky."

Steve cringes. "I think I knocked out our Bucky in the stairwell. Your Bucky. Apparently, they are all my Bucky now. It's complicated."

Sam looks at the Bucky lying on the ground.

"When you mess with time, it tends to mess back," Steve offers like an explanation.

"Is it really you?" Sam asks, his tongue feeling unnaturally large and cumbersome in his mouth.

"Yes. I think. It's all gotten pretty confusing," Steve admits before giving Sam a second, far more gentle hug. "Every Sam in every timeline is a friend, but you are still my favorite Sam."

Sam is still trying to wrap his brain around what is happening when Bucky comes leaping out of the same stairwell Steve had come from. He yells Sam's name and has two knives ready to throw as he takes in the scene.

"Sorry, Buck," Steve yells in a congenial tone. "Thought you were..."

Steve gestures to the unconscious Bucky on the ground.

Bucky looks wary, but he allows Steve to hug him, never taking his eyes off of Sam. Bucky is still holding his knives but Steve seems unconcerned.

"Look at you, Buck. You look..." Steve tries and fails to find a word before weakly settling on, "Great."

"How long has it been since they scrambled his brain?" Bucky asks as he effortlessly flicks his knives back into their hiding places. He still looks ready to fight as his eyes keep scanning the scene and returning to Sam, as though Sam could possibly have answers as to why there are currently two Captain Americas and two Bucky Barnes sharing a rooftop.

"I'm not sure. I just got..." Steve winces. "I was recently made aware there was a Winter Soldier here. I have only been in this timeline for two days, and I haven't been able to get close enough to try and jog some memories. I have no idea how long he has been here."

"What are you going to do with him?" Bucky asks with an unnatural detachment, like he has no connection to the unconscious man on the floor.

"I'll need to keep him somewhere until he..." Steve trails off awkwardly, looking suddenly very tired, and Sam wishes he had fought harder to help Steve with returning the stones. It had seemed smarter at the time to only have one person fucking with time, but it was clear time had been fucking back pretty damn hard. Steve looks exhausted and drained.

"Is more cooperative," Bucky offers.

"More himself," Steve corrects.

Bucky grabs the unconscious soldier by the harness strap across his chest and heaves him into the air and over his shoulder in one effortless movement, treating his unconscious double like a sack of potatoes. Sam sees his own discomfort reflected in Steve's eyes. They are hardly in a position to tell Bucky how to treat... himself? No wonder Steve finally has fine lines on his face.

"We have a place," Bucky says with no emotion. "It's Winter Soldier proof".

Bucky's Nightmare

It's an actual nightmare. The Winter Soldier regularly haunts Bucky's dreams, but these dreams are the worst. Dreams where Bucky has to face the Winter Soldier while Sam and/or Steve watch with pitying eyes.

Bucky knows this isn't literally a dream, because Sam and Steve are trying to keep their faces neutral instead of being openly sad or disappointed and Bucky picks up the Soldier in the first try instead of struggling and failing in front of his audience. Bucky knows the constant humiliation that comes with his dreams, and this reality is much more banal. In reality, Bucky simply carries a husk of a man known as the Winter Soldier over his shoulder and his friends do their best to not look horrified, because they are good friends and good people. If either of them had the decency to look down on Bucky, he wouldn't have to make them do it in his dreams.

Sam asks the relevant questions like why is Steve there, why has he aged twenty years in six months and why the fuck is there a second Winter Soldier in their timeline and blocks from their home, but he gets very few meaningful answers. Steve hems and haws and vaguely indicates that Hydra has sent him on a variety of wild Bucky chases through time. Bucky doesn't know how to feel about it all. Part of him assumed getting away from Bucky's bullshit had been a motive for Steve retreating from his own timeline. Bucky didn't blame Steve. God knows Steve had given enough of himself to the sad saga of Bucky Barnes. There have been so many times that Bucky wished he could have Steve back, but this reality is horrible. Steve is supposed to be living a real life, not chasing Bucky through time. Steve is supposed to finally be happy, not looking so broken and lost.

When the Soldier begins to stir, Bucky props him against the nearest wall and begins reciting the code words. The Soldier fights and tries to cover his ears. Bucky gives him a backhand and the Soldier pulls himself together.

Steve and Sam both say his name when he strikes the soldier, both sad and horrified. Dueling Captain Americas with their endless store of pity for a brainwashed assassin. When Steve left, he pointed Bucky and Sam at one another, doing his best to manipulate them each into looking out for one another. Sam had held up his end of the bargain by consistently reaching out and checking on Bucky, inviting Bucky into his home, including him on missions, and generally trying to help Bucky be a real boy again. Bucky tried to look out for Sam by trying to stay out of his life as much as possible, but he failed miserably in the face of Sam's constant generosity. Their lives are now hopelessly tangled and here is the Winter Soldier to remind everyone why that is such a tremendously bad idea.

The dull face that follows the code words is easier to endure than the confusion and anger of moments ago. Bucky knows exactly how the Soldier feels: memories disjointed and confused, constant thrumming pain in his arm and throughout his body, thoughts that seem to come from outside his own mind - not leaving room for his own thoughts. Until his memory kicks in, it is a mercy to keep the soldier compliant and vacant.

Under the code words, the Soldier can drift. He is aware of everything but he doesn't have to feel. He can be numb and floaty as he walks next to Bucky.

They are certainly getting looks, two Captain Americas and two Winter Soldiers, but slightly fewer looks than when Bucky was carrying himself.

The Soldier barely looks human in his full gear, yet it is when people's eyes move from the Soldier to Bucky that they look scared. His expression must be... unpleasant.

"So, the two of you... have a place?" Steve asks in a carefully neutral tone.

"We have places," Sam cheerfully corrects Steve. "Ole Bucky and I have achieved a level of synergy you're going to find impressive, Steve. We've really become a team. Right, Buck?"

"Do you ever stop talking?" Bucky snaps out of habit. Their 'partnership' consists of Bucky handing over all of his money to Sam who then procures the things they need to live. King T'Challa had refused to hand over Bucky to the U.S. government until he secured not only a pardon, but a huge pile of money to help James Buchanan Barnes get 'back on his feet'. Bucky still doesn't have a great concept of modern money. The numbers in his savings account look made up and nearly meaningless. Meanwhile, Sam had lost his DC home during the blip and was still waiting for the GRC to figure out some way for him (and half the planet) to recover his losses. When Bucky showed Sam his savings account and asked if it was enough to buy a duplex in the DC area, Sam had whistled and said it was enough to buy a block of houses and probably a couple senators.

It had been a tough negotiation. Bucky wanted to just buy the duplex and give half to Sam, because it was goddamn monopoly money handed to Bucky for managing not to die no matter how often he'd prayed for death. Sam, naturally, had to make it complicated and

insisted on paying his share. After a series of arguments that even Bucky recognized as absurd, Sarah stepped in and gently suggested, "Why don't the two of you just live together like the old married couple you are and let Sam take care of renting out the second unit? Bucky gets money, Sam gets to be bossy. Everybody wins."

Bucky and Sam currently own homes in DC, Brooklyn and Delacroix. Sam takes care of the tenants and property while Bucky still spends half his nights sleeping on the floor of his various tastefully appointed homes because he can't handle sleeping in a bed like a human.

"Bucky is building a real estate empire," Sam explains. "Man's got his money making money."

"Sam is creating an empire," Bucky argues. "I just sign paperwork."

"We're the Property Brothers from Different Mothers. Establishing affordable housing..."

"For every sad sack Sam meets," Bucky finishes. It is unkind, but not wrong. Sam is always very honest about charging rent well below the market to people who are struggling for one reason or another, and he obviously tries very hard not to manipulate Bucky into agreeing. He lays out the facts and shows Bucky he could turn a larger profit renting to the wealthy instead of the downtrodden, but then he puts his hand on Bucky's shoulder and looks at him with his sincere eyes and does that, "I care about you as a person" look and it isn't like Bucky actually stands a chance. He'd hand over his vibranium arm if Sam asked while making eye contact and touching Bucky's shoulder. He'd hand over both arms if Sam asked while leaning in close over Bucky's shoulder, crowding into Bucky's space, to point out some fascinating tax benefit or interest rate. Bucky never has any real defenses against Sam's charms, but he is all too vulnerable when feeling equal parts bored and anxious about things he doesn't understand.

At a crosswalk, the Soldier tries to cast a glance back towards Sam. Bucky slaps him with the vibranium arm, hard enough to dislodge the soldier's goggles and leave them dangling under the Soldier's chin. The blow is unnecessarily vicious, but if the Soldier is already testing Bucky, things could get ugly quickly. It's best to make it clear that while Bucky may look less powerful than the Soldier, he's a formidable opponent. He needs to establish clear dominance. He barks in Russian for the Soldier to keep his eyes straight ahead. The asset turns his head forward, but there is a noticeable scowl on his face. He must be overdue for a mindwipe, or perhaps seeing Steve and Bucky is triggering memories. There's nothing

'Bucky' in those eyes, but the childish anger where there should only be a blank stare is a sure sign the conditioning is beginning to fail.

It's a dangerous time. This is when the Soldier would happily beg for a mindwipe, when the thoughts become chaotic and overwhelming. When his whole body begins to buzz and throb with a deep sense of wrongness. The Soldier still has no ability to properly rebel, but he will become increasingly difficult to handle before he can be reasoned with.

Bucky whirls on Sam when he says, "Bucky," in that oh-so-concerned way. Sam actually takes a step back and throws his hands in the air. Steve adjusts his stance, ready for a fight. They are traveling with a confused and angry Winter Soldier on the brink of breaking through his behavioral controls, but it is Bucky they are worried about. Bucky's box breathing like a motherfucker and feeling the weight of his feet in his boots like he learned in therapy, but they think he is the dangerous one.

"I know you know what you're doing," Sam says in an even tone, with eyes full of compassion, "But that guy is our friend, too."

"Given a choice between a few slaps and spending the rest of his life knowing he killed you or Steve? What do you think he'd choose?"

"Got it," Sam agrees, giving Bucky's arm a squeeze. "I'll try to stay in my own lane here, I just want you to remember that we love this guy, too."

Steve nods in agreement and then shoots a quizzical look at Sam. He's probably trying to understand what's going on between Bucky and Sam. Maybe he'll tell Bucky when he figures it out.

Steve Needs a Break

It's horrible to watch Bucky slap the Soldier, but Steve can see the aggressive approach works. The Soldier is radiating anger but keeping his eyes straight ahead. Steve had the immobilizer at the ready, but The Winter Soldier had just barely turned his eyes towards Sam when Bucky 'redirected' him. Steve has learned the early signs of rebellion the hard way. More than once, he had been duped into letting his guard down, thinking Bucky was coming back to himself, only to end up with the Winter Soldier going into some kind of feral state.

But it is clear Bucky is not struggling with any sentimental nonsense. Bucky with his GQ haircut and casual assassin leather. The most familiar face in the world, yet looking like a stranger. Steve isn't sure how long he has been trapped in a cycle of tracking down Winter Soldiers and turning them back into Bucky's, but he feels deeply relieved to have some expert help. Everything Steve has learned about the Winter Soldier has left him feeling hollow and haunted. Steve has learned how to handle the Soldier, but it never stops making his skin crawl. Barking orders and using code words to control the assassin is a necessary evil, but eventually, the Soldier will grin and remember some nonsense from their childhood and Steve feels dirty down to his bones. Dehumanization is a big part of the Winter Soldier programming and until Bucky can break through the programming, the Asset will only respond to a Handler.

Having a future Bucky who is capable of wrangling a past Bucky seems like a stroke of good luck, but this is the first time Hydra has sent Steve into the future. It can't be a good sign. Nothing is a good sign when it comes to Hydra. The fact the Winter Soldier had been walking distance from where current Sam and Bucky live is definitely not a good sign.

Bucky makes the Soldier stare into a corner while he opens the door to the brownstone he apparently shares with Sam. The world's deadliest assassin looks like a child in time out. Steve wishes there was a way to offer comfort to either Bucky but knows his sympathy is and will remain unneeded, unwanted and unwelcomed.

The home looks very similar to Sam's old place. The decor is simple, tasteful and spare, yet warm. There are pictures of Sam's nephews scattered about. There's no obvious sign of Bucky's presence, not that Steve knows how Bucky would decorate. He has never seen Bucky with his own space and more than a handful of possessions. Bucky went from the Depression to the Army to pure hell. He hadn't exactly filled his hut in Wakanda with material possessions and that was the closest thing he'd had to a home before Steve left the timeline.

Bucky barks at the Soldier to remove his boots. It's bizarre to watch the two of them move through the process of pulling off their combat boots. This timeline's Bucky is slim and graceful, moving silently while the Soldier stomps and pouts his way through the process. Between the ice cold assassin and a recognizable Bucky is a period of the Soldier being a mess of primitive emotions. More like a child or an animal than a man, but with an assassin's skill and tactical mindset.

Steve looks at his boots, but Sam gives a slight shake of his head and keeps his own boots on. Steve is happy to follow someone else's lead for once. Bucky leads them down to the small basement where there is a smaller holding cell. The cell has glass walls and contains nothing but a mattress and a plastic bottle of water. There is a Wakandan keypad and Steve wonders if this is another gift for Bucky. A hightech cell capable of restraining the Soldier.

The moment the Soldier shows signs of rebelling, Steve uses the immobilizer. He can feel Sam's judgement, but doesn't dare look at his friend. Steve has learned the hard way to be... proactive. Bucky simply lets the Soldier fall to the floor, making no effort to catch him, and then begins to divest the Soldier of his shocking number of weapons.

"Do you want my help?" Steve asks, knowing the answer is no.

Bucky shakes his head, "Keep that thing trained on him. Take us both down if you have to."

Sam whistles and starts putting the discarded weapons into a plastic tote.

"And I thought you were dramatic with the fourteen knives you carry now. I didn't realize that was your idea of lightly armed."

"Lightly armed?" Bucky grumbles, "Is that a metal arm joke?"

"No. But now I wish I had made a joke about your heavy ass arm. Kinda feels like a missed opportunity."

Bucky doesn't get a chance to respond because the Soldier's breathing changes and Steve immobilizes him before he has a chance to fully wake. Bucky, who had been patting down the Soldier's leg, receives the same immobilizing blast through the physical contact and collapses on top of his doppelganger. Steve quickly scoops Bucky up in his arms (barely an effort with his lighter, sleeker vibranium arm) and hands him off to Sam before resuming the search for weapons.

Sam mumbles about heavy super soldiers and heavier arms as he places Bucky somewhere outside the basement before locking the door.

"The keycode is set for Bucky to be able to get in the room, but he can't get out without my approval. His idea. Thought he was being extra, but here we are."

Steve strips the Soldier down to his tee-shirt and boxers, and really wishes Sam wasn't watching as he gives the Soldier one last thorough pat down. It feels seedy and wrong, but Steve has come close to dying at the Winter Soldier's hands dozens of times. There can be no such thing as too much caution. He hands the Immobilizer to Sam as he drags the Soldier into the cell.

"Don't hesitate to use it, Sam. The moment he wakes up is one of the most dangerous times. The Immobilizer won't hurt either of us."

Sam's face is neutral and he holds the Immobilizer steady.

Steve deposits the soldier on a foam mattress on the floor and quickly exits the cell.

He watches Sam secure the cell, double checking himself at every step. Sam's shoulders don't relax until he is certain the Soldier is properly contained, then his whole body shifts from battle ready to a kind of relaxed openness that makes Steve want to literally throw himself into Sam's arms. If he were clear on this Sam's relationship to Bucky, he just might.

Steve never learned how to negotiate sex or romance as a youth. He watched Bucky easily charm every woman he met, while Steve faced nothing but rejection and pity until the serum changed everything. As Captain America, Steve spent his time keeping overly aggressive suitors at bay, still never learning how to actually initiate or seek out what he wanted. It was in a seedy hotel in the middle of nowhere while they were fugitives from the government that Steve decided to try and initiate something with Sam. He'd held onto a hug from Sam too long, breathing into his neck and trying to figure out how to take things a step further, but then Sam had pulled back enough to look him in the eyes, and that was it. It was always that easy with Sam. Even the Sams who rejected his advances left Steve feeling loved and wanted.

Steve moves slightly towards Sam, wanting to be closer to his warmth and that indefinable quality that made Sam feel like a lifelong friend the first time they spoke, but the Winter Soldier jerks up off the mattress at the same time as Bucky walks back into the room.

Bucky's face is cold and unreadable, so much like the Winter Soldier that Steve wants to shake him and demand some signal that he's the same man Steve has known and loved his whole life, but he keeps his hands to himself.

Just as often as Steve has reached for the security of Sam, he has reached for the familiarity of Bucky but with wildly varying results. There have been times they could be lovers and enjoy the complicated mix of feelings that have always been between them, but more often than not, Bucky's decades of torture and trauma create a chasm between them. Bucky has too much shame and Steve has too much guilt to not let HYDRA come between them.

"What's the plan... Captains America?" Bucky asks drily.

The Soldier sneers at Bucky and gives an ugly laugh.

Sam stands in front of the Soldier, everything about his body language indicating he is completely at ease.

"You need anything, man? Hungry? Thirsty? There is a water bottle there, but we'll get you more. We're trying to keep everyone safe, not trying to make you suffer."

The Soldier just glares.

"Cool. We've got you on camera. Wave if you need anything."

Steve and Bucky follow Sam back upstairs where Bucky growls, "I'll make food" like it's a threat instead of a friendly gesture. Sam shows Steve upstairs.

"This is my room if you want to borrow some clothes, or if you want a boy's size medium instead, you can borrow a shirt from Buck. I know you centenarian supersoldiers like your tiny shirts," Sam offers patting the door across from his. He then opens a third door, "This room is yours as long as you want it."

Steve pulls Sam in for another hug.

"You have no idea how good it is to see you, again, Sam."

"I have some idea," Sam answers quietly. "It's really good to see you... somewhat like the you that left."

Steve is about to ask what he means when Bucky barks up the stairs that the food is ready.

The Soldier Screams

The Soldier is screaming and falling while blue eyes watch him with horror and sadness. This part is normal. The strange part is that the beautiful blond man from his dreams is not reaching down from a train, trying to reach for the falling Soldier. Instead, he is standing in front of the Soldier, asking if he wants some casserole.

The Soldier has always wondered about the man from the dream. For a while, he thought it was Pierce, but that never quite made sense. The Soldier wants to reach for the blond man. He wants to touch that man and be saved. Pierce was sometimes a gentle presence, even a welcomed one, but the Soldier would never actively want to touch Pierce. Even when Alexander Pierce had been young and devastatingly beautiful, the Soldier had tolerated more than craved his touch.

The man behind the glass is considerably older than the man on the train, but the eyes are the same. The Soldier has a feeling if he could reach out to the blond man, Steve, he could finally stop falling.

But first, he needs to get rid of the glass between them.

"I promise we won't tamper with the food, Bucky. We aren't trying to harm you, we just need you to remember who you were. James Buchanan Barnes. My best friend."

"The other one is your Bucky," the Soldier corrects.

The Soldier scowls at the idea of the "Bucky" playing Handler. Absurd. The Soldier sees Bucky's hesitation, his uncertainty as he tries to play human with his companions. The man with wings, Sam, quietly trying to reassure his "Bucky" and Bucky leaning into every word like a sad little puppy. It is like seeing a fully dressed dog in a baby carriage, a sad parody of a person. Bucky is pathetic and weak, but his arm is vibranium and he knows the words. Sadly, that is enough for him to keep the Soldier under control for the time being.

Sam and Steve did not like seeing their Bucky strike the Soldier. They let their little pet play handler, but they don't care for the full reality. They want to keep their hands clean. They

don't want to think about the 'moral implications' of keeping a Soldier at heel. Sooner or later, one of them will have to step up and take over, or the Soldier is going to tear Bucky apart. Just a threat to the man with wings would be enough to rattle this Bucky and the Soldier only needs the upper hand for a moment. Perhaps Sam or Steve have what it takes to be a real handler, but it seems unlikely when they have let Bucky play human to the point he thinks he is no longer a Winter Soldier.

Perhaps they have already decided to stop playing the game. Maybe that is why Steve is the one offering casserole. He's no longer in his stars and stripes. He is wearing casual clothing that doesn't quite fit. The clothing might be Sam's. The Soldier stores the information. The dynamics between the three are confusing.

"I will only eat food from Sam," the Soldier states.

Steve Rogers has many questions and Bucky is still falling, There is no ground. There is no floor. Just endless falling and pain.

"I will only eat food delivered by Sam," the Soldier speaks over Steve, ignoring his questions. "He won't lie to me about poisoning the food."

Steve tilts his head and looks the Soldier in the eyes.

"Do you remember Sam? Do you know Sam?"

"I know Sam," the Soldier replies. He has never seen the man before today, but he knows the type. Sam is a fixer with an overdeveloped sense of responsibility. He will try to connect with the Soldier and that is when he will drop his guard.

"You know that Sam is your friend?"

"Sam is my friend."

"Do you want anything else? Do you want a change of clothes or...?"

The Soldier looks at the soft maroon tee-shirt clinging to Steve's expansive chest and says, "I will wear Sam's clothes."

Steve looks suspicious but nods.

"I'm going to talk to Sam and Bucky now. We have to make our decisions as a team, but I think that should be fine."

"You and Sam and... Bucky will decide."

Steve clearly doesn't like the implication in the Soldier's tone, but he has not openly disparaged or mocked their pet so Steve lets it go.

Steve is a martyr. He would be easier to manipulate than Sam, but there is a better chance of playing the long game with Sam. Steve will be all in or all out and it is too soon to risk permanently alienating him with a misstep.

"Steve?" the Soldier adds for good measure. "Thank you."

Steve's face fills with emotion. So predictable.

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Sam appears with a plate full of colorless casserole, a set of clothes and a confused expression.

"Steve says you only trust me to bring you food and you want to wear my clothes."

There is no response required, so the Soldier remains silent.

"You know Bucky has the same body as you, right? His clothes would definitely fit better than mine."

"Bucky is smaller than I am."

Sam tilts his head thoughtfully.

"Bucky isn't with HYDRA any more. He's his own man now. That's why he looks different."

"From attack dog to lap dog. He must be very grateful."

Sam's eyes widen at that.

"Bucky is no one's lap dog. He's an Avenger. He's a hero."

"So he sleeps in a bed like a human? Eats people food? Has a job? Knows how to pay bills and balance a budget? Goes on dates? All the basic skills of an adult human? Or does he sleep on the floor like a dog and do his best to hide? Cling to your leg like a whipped puppy, just begging for scraps human contact but snapping if you reach out to him? He isn't a person. You are anthropomorphizing a pet. The Winter Soldier is not Bucky Barnes. The Winter Soldier just inhabits his animated corpse."

Sam looks devastated.

"That's... none of that is what makes a person a person. That is a lot of... upsetting information there, and I am trying to wrap my head around your thinking, but Bucky is my partner. We're equals and we respect one another. We need to restrain you while you are actively programmed to kill us, but once you are back to yourself, I promise, you'll be part of the decision making process. We don't want to use you as an attack dog or a lap dog or a weapon. You're our friend, and we want you to be happy."

"You don't fuck Bucky."

Sam winces and shakes his head, cursing under his breath.

"You want him and he wants you, but you don't touch him. Not like that. Not like a person."

"That's a whole other discussion... What's going on here? What are you trying to get out of this interaction? Why do you want to wear my clothes?" Sam's voice is kind but firm.

"Eventually, I will be required to submit to someone. I chose to submit to you. I am an exemplary fighter, a powerful weapon. You will find me more helpful than your pet Bucky."

"Submit? You don't need to submit to anyone. We're all equals here."

"I was created to submit, but I prefer to choose my handler when I can."

"You were 'created' to be a person named Bucky Barnes. You have temporary programming to be a weapon, but that will fade and Bucky will come back to the surface. I promise."

"If you know the words, I am easy to control. You don't have to be afraid of me. I will be whatever you want me to be. It can be that simple. Wouldn't that be better? A pet who can sleep on the bed and show gratitude? I can be very grateful, Sam."

He doesn't try to be seductive or appealing. It doesn't matter yet. Sam is still in denial about what he wants. He thinks he wants enthusiastic consent, but soon enough he will learn he wants obedience. The Soldier has observed the way Bucky behaves. Maybe Sam likes it now. Maybe it still seems cute that Bucky wants to play human, but the novelty won't last forever. Sam will either need to bring his pet in line or start over.

Sam opens his mouth to speak then frowns.

"How about I give you this casserole and maybe we'll get you your own clothes? I don't want you... So I guess this is happening?"

The Soldier stares Sam in the eyes and he takes off his clothes. He does not enjoy being naked, but he knows the effect it has on others.

Sam sighs and tells the Soldier to remain where he is while he drops the clothing into the exchange drawer. There is a soft tee-shirt and even softer pajama bottoms. The Soldier holds the clothes, but makes no movement to get dressed.

"And this is some kind of chicken and mushroom thing. It's a struggle meal, but it's tasty. Bucky makes it all the time."

The Soldier cannot smell the food until it moves into the cell, but he is immediately overpowered by the scent. His head fills with confusing images and the floor drops out from underneath him.

"Bucky?"

"James?"

"Asset?"

The Soldier is falling too fast and hard. There's no one, not the blond man, not Sam, not Pierce that could ever stop him from falling and he will never land.

The Soldier puts on Sam's clothing. The clothes are soft and comfortable. He picks up the casserole and tries a bite, scanning for any telltale hint of bitterness that indicates poison. It tastes... familiar.

The Soldier looks up from his food to Sam, who looks very worried and is still calling the Soldier names.

"Barnes?"

"Soldat?"

"You can call me James," the Soldier says to end the game.

Sam looks confused but says, "Okay then. I'm going to go eat... Wave if you need anything."

That Could Have Gone Better

Sam kicks himself as he walks back up the stairs. He knows Steve and Bucky are glued to the monitor and just watched Sam barely survive the world's most upsetting seduction attempt. Sam had gone in prepared for just about anything the Soldier might throw at him, but still ended up completely shaken. Talking to traumatized soldiers is supposed to be one of his big skills. He is going to need to give back his shield and his Master's degree after that shit show.

Sure enough, Steve and Bucky are staring at the monitor as they absently shove food in their mouths.

"Well, that could have gone better. At least your casserole was a real hit, Bucky."

Sam isn't sure how long the Soldier had stood there, naked and screaming before he suddenly stopped and got dressed like nothing had happened. Sam has seen plenty of flashbacks, but that was god awful.

"Ma made it all the time," Bucky states with no emotion, eyes glued to the screen as the Soldier takes a few large bites and then pauses for a few minutes before eating more.

"It's like a plateful of my childhood," Steve adds. "I am not surprised it had an effect on him but... Why was he screaming like that?"

"A kind of vertigo. He feels like he's falling and sometimes it triggers a flashback. Shuri fixed it in my brain."

Bucky speaks with no emotion, his face still blank as he stares at the monitor.

Sam has that familiar desire to hug and throttle Bucky. Bucky loathes pity, which Sam can respect, but he can't seem to tell the difference between pity and compassion. He is spiky and distant when he needs comfort.

Sam settles for placing a hand on Bucky's very tense right shoulder.

"I don't know what I did wrong down there, but this is going to be a mess."

"You didn't do anything wrong," Bucky says quietly. "He's just... It's all part of the programming."

"The shit about being a pet and being able to sleep in a bed?" Sam's usual eloquence is gone. He feels dirty, and suddenly unsure if he should even be touching Bucky.

"Mind games to keep us from running away. We had to be constantly reminded we lacked basic skills for passing as human. Sure, you can speak five languages, but what's your FICO score?"

Sam can suddenly see Bucky's refusal to discuss their shared property in a new light. Sam has always hated the way Bucky tried to throw his money at Sam like Bucky didn't earn every penny with what he went through as a POW.

"That's fucked up," is the best Sam can offer at the moment. "Why is he eating like that?"

"So he doesn't throw up," Steve answers, before looking to Bucky. "At least, that's what I have come to assume. They always seem to have trouble with eating in the beginning."

Bucky nods. His face is utterly blank and Sam can't decide if he should back off or move in closer.

"G-tubes, protein shakes, supplements. You don't eat a lot of solid food when you are in and out of cryo and mind wipes and induced comas."

The Soldier had asked if Bucky ate 'people food'.

"Your casserole is on the counter," Bucky says after an awkward pause. There is a small casserole dish next to the larger one everyone else has been eating from.

"Why is mine separate?"

"That's the way I make it for you. The big dish is the original recipe."

"What's the difference?"

"Yours is made with fresh cream and wild mushrooms, is low sodium, and has locally sourced free range chicken. The original recipe comes from a series of cans."

Steve pipes in, "It's so salty, my tongue hurts, but I can't stop eating it. It's like a hug for your stomach."

Sam takes a small scoop of the original recipe and a healthy portion of what he now realizes is the healthier version. He hadn't realized Bucky was making that effort for him. It's sweet.

"You think you can handle that Depression Era food?" Bucky asks with a hint of a smile.

"I'm from the South. There is nothing my grandma wouldn't batter-dip and fry."

Sam tries a bite of the canned stuff and it is far too salty for his tastes, but not bad.

He looks up and sees Bucky staring at him with narrowed eyes.

“It’s good!” he cries, hearing his own defensiveness. “If I could eat like this and not gain forty pounds of water weight, I would eat more. Those wings do have a weight limit. Besides, I like knowing you made the other one for me. I can taste the love in every bite.”

Bucky gives him what can only be described as an affectionate glare. Sam can see Steve taking in the interaction with a questioning look, and he suddenly feels self-conscious. Sam and Bucky’s banter has become increasingly flirtatious, but that is where it ends. He knows from Steve that he and Bucky never acted on their obvious mutual attraction, and now Steve knows (courtesy of a very blunt Winter Soldier) that Sam and Bucky are not sleeping together, but Sam has no idea if Bucky knows that Sam and Steve had a... fling? Sam isn’t even sure what to call it. Fugitive teammates with benefits? As much as Sam enjoyed those moments of intimacy with Steve, there had never been an option of it becoming a real romance while they were on the run. They both needed to be able to walk away when duty called.

Sam loves Steve about as much as he’s ever loved anyone, but when his head hits the pillow tonight, he’ll be thinking about Bucky making him a low sodium version of his casserole.

And even though Bucky looks at his childhood friend like Steve hung the moon, Sam is pretty sure Bucky will fall asleep thinking about Sam.

Other than Sarah occasionally pointing out they should get married while Cass is still small enough to be the ring bearer, Sam has never seen a reason to try and rush things. He and Bucky have gone from Bucky actively trying to murder Sam to Bucky making Sam low sodium casserole. They used to barely be able to share a space, and now they live together. They argue day and night, but it is with affection and respect. There have been a few charged moments where Sam was tempted to take things to the next level, but Bucky is protective of his personal space and Sam won't push.

Hearing the Soldier - James - offering himself to Sam with a promise to show 'gratitude' confirmed some of Sam's theories about why Bucky remains standoffish when it comes to physical demonstrations of affection. He would have preferred to be wrong, but at least he has a better idea of what is going on in Bucky's head.

"So how long until he," Sam shakes his head. "James. We'll call him James? How long until James starts remembering Steve stuffed his shoes with newspaper?"

Steve and Bucky look at one another, both seeming to expect the other to have an answer.

"The behavioral controls are breaking," Bucky offers, his expression and voice bland. "They'd normally do a mind wipe at that point. There were a couple times early on where I was able to remember that I was someone before I was the Winter Soldier, but I never remembered anything specific. There was just a sense that what I was doing was wrong. They learned to scramble my brain before I got to that point. It wasn't until I saw Steve again that I started to have actual memories from... before. I have no idea what to expect from... James."

Steve rubs at his face, looking exhausted. Age suits him. He might be even more handsome now than when he was young. It's one of those things that would make Sam feel a little

bitter, but Steve is just so... Steve. Sam can never work up any resentment for Steve or his perfect teeth.

“I usually start with a few moments where I can try and jog some memories, usually while the Winter Soldier is trying to kill me, and eventually something clicks. It’s usually weeks until I see any sign of Bucky in the Soldier, months before he actually remembers who he is. I’ve never had any extended one on one time. Maybe we can speed up the process. Not that I’m in a hurry to leave you guys...”

“Where will you go when you leave? Or when will you go?” Sam asks. “This is exhausting. I don’t even know what I am asking.”

“I’ll return James to his timeline.”

“And then what will you do?” Sam asks, already knowing Steve will not answer. At least not fully.

Steve gives a sad smile and shrugs. “Theoretically, I come home... but I am pretty sure that isn’t what happened in this timeline, so my guess is there will be another mission.”

“Another Bucky?” Bucky asks, his face still oddly neutral.

Steve licks his lips and shakes his head. “I don’t know. It’s complicated. There are factors I can’t... I don’t know what will happen next.”

Sam reaches out and puts his hand on Steve’s. Steve gives him a big, goofy smile while Bucky’s face remains completely indifferent.

Who the Hell is Bucky?

Steve and Sam are looking at one another with hearts in their eyes while the Winter Soldier glares into the camera and tries to finish a plate of food without making himself puke. The Soldier gags and Sam and Steve switch their gaze back to the monitor. Bucky was a fool to think he could leave his past behind him. His past is forever at his heel, strutting and tossing his hair as he sacks and slaughters.

Or gagging while trying to eat solid food.

His stomach twists when he thinks of the Soldier talking to Sam, trying to coax Sam into using him for something other than a weapon. Like that had ever worked with Pierce. Pierce had enjoyed playing like they were in a relationship early on, but at the end of the day, he barked his orders and the Soldier complied or paid the price.

"The Winter Soldier is not Bucky Barnes. The Winter Soldier just inhabits his animated corpse."

Bucky has spent the past year wondering how much of Bucky Barnes actually remains. A dumb kid in the forties had his face shoved into the most horrifying evils imaginable for seven decades. Even if Bucky cannot be held accountable for the actions of his body, he was along for the ride - witnessing every atrocity up close. What happens to a soul after an experience like that? Bucky was the only Howling Commando to give his life in the line of duty.

It says so in the museum.

Bucky is stirred out of his reverie when he hears his name.

"Bucky got a buttload of money from the government and he's been helping me out with the housing situation. Being dead for five years really messes with your credit. I was already broke from being on the run before the Blip, so I was scrounging. Then Bucky straight up bought three houses and now I handle the properties. One of the many ways Bucky has saved my ass."

Steve and Sam both turn to Bucky. Steve has that sweet, nostalgic look on his face that is only for Bucky while Sam is grinning widely, showing off the charming gap between his front teeth. The first time Bucky found himself thinking about Sam's perfectly imperfect teeth, he knew he was in trouble.

Sam and Steve are beautiful together. They complement one another in every way. This is what the Soldier sees: two beautiful, brilliant, heroic men and their pet, Bucky.

"Well, you've got a lot of ass to save," Bucky deadpans. "That's why I make you the healthy casserole."

Sam grabs his heart and pretends to collapse in his chair. "It's the padding in the suit! Of course my ass is going to look huge with extra padding."

"That is America's ass, Sam," Steve assures him. "Big, bold and beautiful."

"It is America's ass," Bucky agrees with a waggle of his eyebrows lest Sam ever doubt Bucky is a fan of that heroic backside. "I wouldn't be surprised to see a bald eagle land on it. Or even build a nest on that shelf..."

Sam looks Bucky in the eyes and takes a massive bite of the original casserole, somehow managing to chew defiantly while Steve laughs.

Bucky knows Sam's appreciation for Bucky's financial help is real and genuine. It always is. Just like when Sam rubs his arm after a punch from Cass or marvels at AJ's science facts. It's all real, just amped up and exaggerated to make a point. The Soldier described all the ways that Bucky is unable to act like a real person, so Sam is making sure both Steve and Bucky know that isn't entirely true. It's the kind of thing Sam does on a regular basis that sometimes fills Bucky with joy and sometimes makes him want to die of shame.

Bucky is tired of being pathetic. He wants to live a real life and the fucking Winter Soldier is gagging on the monitor again. There are tears on the Soldier's cheeks from the effort it takes to eat a meal and Bucky hates him. He is repulsed by the Soldier's manipulation, his lack of understanding of how real people interact, his desperation and his impotence. Most of all, he hates the sad look on Sam and Steve's faces as they watch the monitor. It's like they can't see a difference between the freak in that cell and the moderately functioning person at their table.

"How can we help him," Sam asks sadly - his big, dark eyes full of sympathy.

"Just keep jogging his memory. There's not much else to be done," Bucky replies.

"Is there a way to let him know we aren't going to... hurt him?" Sam asks. "I hate that he is sitting there wondering what messed up shit we are going to put him through. Is there anything that would convince him he's safe?"

Bucky says, "No," because it is the truth, but he feels guilty when Sam's face falls. Sam always wants to help.

"Not even if it came from you?" Steve asks.

"He assumes I have earned the rank of pet. He won't believe anything I say. He doesn't remember anything other than being the Winter Soldier. He isn't scared or upset. You don't have to worry about him. As far as he's concerned, he just found a couple of dopes that he can sucker for better accommodations. He already has a mattress, Sam's Egyptian cotton tee-shirt and a real meal without doing any work. He's fine."

It's as much as he can say without getting Sam and Steve upset. The Soldier is used to a level of atrocity that the Captains can't easily wrap their wholesome brains around.

"He seems to assume there will be some... expectations," Sam says with a grimace.

"And does he seem upset about that?" Buck snaps.

The room goes painfully quiet except for the sounds of the Soldier chewing and gagging.

"Bucky," Sam says softly.

"Don't Captain America me. I'm fine, he's fine. We all know this shit happened to me and there is nothing that we can do to change any of it so can we just..."

The fact that Sam goes quiet and doesn't even look pissed off makes Bucky feel even more pathetic. Sam is one of the few people Bucky can trust to tell him off when he goes off the rails.

Sam's phone goes off, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

"Torres is looking for an update. Anyone have a clue what I'm supposed to tell him?" Sam asks with a smile. "I am open to suggestions."

"Tell Baby Falcon Steve's visiting from the Moon," Bucky suggests. "But tell him on a video call. I want to see him cry tears of joy."

Steve says, "I have several questions."

“Joaquin Torres,” Sam explains. “He’s my liaison with the Air Force but he’s due to re-up in four months and he’s thinking he’ll... start a new career. I’ve been training him on my old wings. He’s a great guy. Smart, honest, passionate...”

"He thinks Sam is the best thing since sliced bread."

"Sliced bread was exciting," Steve chimes in.

"Ma was thrilled," Bucky agrees.

Sam has that look that means he can't tell if they are joking or not, so Bucky tells him to Google it.

"And the part about the Moon?"

Sam and Bucky share an uneasy look.

"It's a silly theory some people have about where you went after Thanos. That I flew you to the Moon."

"So you can watch over us all," Bucky adds. "It's a nice idea."

"So... I'm not here?" Steve asks. "Am I in hiding?"

Bucky and Sam share another uneasy look.

"I don't know how much we should or shouldn't tell you," Sam explains. "I honestly don't know exactly where you are. You were pretty cryptic when you came back."

Steve nods. "It's hard to know what would create a problem in this timeline... But I assumed I would eventually live out the rest of my life here."

Sam opens and closes his mouth a few times before saying, "That may have happened somewhere - somewhere? - else."

"Somewhen... Do I stay in the past? How would that work? Am I in a timeline where I didn't exist?"

The fact is, Old Man Steve showed up, gave Sam the shield and pissed off never to be seen again. Everyone has their theories, but Bucky can't imagine repeating any of them to Steve's face. They all sound so... mean.

"No one, but you... future you, knows what happened," Sam explains. "You did come back and give me the shield, but you never explained anything other than to say... Maybe I shouldn't say that part."

"If the Steve that gave you the shield was this Steve, then he was here with us in his past like this," Bucky states, trying to get his own thoughts clear. "If Steve was here, he would have to know about Walker. Steve has access to the internet. No way he wouldn't say something to make that shitshow less... of a shitshow."

"Walker?" Steve asks.

"He wouldn't be able to say anything, he'd have to protect the timeline," Sam argues.

"True," Steve agrees.

"But he could have said something. He could have made things easier. No Steve Rogers intentionally sets up Sam Wilson to get screwed over."

Steve nods and adds, "I don't know what we're talking about, but I agree with that last sentence."

Sam looks a little sad at Steve's comment, like he's not 100% certain it's the truth and Bucky hates that. He hates that Sam could ever doubt how dear he is to Steve and he hates not knowing Sam well enough to understand why. His relationship with Sam often feels like they are opposite sides of a two-way mirror. Sam seems to be able to see everything Bucky is going through while Bucky is trying to see Sam but can't get past his own bullshit being reflected back at him.

"It could have been a different Steve. Maybe that Steve didn't run into us. Maybe this is an anomaly," Sam suggests.

"I can say with confidence that if I am here and," Steve gives a quick look around, "no one is trying to arrest me, then this is what is supposed to happen... and also what happened."

Bucky Training

Bucky drops his head on the kitchen table and asks someone to drive an ice pick through his brain. Steve finds the sentiment relatable. The intricacies of time travel can drive a person off the deep end. Steve knows that for a fact.

Steve pats Bucky's shoulder and gets a half-smile in return, a smile that immediately disappears when James begins gagging again. Steve can relate to Bucky's pain there as well. He's had the misfortune of running into several past Steve Rogers, and it is always painful. Steve is fairly certain he is a confident man, not an arrogant one, but the line gets very blurry at times. The line between tenacious and insufferable is also surprisingly thin and wiggly.

Steve can't feel anything but sympathy for the man in the cell, struggling to eat solid food and marking his time until he can work out the weak points in his captors. To Steve's knowledge, there's no way to convince the Winter Soldier that anyone cares about him as a human being. Steve has certainly tried. Until the memories start bubbling up, the Soldier has no concept of friendship or love. There is only pain and punishment with the occasional hard-earned reward.

"So, you're saying if you stepped out of line, there would be someone or someones that would put you back in line?" Sam asks.

Steve thinks of Hunter B-15 and smiles.

Sam widens his eyes, "I know that look! Is it an attractive someone that would put you in line?"

Sam is always like this. So ready to be happy for Steve regardless of the circumstances. It makes him feel loved, but maybe a little disposable. He knows that isn't the case, that it's about Sam's knee jerk reaction to put the needs of others before his own, but it still stings. Steve will absolutely stay out of Sam and Bucky's way, as he has in many other timelines, but he's sure as hell going to pine for any Sam he isn't allowed to touch and he will always be at least a little jealous of anyone Bucky loves more than Steve. This Sam is right to choose Bucky over Steve, but he could at least pretend it's a hard choice.

"Well, yes, she is attractive, but no, Sam. It isn't anything like that. There are people monitoring the timeline and they are pretty aggressive. And mean. Very mean."

Steve has tried to charm B-15. It was not a successful endeavor.

The Soldier has finished his meal and is now standing completely still, staring into the camera with his face devoid of emotion.

"So what do we do with James?" Sam asks. Steve reaches across the table and takes Sam's hand. He hates seeing Sam looking so sad, and he really hates the way Bucky is glaring at them both. Like the soldier in the cell, Bucky is surrounded by love that he cannot accept or trust. Maybe it's a residual effect of the programming. Maybe Bucky just can't imagine that, after all he's been through, he's still someone who can be loved. Bucky is the only reason Steve isn't going to try and get into Sam's bed later that night and Bucky is probably the only reason Steve would not be welcomed if he tried. Two Bucky Barnes in a home with the two men that love him the most, and yet they both remained trapped in their isolation and pain.

"I'll go and have a chat with him," Steve offers. "See if I can jog some memories. The two of you can discuss..."

“Moon stuff,” Sam finishes with a smile.

The Soldier watches Steve with an unnerving intensity.

"We're friends, James. We grew up together. Our moms were friends. We've been friends for as long as I can remember."

“We're friends,” James repeats dutifully. He looks vulnerable in Sam's clothing instead of his usual leather.

“We grew up in Brooklyn. You had a sister named Rebecca.”

“I had a sister named Rebecca.”

“I used to be small. I was a runt.”

“You were small.”

“You used to look out for me. Save me three times a week from getting my ass kicked.”

“I looked out for you. I am your friend.”

“You used to hold my hand when no one was around. When we were little kids. Sometimes when we were teenagers. You said it was okay as long as no one could see us.”

Steve wonders if even the Bucky upstairs remembers that. Young Bucky had been so affectionate and downright motherly at times. He would hug Steve with his chubby arms and plant wet kisses on his cheek or on his assorted scrapes and bruises. Little Bucky was very careful not to do anything that would get him called a ‘sissy’ by his peers, but any rules of how men should behave went out the window when they were alone. Bucky outgrew kissing Steve’s ‘boo-boos’, but he was always more physically demonstrative than was considered proper at the time. There were times that Bucky would get so close that Steve had the panicky thought that they were about to cross some dangerous line and would have to push Bucky away.

“I secretly held your hand.”

“Why do you think I’m telling you these things?”

“You are training me to become a Bucky.”

“And what is a Bucky?”

“A friend from your childhood that acted as a protector in public and a lover in private.”

Steve wants to bang his head against the unbreakable glass.

But then he has another idea.

“What does it mean to be trained to be a Bucky?” he asks.

James’s blank face suddenly fills with anxiety and distrust.

“It’s okay, James,” Steve assures him. “You won’t be in trouble for guessing wrong. What does it mean to be trained as a Bucky?”

“You’ll teach me to act like your dead friend.”

“And why would I do that?”

James swallows and licks his lips, clearly hesitant to answer.

“It’s fine, James. I just want to... assess your understanding of the situation.”

“You want a Bucky tailored to your memories. One you won’t have to share with Sam.”

It makes sense in that terrible Winter Soldier way. Why would Steve want to settle for a pet not completely tailored to his preferences?

“And what would be your function as a Bucky?”

“To protect you and to provide affection and sexual gratification.”

Steve keeps his face neutral. The response is hardly a surprising interpretation of the information Steve has given. This James has no frame of reference for affection freely given.

“Do you believe you are up to the task of becoming a Bucky? Is it worth the effort of trying to train you?”

James looks a bit desperate when he says, “I will be exactly who you want me to be. You won’t have any regrets. Tell me what to do and I will do it without hesitation.”

“Do you have any questions for me?”

James looks suspicious.

“If I don’t want to answer, I won’t, but you will not be in trouble for asking questions. You can always ask as many questions as you like, James. We want your training to be thorough.”

“Will I be your Bucky?”

“Would you prefer to be trained for Sam?” Steve is genuinely curious about why James seems to have attached himself to Sam.

It is clearly a lie when James insists he has no preferences.

“We haven’t decided exactly what to do with you,” Steve says truthfully. “We’ll see what happens with your training and go from there.”

James gives a resolute nod of his head and opens his mouth for a moment before clamping it shut again.

“You have another question? It’s okay to ask.”

“Will I be fitted with an upgraded arm?”

“That wasn’t us,” Steve explains. He knows the soldier will never believe the real story of how Bucky received his vibranium arm. The idea that someone would be kind to Bucky with no expectations in return would sound ludicrous. “Bucky earned that arm on his own.”

“Will you cut my hair?” James sounds oddly hopeful, like a haircut is as fanciful a hope as a vibranium arm.

“Bucky cut his own hair. That was his preference,” Steve answers, assuming his statement is true. He knows very little about the Bucky sitting upstairs. “As long as you complete your

training, you will have free reign over your appearance. You'll be able to make choices, just like Bucky."

"Will I need to become small like Bucky so I am easier to control? Or do you want me to stay large and powerful?"

Steve grits his teeth together and hopes there is not a trace of laughter on his face. He is absolutely certain that Sam is upstairs making some teasing but reassuring comment about Bucky's impressive physique.

"That will be up to you. Like I said, once you have completed the training and you are a Bucky Barnes, you can make decisions about your body and your appearance."

Steve preferred James's look of uncertainty to his current expression. It is clear James believes he has figured out exactly what Steve is saying and it's no doubt a horribly twisted version of what Steve is trying to convey. The soldier cannot conceive of being given a real choice.

"I will comply with Bucky training," James says with resolve. "What is my first assignment?"

Steve hadn't thought that far ahead.

“I’m going to need to confer with Sam and Bucky, see what they think should be our first priority. In the meantime, is there anything you want or need?”

The soldier is silent and then drops his eyes, looking ashamed.

“I don’t know the correct answer.”

“That’s fine, James. If you decide you need anything, if you are hungry or thirsty or cold or too warm, wave at the camera and one of us will come check on you. It’s okay to make requests. None of us wants you to be uncomfortable.”

James looks appropriately confused and Steve heads back upstairs. He feels certain it is a good plan, that James will likely recover his memories quicker if he is actively trying to be Bucky, but he has no idea how Sam or Bucky will respond to his deception. Their Steve, the Steve he was when he began his godforsaken mission to return the infinity stones, would have put being honest above getting a desired result. The ways that he is no longer their Steve are only going to become more and more obvious the longer he stays. The inevitability of their rejection weighs on him as he climbs the stairs. Steve has been longing to again be part of a world, but he is still a temporary visitor, just a blip in a timeline and not meant to make a lasting impression.

A Broken Bucky

The Soldier feels hope. It's a small and weak feeling and every part of him knows it needs to be quashed, but it feels good. It's been a long time since he's felt something other than despair. The idea that he could be like the other Bucky - wearing stupid clothes and being difficult and useless, but still treated like a favored pet - is remarkable. He could be given casserole and a bed for as long as he keeps his owner entertained. The Soldier is a quick learner. He will be able to give Steve or Sam whatever they want, at least for a while. When they get bored, it's back to the grind, but a break would be nice.

Steve wants his hand to be held. The Soldier can do that. He can be gentle. There were times when Pierce wanted to pretend the Soldier was a human, when they would kiss and touch before sex like they were lovers. Pierce was almost always satisfied with the Soldier's performance, and based on what he has seen of Bucky's behavior, the Soldier can only assume Steve and Sam have much lower standards.

He feels another wave of dizziness coming and tries to ignore it, tries to muscle through but eventually he drops to his knees and puts his head on the ground as the world falls out from under his feet. He tries desperately not to be sick. There will be no more people food if he can't prove he won't waste it every time he begins falling.

When the world settles down again, Bucky wipes the tears and drool from his face. His captors are no doubt watching.

At least he kept his meal down.

Steve will not want a broken Bucky. He remembers Bucky Barnes as a person. The Soldier will need to continue to focus on Sam. He is fairly certain that Sam doesn't remember

another Bucky, only the one he has now. Sam might feel pity for the way the Soldier cannot stop falling. Perhaps he can embrace the ways the Soldier is broken and try to fix him. Sam is a fixer and the Soldier can be his project. The Soldier can be so very grateful for Sam's kindness, maybe he can make it worth Sam's effort. Steve said Buckys get to choose their appearance. The soldier knows what Steve wants, he will want a Bucky who looks like the one from his childhood. The Soldier will have to figure out what Sam would prefer. Perhaps the other Bucky has tried to adopt an appearance pleasing Sam (because he is certainly failing to look like the original Bucky) but it's hard to believe Sam would want Bucky's hair so short. There's barely anything to grab onto or hold. Maybe Sam doesn't hold onto Bucky's hair. Maybe he expects his asset to be able to hold himself still.

The Soldier strokes the soft material of Sam's shirt, both to soothe himself and for the sake of his audience. Look at the sad broken Soldier, grateful for soft clothing. He'll wear whatever Sam brings him and be appreciative.

The sad truth is, he is grateful for the clothing. It's soft against his skin and a pleasant distraction from the pain in his arm and his stomach and his brain. He imagines Sam is also soft to the touch. His skin looks smooth and inviting. His body is muscular, but there is softness to it, because he is a person and not a weapon. Sam is a powerful fighter, but he needs his technology against the Soldier. Steve will be able to break the Soldier's jaw with a backhand now that the Soldier cannot protect himself, but Sam would need a weapon to do real harm. The Soldier can hardly resist a handler's discipline if he wants to survive, but it would be easier to have that discipline delivered by a normal human rather than a super soldier.

Or maybe Sam will have the other Bucky deliver the punishment for him. He worries about the other Bucky. He does not want to submit to the other Bucky. It would be so much worse than any other handler. They are natural enemies, competing for any bits of food, comfort and kindness that might be available. He doesn't want to be used by other Bucky either, not even for the enjoyment of Sam or Steve. The other Bucky will try to hurt him and make him look weak. He's certain their Bucky will try to make him throw up his food or bleed on his mattress. He will hurt the Soldier until he can't help trying to defend himself. Sam and Steve won't care that their pet isn't playing fair, they'll only see that the Soldier doesn't know his place and therefore cannot be trusted.

He knows he can be good for Sam or Steve. They don't seem like the types who want to see the Soldier limping or crying after sex, at least not on a regular basis. They are soldiers and it is only normal they would occasionally need to take out their aggression on someone or something. He doesn't really mind being punched or kicked or fucked without lubrication or being starved when it's only for a few days at a time. It's the weeks or months of constant torture that break down his self-control and make him start to misbehave. The Soldier is disciplined, but when the hunger pains keep him awake and he can never stop falling, it gets hard to think before he acts. He may not exactly be a human any more, but the Soldier isn't a machine. There are things that cannot be programmed out of the meatware.

The Soldier looks at the mattress on the floor. He hasn't dared to lie down on it, but it looks soft and inviting. He doesn't remember the last time he truly slept.

He looks at the camera and thinks about asking for permission to lie down. He starts to open his mouth but thinks better of it. It's too soon to push his handlers. They don't trust him enough to come into the cell and until then, he's not going to be able to earn his rest. The room only contains a mattress and a bottle of water. It doesn't take a genius to figure out what is expected of him.

The Soldier feels trepidation at the idea of sex with the new handlers. He doesn't expect it to be any kind of hardship. They are both beautiful, kind men. It will be easy to pretend to enjoy what they do to him, if that is what they want from him. The problem is, he's not sure what they want from him. Should he act eager or fearful? Will they want him to beg for their cocks or need to be coaxed into spreading his legs? It's hard to know with do-gooder types. Sometimes they have the darkest needs.

The Soldier expects to be alone for at least a few hours, but Sam arrives not long after Steve leaves.

“Do you want something?” Sam asks, not looking angry at all. “It looked like you were going to ask for something and then you stopped. You can ask. No one will be angry. Steve was telling the truth about that.”

“Steve said I am going to begin training to be a Bucky.”

Sam cringes at that. Perhaps he doesn't think the Soldier is capable of being a Bucky.

“I want to be a Bucky. I want to be good. I won't misbehave. I'll do anything you tell me to do.”

The Soldier can hear the desperation in his voice, and he can see Sam growing more distant even as he stands still. Of course he doesn't trust the Soldier. The Soldier was mouthing off to him not an hour earlier. He assumes the Soldier is trying to trick him. The Soldier should never have spoken out of turn like that. It was foolish to let his hatred for Bucky get the better of him.

“Please,” the Soldier says, trying his best to look pretty the way Pierce taught him, to look up at Sam even though the Soldier is taller. “Please let me show you that I want to be good. I want to show you I am grateful.”

“You can say thank you when you're feeling grateful. We don't expect anything else from you, James.”

“Thank you... I’m not sure how to address you, sir.”

“Sam is fine.”

Sam’s voice is even and his expression is unreadable, so different from his usual animation. The Soldier has already made a mistake, but he doesn’t know what he’s done wrong. Sam and Steve do not agree on the Bucky training. If he tries to take Sam’s side, he will risk alienating Steve who wants to turn the Soldier into a pet. His best chance at safety is to be Sam’s pet, but that option seems to be disappearing before his eyes. A rush of panic hits the Soldier and soon he is falling again. He screams in frustration and tries to reach for the train, but he’s lost his chance. He was weak and he couldn’t reach far enough and now he’ll never stop falling. He wasn’t strong enough to survive or strong enough to die. Now he’s a corpse with Bucky Barnes’s face and if he throws up his meal, there won’t be any more comfort.

The Soldier keeps screaming as someone takes him by the shoulders and holds him. He’s surrounded by warmth and someone is stroking his hair.

“It’s okay, buddy. You’re going to be okay.”

The Soldier pries his eyes open. Sam is in the cell with him, holding him and rocking him, murmuring comforting inanities. Although he imagines Sam is the type who likes to kiss, the soldier has not showered or brushed his teeth, so he simply moves his hand between Sam’s legs, but Sam says no.

“That isn’t what we’re doing, buddy. I just want you to calm down.”

“What the fuck are you thinking?” Bucky yells as he bursts into the room. He’s holding one of the shields, and he looks ready to take the Soldier’s head. Steve is on his heels with his own shield and the immobilizer, his eyes cold and his face hard.

“Keep your hands where I can see them,” Steve barks. The Soldier holds his hands up, but he cannot keep them from trembling. Sam is in his cell and now Bucky and Steve are there to keep Sam safe if the Soldier tries anything. They are either going to kill him, or it’s time to begin his training.

Sam Needs a Shower

Sam needs a shower. Everything about the scene has his skin crawling. James is shaking in Sam's arms, trying to maneuver them to the mattress, whispering promises to be good while casting nervous glances at the furious Bucky who is punching the code into the keypad and muttering what Sam can only assume are unflattering comments about Sam's intelligence and decision making.

Sam knows it is insane to be in the cell, but he couldn't bear watching James screaming and weeping. The cold, blank Soldier disappeared with Steve's brilliant idea of convincing him he could be trained as a pet/bodyguard/fucktoy. The way James is tripping over himself trying to earn that dubious reward is heartbreaking.

Bucky looks absolutely betrayed.

The cell door swings open and Steve points the immobilizer at James.

"Sam, out," Bucky barks.

Like Sam would tolerate that tone from anyone but his mother, may she rest in peace. Or maybe Sarah.

"Are you okay, James?" he asks, shifting them so he is between James and Bucky. He doesn't expect a real response, but he wants to get James accustomed to being spoken to like a person.

"I am ready to comply," James responds in a shaky voice, sounding neither like the Winter Soldier nor Bucky Barnes.

Sam rubs James's shoulders, but that just leads to James trying to remove his shirt.

“Nope. We’re still not doing that, buddy. Just keep your clothes on and lie down on the bed and get some rest. We’ll bring you more food after you’ve slept. Do you need anything else?”

Every once in a while, Bucky’s face will absolutely crumble with pain and he will look like a little kid ready to cry. That is the look currently on James’s face. Sam can’t help but reach out to touch his cheek. James pulls back, like he expects to be hit, but then stops himself and holds himself steady. It’s the same thing Bucky does when Sam tries to be affectionate without properly telegraphing his movements. Sam was always pretty sure that was a trauma thing and not a repulsed-by-Sam thing, but it’s a jarring way to have it confirmed. His poor Bucky. His poor James.

Sam gently pats James’s cheek.

“I’ll be back to check on you later, James. Get some rest.”

Bucky and Steve are yelling at him at the same time. It reminds him of the one and only time he brought home a less than stellar report card and his parents laid into him for an hour. However, he is no longer a child and while Steve and Bucky are old enough to be his great-great grandparents, they had no hand in bringing him into this world.

“Unless you’re planning to go ballooning, you can stop blowing all this hot air at me. I went into the cell and I’m fine and if I need to go in again, I’m going to. Need I remind you, this is not the first time I have put my life on the line to try and rescue a Winter Soldier from his programming. But this time, he is not just the friend of a guy I met while jogging, he’s someone I personally care about.”

Bucky scowls at that, while Steve looks guilty.

“He isn’t a person, he’s a Winter Soldier,” Bucky explains, his voice shaking with anger. “Whatever you think you’re seeing in him...”

“I already got this speech from Zemo,” Sam interrupts, “Skip to the end.”

Bucky's eyes are ice cold as he continues. "All the sad sack emotions you think you are seeing are pure manipulation. He will kill you in a second with no remorse."

"Of course he will. He's a traumatized, brain-washed POW who doesn't know who he is and who doesn't think he is capable of being human. He's going to do whatever he has to do to survive, and right now, he thinks he can manipulate me into taking care of him. I don't have a death wish and I'm not stupid. I know he isn't Bucky Barnes right now, but..." Sam is caught off guard by the wave of sadness that hits him and he has to pause so he doesn't break down. "But I know who is locked inside that brain. How can you expect me to not care about him? About you?"

Bucky storms out of the room, but Sam isn't having it. He follows Bucky into the living room. When he grabs Bucky's wrist, the super soldier nearly throws Sam to the ground with a sharp movement of his arm.

"Whoa!" Steve yells, hot on their heels. "Bucky..."

"I didn't mean to!" Bucky yells, borderline hysterical. "I wasn't trying to..."

Bucky grabs his head and starts taking deep breaths. Sam tries to radiate calm, and he can feel Steve doing the same right behind him. Their breathing is steady and in sync and soon Bucky is breathing normally with them.

"I'm sorry, Sam," Bucky says in a voice that is hoarse and raspy. "Did I hurt you?"

"I am not made of sugar. I can handle a tug on the arm."

He's going to need to ice his shoulder and elbow, but not before they have this conversation. He can't have the super soldiers teaming up on poor, breakable, human Sam.

"Steve, tell him," Bucky implores. "You've been dealing with Winter Soldiers. Tell him there's nothing in there. There's nothing in there to keep the soldier from killing him or doing whatever he thinks he needs to do..."

"I know that. Bucky, I hear what you are saying and I am not taking this lightly. If this were anyone else, you would trust me to read the situation, right? You'd want to be there to play nursemaid, but you'd trust me to handle it. You trusted me with Karli and Walker."

"Karli tried to shoot you and Walker tried to bash your face in with the shield."

"So those are bad examples," Sam shrugs.

"I hate you so much," Bucky sighs, dropping onto the couch.

Sam laughs and playfully nudges Bucky with his knee.

"I don't have to prove anything to you, because I am alive and telling the story. I know a thing or two about dealing with confused and frightened people."

Sam puts his hands on Bucky's cheeks and guides his face up so he can see the other man's eyes. Sometimes, Sam wonders if he is reading everything wrong and misinterpreting Bucky's neediness for something more, but then Bucky will look at him like this - like Sam is the most amazing thing he's ever seen.

"I took a chance," Sam continues, gently stroking Bucky's cheek with his thumb, "but it was a measured decision based on my experience as a counselor, as a veteran and as someone who spends way too much time watching you."

"You went into that cell thirty seconds after he started screaming. That was not a measured decision." Bucky's tone is grumpy, but his eyes are still soft and full of love.

“I did some of the measuring ahead of time. Like a cooking show.”

“Sam,” Steve interjects, “You know I trust your judgment, but Bucky nearly ripped your arm off a few moments ago because he was startled. I have no doubts about your ability to de-escalate a situation if you have a chance to talk, but James could have killed you before he realized who was in the cell with him.”

It is a legitimate point that feels like a knife in the back. Sam had done quite a bit of thinking about how to connect with James, but his decision to go in the cell at that moment had been impetuous. But for Steve, of all people, to call him out for not thinking straight when it comes to Bucky Barnes is a bit much.

Bucky is staring at the floor, looking utterly dejected and broken while Steve has that unfamiliar, cold look to him that he apparently developed while chasing an unknown number of Bucky's through an unknown number of timelines. Sam is outnumbered and overpowered.

"It can only help if James continues to want to be my Bucky, right? He wants to work with me."

"It would be better if he wanted to be Steve's Bucky," Bucky argues, all traitor-like. "Because those are the memories that will help bring him out of the programming."

"And it would be better if he didn't see our Bucky as a threat. As long as he thinks he needs to replace Bucky in order to have you, we need to worry about how he might try to eliminate the competition," Steve adds.

Again, legitimate points jabbed right into his back. Sam tries to touch Bucky's cheek, but his partner jerks back, then looks miserable and ashamed as he presses his cheek to Sam's hand. Maybe Sam is out of his league. Maybe he needs to back down and let the super soldiers run this one.

But he thinks of how lost and scared James had looked in the cell, so eager to cling to any bit of comfort.

"Then tell me how to be a better carrot to dangle in front of James."

Sam's Left-Hand Man

Bucky wants to scream like the Soldier during his flashback. He just wants to howl at how awful and unfair it is to be so close to having everything he's wanted and needed for so long, but to know he isn't capable of holding on to any of it. He can't even accept a comforting touch like a normal human being. He might as well take a page from the Soldier's book and grab Sam by the dick while begging to be fucked, because James seems to have a better handle on how to keep Sam's interest than Bucky ever has. He's tried so hard to be less needy, to be more of a partner Sam could be proud of, only to be held at arm's length. Seeing Sam gently hold and caress the weeping Winter Soldier (who had fucking snot dripping from his nose) was the icing on the cake. Bucky has been so careful not to overstep his boundaries or touch Sam in any way that might make Sam want to retreat, but the Soldier was able to paw at Sam and be rewarded with more gentle caresses and whispered assurances.

When Bucky loses control, Sam shuts down and becomes distant and it's like being shut off from the sun. No warmth or light for Bucky when Sam's angry.

But the Soldier gagging and crying and trying to whore himself for a chance to sleep on a mattress is apparently endearing.

Bucky can't stop thinking of watching Sam punch the code into the keypad, knowing it might be the last thing Sam ever did. He and Steve had moved at their full speed but Sam was already in the cell with the door locked behind him when they got to the bunker. Sam was holding the soldier and stroking his hair. Sam has never been that intimate with Bucky.

Of course, when Sam tried to take Bucky by the wrist, he nearly got his shoulder dislocated. All the deprogramming and therapy and buzzers and lights and recreations and journaling have led to a Bucky who still cannot control his defensive responses. Why would Sam allow him into his bed, allow Bucky access to the most vulnerable parts of himself, when he can't trust Bucky not to hurt him in day to day contact?

Sam definitely keeps his vulnerable parts to himself, and not just the physical ones. After Sam made an off-hand comment months ago that he worried his tendency to be on the 'thick' side might make people think he was lazy, Bucky had asked questions, trying to understand why Sam was worried about his stellar physique, but Sam had closed up. He made jokes and deflected and shut down any conversation around the stereotypes about Black bodies that were clearly weighing on him. Bucky did his research and tried to be supportive. He learned the word 'intersectional'. He learned the word 'microaggression'. He learned about systemic racism and health equity. For the first time in his extended life, Bucky started caring about good and bad cholesterol, healthy fats and monitoring sodium intake. He learned how to make healthy dishes. He learned how to avoid potentially hurtful comments. He tried to figure out a way he could support Sam other than the usual punching and throwing things that had been his go-to approach for problem-solving for the past 100 years.

Bucky has really tried for Sam. Not just because he wants Sam to be his boyfriend (he does), but because he respects Sam and wants to be part of Sam's plan. He wants to be Sam's right hand man. Or maybe his left hand man.

Sam has been the carrot dangling in front of Bucky, driving him to pull himself together and re-enter the world. Bucky thought he was moving towards a genuine partnership.

Seeing Sam with James makes him question everything. Maybe every step towards being a functioning person was a step away from Sam. Maybe he was never anything but a project. A sad sack for Sam to save.

Sam and Steve are bickering in the kitchen. Bucky should have seen it coming. Sam is never one to keep his opinions to himself but, push come to shove, he would always have Steve's back. There's no pecking order now that they are both Captain America, and Sam isn't about to back down for anyone. He can see in Sam's body language that he is ready for the WWII Vets to try and pull some power card on him. He isn't wrong. Bucky would be glad to bully Sam out of risking his life to snuggle a sad Winter Soldier. If he had any kind of leverage he

could use to keep Sam away from James, he'd use it, but unlike Steve (who is actively trying to argue with Sam), Bucky is capable of conceding defeat. Unless Sam decides that not being murdered is a good enough reason for him to not go ahead with his current plan, there's nothing anyone can do to change his mind.

Sam walks into the living room looking ready to snap.

"Sam..."

"Don't start with me, Bucky."

"I'm not trying to pick a fight, Sam. Can we just agree to something reasonably safe? He's too unpredictable right now. The controls are failing and there's no real person there to take the reins yet. I don't think he would hurt you on purpose, but he's... confused."

"Do you remember what it's like?" Sam asks softly. "How it feels to be in this... in-between space?"

"Fucking awful. Confusing. Everything hurts. You feel everything, but there's no sense to it all. Just pain and confusion and the falling and the flashbacks. He's not in his right mind. The way he keeps..." Bucky can't look at Sam. "The stuff with the bed... I don't know what it even looks like, but it's not about... Fuck."

Sam sits next to Bucky on the couch and puts his arm around Bucky's shoulders. Bucky leans right into him, wanting to rub himself on Sam like a cat and replace any sign of James that might be clinging to Sam's clothes.

"It seems like he hasn't had any kindness or compassion in so long that he can't imagine it's real when it is offered. It seems like he sees himself having one bargaining chip at his disposal and he's trying really hard to use it for a little bit of comfort."

Bucky closes his eyes. Sam always understands too much.

"I know it was stupid to go in that cell, and I am sorry," Sam continues. "I am truly sorry if I've made this all worse for you. It's just so hard to see him in so much pain and know that was you. That you were trapped in that hell for decades and people treated you like a thing... And you were so alone."

Bucky keeps his hands to himself, but lets Sam pull him into an embrace. He wants to act like the Soldier. He wants to pull Sam down onto the couch and... That's the problem. He doesn't know what he'd do. He doesn't know if he still knows how to have sex like a regular person. He has no faith in his ability to read the situation or to act like a lover instead of an object. If he were to try and take things a step farther with Sam and Sam ended up looking at him with pity or disgust, Bucky isn't sure he'd recover. Sam is full of compassion for Bucky, but never pity.

"I can't do anything about what happened to you, but he's here and I can give him a little bit of kindness," Sam explains as he gently strokes Bucky's back. "I don't want to hurt you in the process. I don't want to make this worse. I just need to be able to do something for him."

Bucky presses his lips to Sam's throat, and feels Sam's pulse quicken under his lips. He pulls back to try and look Sam in the eyes, but Sam's eyes are darting around the room.

"Bucky, I'm not sure..."

Bucky takes Sam's face in his hands.

"Sam, I just need you to be honest with me. I just need to know if this is real or if it's..." he can't say pity. "Just sympathy."

Sam puts a gentle hand on Bucky's cheek and gives him a tender smile.

"It's real. It's very real. I have been..."

"No!" Steve yells.

Bucky jumps back, immediately feeling guilty, but Steve is still in the kitchen. Sam and Bucky both run into the other room and find the source of Steve's dismay. He's sitting at Sam's laptop, with a freeze frame of John Walker on the screen, the shield dripping with blood.

A Little Lost and Vulnerable

The laptop is closed, but Steve can still see the shield dripping with blood. He'd been looking for footage of Bucky during the war, but he couldn't ignore the headline "Captain America Kills Unarmed Man".

Sam said, "It's a long story, and you are going to hate every bit of it. It might be better to let it go." But Steve has never been able to let things go.

So Sam is telling him the strange, preposterous and yet somehow predictable tale of John Walker. Of course the government found a new blue-eyed blonde with a Black best friend to replace Steve. Of course it was an unmitigated and tragic disaster.

Sam isn't wrong. Steve hates every bit of the story. He especially hates how guarded and distant Sam looks as he tells it and the way Bucky keeps looking between Sam and Steve like he's expecting a fight to break out at any moment. If Bucky's body language becomes any more protective of Sam, he's going to be sitting in Sam's lap.

Sam emphasizes Walker's grief and instability when he gets to the events of the video, to Walker's vengeful attack on an unarmed man in front of a crowd.

"I'm not trying to defend him or minimize what he did... I don't know why I care what you think of him. Maybe I just don't want you to think I stood by and let a monster carry your shield. Once he went over the deep end, Bucky and I took back the shield."

"I'm guessing he didn't hand it over easily."

"He did once we broke his arm," Bucky explains with an ugly smile.

"He was already fraying at the edges, and I know he wanted that serum, but..." Sam trails off. It isn't like Sam to be so careful with his words. It's unnerving.

"No one could have predicted that chain of events, Sam," Steve offers. "I still haven't wrapped my head around the fact Bucky was intentionally working with Zemo."

"He didn't murder me, I didn't murder him," Bucky snaps. "It was a growth opportunity for both of us. Move on."

"I spent months trying to think of things from every possible angle before I put the shield in the museum. It was not a decision I made lightly."

Steve nods. He gets the sense Sam is waiting for him to have something to say about that decision, but while he can't pretend he truly understands Sam's choice, he knows Sam well enough to be certain his reasoning was sound.

"I knew there would be a lot of pushback from a lot of people if I carried the shield... and there has been." Sam casts a glance at Bucky and they share a knowing smirk. As much as Steve hates the feeling of being on the outside, it's good to see them so in sync.

“But it came down to protecting your legacy. I could handle people calling me a token or an Uncle Tom, but I couldn’t handle the idea of everything we worked for becoming a joke. Until I saw Walker with that shield, literally dripping with blood... I was worried about your legacy being denigrated and he managed to turn the shield into a symbol of all the worst this country has to offer. A selfish, impetuous bully using violence to crush the nearest scapegoat he could find. I keep thinking it all could have been prevented if I’d just taken the shield in the first place... but I don’t think I was wrong, Steve. I don’t think most of America would have accepted a Black man as Captain America if they hadn’t just watched a white dude straight up murder someone with the shield. I keep going over it in my head, but I can’t think of a way I could have kept the shield and your legacy from being dragged through the mud other than locking it away.” Sam pauses as a flurry of emotions cross his face and disappear. “I never wanted you to know about all this. I wanted you to think things just worked out the way you imagined it. That we all lived up to your expectations.”

Steve knew there would be people who would never accept Sam as Captain America, but he can see his own naiveté in failing to imagine the scope of opposition Sam would face. Maybe he did set Sam up after all.

“Sam, we do what we do because we believe in people. We try to foster the best in people... Captain America is supposed to be inspiring. Sure, he was supposed to sell war bonds, but you and I always believed he could be more. That he could represent the best America has to offer. And we’ve tried to hold ourselves to those standards. I represented the rose-tinted memories of some halcyon age of America that never really existed, and you represent what we believe America can and should be. You are the hope of a better, kinder, smarter, more compassionate America. Walker... he’s reality. He’s a desire to do good that is corrupted by an obsession with strength and physical power. Walker couldn’t destroy the ideal of Captain America. It seems like he just reminded everyone that it’s still very much an ideal and not the reality. It’s painful, but I’d rather be aware of the painful reality and fight for something better than be deluded while maintaining the status quo.”

Sam looks thoughtful and Bucky gives Steve an approving smile before saying, “Well, I’m going to leave you two hyper-articulate Captains to your speechifying and see if James wants to chat about how he’s slightly more muscular than me. Should be fun.”

On the security monitor, James is still sleeping, but he's becoming restless.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Sam asks, placing a gentle hand on Bucky's arm. Sam has yet to use the arm that Bucky nearly yanked off in the living room. Steve feels guilty for noticing Sam has kept that arm nearly still. Sam doesn't like when Steve notices his injuries.

"No one here knows more about acting like a Bucky Barnes than I do. And at least he won't try to suck my dick," Bucky says drily before adding a concerned, "at least, I hope he won't. Fuck."

Steve feels a pang at the affectionate look Sam and Bucky exchange before Bucky heads down to the bunker.

As soon as Bucky closes the door, Sam grabs an ice pack from the freezer and puts it on his shoulder. He shoots Steve a look, daring him to say something about his injured shoulder or his injured pride. Sam was always the first to offer comfort and support to others and the last to acknowledge he needed anything in return.

"I'm just going to spit this out before I have time to overthink it," Steve begins. He sees Sam immediately looking more guarded, but he plows on. "I have lived a few years, decades... I have lived a good bit since the last time I saw you, and I want you to know that I have met a lot of Sams and I have learned a lot about your reality that I was not aware of. I came out of the ice and thought it was great that racism was more or less a thing of the past. Why shouldn't it be? I was raised to think racism was a disgusting and antiquated idea in the

1920s. How could it still exist a hundred years later? That's as absurd as people still thinking the Earth is flat."

That gets a smile from Sam. Steve takes a deep breath and continues.

"I never wanted to discuss it, because I was afraid of being unintentionally hurtful or just sounding stupid and now I wonder if I hurt you by never opening that door. I wanted to give you the shield because I think you are exactly the hero America needs, but I promise I would have been just as happy to see you hand that shield to Shuri and have it melted down and turned into vibranium wings. I thought taking the mantle of Captain America would give you a lot of advantages because it's already such a symbol and, frankly, a brand, but I never doubted you could do just as much good as the Falcon. You don't need to be Star-Spangled to be what this country needs," Steve feels himself beginning to choke up, but he keeps going. He's left too much unsaid for too long. "I always hated being small and weak. I hated needing help or to be saved... but... even though you literally swooped in to save my ass on many occasions, I've never felt small or weak with you. I've always felt like you saw the best in me and that it was okay to be a little lost and vulnerable with you, because you'd help me find my bearings and get back on track. Thank you for that. I am truly sorry for not giving you that same feeling of safety in return. From the day we met, I felt like you really saw me, that you looked through the serum and the hype and the legend and saw a person who was struggling and I am so grateful for that. I have held you in such high esteem, I have loved and admired you for so many reasons, but I know now that I was missing out on a huge part of who you are by not understanding what you've been through, what you continue to go through."

"Steve," Sam begins, his tone soothing and his face the picture of understanding, "I always knew..."

"You don't have to make me feel better, Sam. I was wrong and I am sorry."

“Has Bucky been talking to you about white fragility?” Sam asks with exaggerated suspicion. “He keeps hiding what he’s reading. I thought he was getting into some weird porn until I saw his woke search history.”

Steve doesn’t want to be deflected with humor yet again, but it’s such a Bucky thing to do that he has to laugh. Bucky was always squirrely about reading for self-improvement, seeming to think ‘serious’ books only belonged to intellectuals.

“He really loves you,” Steve says, because it feels like it needs to be said out loud.

Sam’s eyes immediately drift to the screen where Bucky and James seem to be having a conversation. His eyes are so soft and full of love that Steve feels another pang.

“Can I get you some ibuprofen for your arm?” Steve offers. If he’s managed to learn one thing, it’s that pretending not to see Sam’s pain in order to protect his friend’s pride isn’t helping anyone.

He can see Sam fighting his automatic response of dismissing Steve’s concern before he smiles and says, “That would be great. And maybe another ice pack for my elbow. And my wrist. And don’t you dare breathe a word of this to Bucky.”

Is That What You Tell Yourself?

The Soldier would love to continue sleeping, but the pain in his bladder can not be ignored. The Bucky on the other side of the glass would love to see the Soldier soil his clothing and mattress. Sam won't let the Soldier wear his soft clothes any more if he can't even control himself for one day.

"You look uncomfortable, James," Bucky observes in a flat tone, like he isn't mocking the soldier's weakness.

"I need to relieve myself."

If Sam or Steve are watching, perhaps they will make Bucky give the Soldier a receptacle for his waste. He just needs to hold on a little longer.

Bucky taps on the keypad and a hidden door opens behind the Soldier to reveal a very basic washroom.

The Soldier jumps into the room, expecting Bucky to try and hit him with the door, but the door simply slides closed behind him. The Soldier does what he needs to do as quickly as possible and scrubs his hands thoroughly. He doesn't want to press his luck, but he gives his face a quick wash and rinses out his mouth as well. The door opens as he is drying his hands.

“Anytime you need to go to the bathroom or shower, you can ask. No one wants to see you uncomfortable or...” Bucky looks away from the Soldier. He’s so weak. “...or humiliated.”

Such a lie. Bucky wants to see the Soldier look disgusting so Sam and Steve will not want him in their beds. Bucky wants to maintain his pet status without offering anything in return. He’s greedy and lazy. No wonder he’s gotten so small compared to the Soldier.

“So, you want to be a Bucky?” Bucky asks in a flat tone, like he has no opinion on the matter. “Do you remember anything before HYDRA?”

“I was Bucky Barnes. I was Steve’s friend. I held his hand in private and protected him in public. I had a sister named Rebecca. I grew up in Brooklyn.”

“Do you remember anything other than what Steve told you?”

“No. I only know what Steve and Sam want me to know.”

Bucky nods but says, “That will change. You’ll start to have memories, and it will be confusing. You don’t have to be afraid. Sam and Steve will help you remember who you are, and they will take care of you. They don’t want you to be a weapon or a pet. They want you to be your own person.”

“Is that what they tell you?”

Bucky gives a tight smile. He probably wishes he could slap the Soldier again, but he is wisely on the other side of unbreakable glass.

“I went through it. I remember how it feels, and it’s awful, but it’s worth it. You’ll remember who you were, but it will feel like someone else. You’ll feel like you’re pretending to be someone else... and eventually, you’ll realize you’re you again.”

Like a weapon can just become a person.

“You get better at being who they want to see.”

“It’s a fake it 'til you make it type situation. You play the role until it isn’t acting any more.”

“But you’ll never really be Bucky. You’re still playing a role.”

“No. You’ll realize that Bucky was never really gone, just... buried.”

“Is that what you tell yourself?”

Bucky widens his eyes at that, but does not get angry.

“Yes? Let’s leave the existential crisis to the philosophers. You and I are more of the punching and shooting types. You will remember being Bucky Barnes and that is when you will start to be Bucky Barnes.”

“Where does the Soldier go when you become Bucky Barnes?”

Bucky gives a sad smile at that. “He stays right where he is. He’ll be in your brain and you’ll have all his memories and his skills and you will live with all that he’s done... and all that was done to him.”

Bucky looks sad and the Soldier wants to break his neck for being so weak. If the Soldier were in Bucky's shoes, he’d be on his knees for Sam every day, earning his keep and showing his gratitude. He wouldn’t be acting sad and trying to keep his handlers from what is rightfully theirs. Even now, Bucky is wearing a jacket and gloves like he can hide his body from the people who own him. The Soldier can’t remember the last time he felt as well-rested and well-fed as he is at this moment and he will do anything to make it last a little longer. It’s been so long since he felt the absence of pain, he’d stopped thinking about pleasure. But here, he was given people food and a soft mattress and Sam held him and touched his hair without pulling it. How can Bucky not see how lucky he is to have this life?

“So you’re still the Soldier.”

That makes Bucky look even sadder. Pathetic.

“No... He’s still there, but he’s not...” Bucky trails off, shaking his head.

“Do Sam and Steve like it when you cry and act weak?”

Bucky’s face suddenly turns hard. “I hate you.”

The Soldier smirks, “You are me. You’re weak and you fell off the train and you died and you don’t get to be sad about what happened to your corpse, because you’re dead. Dead people don’t get to eat food and feel feelings and be held...”

The Soldier realizes he is screaming before the world even drops out from beneath his feet. He tries to keep yelling at Bucky, but he’s falling too fast. Steve is watching him from the train with sad eyes. Steve tried so hard to save him, but he didn’t realize there was nothing left to save. Bucky died well before HYDRA got a hold of him.

The Soldier screams as disjointed thoughts crowd his brain. Neurons fire like lightning strikes in his head. He remembers shooting person after person after person. Not as the Soldier, but as a soldier. He remembers thinking he never wanted to see Steve again, knowing Steve would hate what had become of his friend. The Soldier can taste bile, and is aware he’s wasted what was left in his stomach, but he can’t stop screaming. His whole brain feels like it’s on fire as random images appear one after another.

He's sweating and shaking, and there are strong arms around him. He wants so badly for it to be Sam, even though the Soldier is disgusting and there's vomit on his soft clothes. He wants to be comforted and to feel Sam's soft skin.

But it's Bucky. The Soldier can feel the immobilizer pressed to his back, but otherwise, Bucky is going through the motions of offering comfort, gently rocking the Soldier back and forth and saying, "It's okay. You're going to be fine."

He can see Steve as a little boy. Skinny and frail but always ready to fight. A woman he thinks is his mom. A feisty little girl named Rebecca following him everywhere he went.

"What did you do to me?" He wants to sound intimidating, but his voice is weak and raspy.

"You're remembering things. It won't always be this hard," Bucky says in a soft and reassuring voice. He is really playing it up for the camera. He wants Sam and Steve to believe he is being kind.

"You did something to me," the Soldier growls. "You don't want me to take your place, because you know I'll be a better Bucky than you ever could."

He wants to call Bucky weak, but it is the Soldier who is crying and shaking on the floor. Bucky has won this round.

Steve appears outside the glass, holding his shield. The Soldier didn't even hear him come through the door. He's going to be as weak as Bucky soon.

"Why don't you take a shower?" Bucky says in a kind tone. He is really playing it up for Steve. "I'll get you some toothpaste and more water and clean this up. Stay right here and don't try anything cute. My sympathy for you is fairly limited."

The Soldier has no desire to escape. He stays put, staring at the mess he's made on the floor. He touches the soft fabric of his soiled shirt, He's going to miss it when it's gone.

The Soldier steps out of the shower and the door opens to reveal Sam on the other side of the glass. The mess has already been cleaned and there is no sign of Steve or Bucky.

"Are you feeling better?" Sam asks. His eyes are sad. He has so much kindness in him. Sam keeps his eyes on the Soldier's face, not even looking at his naked body. His soiled clothing has been taken away.

"I'm sorry I ruined your clothes." The Soldier is surprised by the way his voice breaks. This is what hope does. No wonder Bucky is so weak.

“I put some more clothes, a towel, toothpaste and a toothbrush in the drawer,” Sam explains. “Put some clothes on before you catch cold.”

The Soldier finds another pair of soft clothing in the exchange drawer. His eyes fill with tears.

“I want to be a good Bucky for you. Please let me try. The other Bucky...” Sam likes Bucky. The Soldier can’t tell him that Bucky set him up, especially when the Soldier has no idea how he did it. “I think I am starting to remember things like Steve wants me to.”

“Good. Just keep doing your best to remember things and we’ll do our best to take care of you. I’m sorry it’s so hard. I know it hurts and it’s confusing, but I promise it will be worth it to be yourself again.”

The Soldier walks over to Sam and puts his hand against the glass. He wants to touch Sam. He wants to show Sam he’s grateful. But Sam said to just say, “Thank you,” so he does.

Sam smiles. “I happen to be pretty soft on Bucky Barnes. Now, seriously, dry yourself off and get some clothes on. You’re making me cold just looking at you.”

What Would Sam Do?

When Sam was very small, his favorite Sunday school teacher made him a pillow shaped like Captain America's shield. It was made to scale with a strap for his arm, so he could curl up and sleep with it on top of his body and feel secure that no monster could possibly get at him while he slept.

Currently, Sam wants a nap. Not a grown-up, restorative nap. Sam wants an angry, petulant little kid nap. He wants his mom to say, "Samuel Thomas Wilson, go to your room and stay there until you remember how to act," and then give him a hug and a kiss on the head while asking God to give her strength. Back then, being sent to his room for a nap felt like the worst possible punishment, but now he thinks of being curled up on a twin bed in his star-spangled childhood bedroom with his stuffed shield and longs for that sense of security.

Sam has a genuine vibranium shield, two if he borrows Steve's, but there is zero chance he's going to be able to convince himself that they can keep him safe from monsters. Monsters are everywhere and no one is ever really safe.

Sam woke up that morning expecting an easy day. His calendar said "leg day" and he had one phone call scheduled. The rest of the day was supposed to be playing catch-up on some admin and maybe a movie with Bucky.

No one had bothered to add, "Watch your partner relive decades of trauma in excruciating detail" to his calendar. A grievous oversight. His imaginary personal assistant also left "visit from a middle-aged time-traveling Steve Rogers" off the calendar.

Not that anything would have prepared him to go from an uncomfortable barely-a-conversation about race with Steve to watching Bucky hugging his brainwashed past self.

No ratio of protein to carbs at breakfast would have made that easier.

Not that Steve was anything but caring and respectful as he plucked open about a hundred half-healed wounds just by acknowledging there was something to be discussed.

Not that Sam ever doubted Steve would listen and try to understand if Sam were to talk about the blatant racism he has experienced throughout his life (including their years together). The things people have said to his face either as an attack or ‘a joke’ or ‘ironically’. The constant microaggressions he experiences, the death by a thousand cuts that every Black person in America experiences as a part of their daily routine.

And if there is a voice in Sam’s head saying, “If you really believed that, then why did you make sure Steve never had a chance to let you down?”, then...

Then a person has to learn self-preservation at some point. There are things that can’t be deflected, not even with a vibranium shield, and Sam has been let down enough.

Sam takes a deep breath and shakes out his limbs before heading upstairs to where Bucky and Steve are standing in the kitchen, somehow both inches and miles apart from one another. Bucky is staring at a wall with not a shred of emotion on his face while Steve hovers near him, looking helpless. The words ‘a little lost and vulnerable’ float through Sam's head. He’s pretty sure that phrase will be on a loop in his brain for a while.

Bucky is still wearing his gloves and jacket even though they have been home for hours. Sam tries to not even think of James standing in front of him, completely naked and overwhelmed with emotion. There is so much that Bucky tries to keep private and hidden,

and Sam can't imagine how it is killing him to have James literally exposing him in so many ways. Sam feels flayed just from thinking about his own wounds in front of Steve. He can't imagine having to watch his worst memories play out in front of him while his closest friends watch.

Sam debates the best way to approach Bucky, wondering if he should give him space, even as he is already in motion to give him a hug. He telegraphs his movements, giving Bucky time to pull away, but Bucky is quick to hug Sam back, holding him so tight that Sam feels like he might actually survive this bizarre and exhausting day. Bucky might be strong enough to literally hold Sam together.

"I want to slam his stupid empty head against a wall," Bucky growls.

"I know. I'm glad you were kind to him instead."

Seeing Bucky go into the cell had been terrifying. It could have gone wrong in so many ways, but Bucky never lost control of the situation, his temper, or his traumatized younger self.

"I asked myself, 'What would Sam do?'" Bucky says. "Then I did the dumbest thing possible."

Sam laughs and looks at Steve, who is still hovering but not touching Bucky. There's a raw sadness in his face that breaks Sam's heart. Steve would do literally anything for Bucky, and Bucky has always been desperate to prove himself worthy of Steve's efforts.

Bucky tried to minimize his horrifying experiences around Steve. He never held back on what he'd done. Bucky doesn't hesitate to admit to the people he killed and the damage he caused while he was the Winter Soldier. It's the ways Bucky was tortured that he has always played down. Steve hasn't seemed surprised by a thing the Soldier has done or said since they arrived. It is clear he's seen it all, probably over and over again. The way Bucky keeps Steve on a pedestal, it must be agonizing to know he has no more secrets from the only person who still remembers the pre-Winter Soldier Bucky Barnes.

"Let's make this a Cap sandwich," Sam suggests as he shuffles Bucky backwards towards Steve. Steve laughs and Bucky calls him an idiot, but no one fights the three-way hug. They clearly all need it.

Sam puts his head on Bucky's shoulder and guides Steve's head to the other shoulder. It feels important to keep Bucky between them. He doesn't want Bucky to have any questions about where he belongs. He belongs in Sam's arms.

Sam has been hesitant to take any romantic steps towards Bucky. He knows Bucky feels dependent on him, and he has been concerned about Bucky being more focused on keeping Sam in his life than with taking care of his own mental health. Watching James, Sam knows his fears are solidly based in reality. Sam is glad to have some more insight into Bucky: the way he shuts down when discussing money, his discomfort with physical intimacy, his lack of faith in his own moral compass. It all makes sense when he looks at James trying so desperately to have a little bit of comfort in his personal hellscape.

Sam is glad he didn't sleep with Bucky before truly understanding how badly he'd been used, but Sam wishes he'd let Bucky know he had been assuming they'd end up together. That he'd seen Bucky as his endgame and not as a potential fling or friend with benefits. He felt comfortable taking his time because he felt certain that he and Bucky would be together for the long-haul, partners in every way. When Bucky showed up in Delacroix with the new suit,

Sam felt a sea change. He wasn't sure what it was at the time, but he knew their dynamic was changing and for the better.

"I should take James some food," Steve says, slowly pulling away from the hug.

"Don't go into his cell and hug him," Bucky warns, not letting go of Sam. "Someone in the house needs to act like they have a brain in their head."

"I'm not taking any chances. Not this early," Steve says with a kind of detachment that makes Sam wonder what his friend has been through with the Soldier. Woolly-headed optimism has always been Steve's brand, especially when it came to Bucky.

As Sam watches Steve prepare a plate of spaghetti (sauce made with canned tomatoes, not fresh) he feels irrationally guilty for assuming Steve had been enjoying his life in the past. For thinking Steve had chosen happiness when he was such a martyr by nature. For being angry Steve left Bucky when Bucky was still so fragile. He should have known there was more to the story.

He feels guilty for never realizing how much Steve cared about Sam. Sam had posters of Steve Rogers on his wall as a child, dressed up as him for Halloween. He expected their relationship to be a little unequal. When Steve showed a little vulnerability, Sam felt good that Steve trusted him. He should have realized how meaningful it was for Steve to be a little lost and vulnerable. Of all the people trying to get close to Steve, he'd chosen Sam to open up to and Sam hadn't appreciated just how much it meant.

The first time Steve and Sam made love, it had been in a laughably sleazy motel with a neon sign outside their window and paper thin walls. Sam had been surprised to see that hungry look in Steve's eyes, surprised Steve was actually making a move, but he never imagined it was more than comfort between friends. There's nothing in particular Sam would have changed, it was never in the cards for them to be together, but he could have been a little more tuned in to Steve's feelings. He's grateful to have this time for them both to have more clarity. To not leave things unspoken.

As soon as Steve is down the stairs, Bucky has his hands on Sam's cheeks.

"Would it be okay if I kissed you?" Bucky asks, so fucking earnest that Sam could propose on the spot. Instead, he kisses Bucky. It's a bit more crazed and desperate than he'd pictured for their first kiss, but he wants Bucky to feel every bit of love and protectiveness Sam is feeling. Bucky's kiss is just as desperate and full of need. It's an effort to pull back, to not just make-out in the kitchen when they should be monitoring the situation downstairs. Sam presses his forehead to Bucky's and holds him tight.

"I am aware of the irony here and I don't want to hear it," Sam begins, "but you scared the hell out of me when you went in that cell. My heart goes out to James, but you are the James "Bucky" Barnes I'm in love with and I really don't want to think about having to live without you."

Sam wouldn't retrieve the words if he could, but he hadn't intended to make that particular declaration so soon. Bucky looks gobsmacked. Bucky's mouth is moving, but he isn't saying any words.

Sam pulls him in for another hug, allowing himself a moment of comfort before getting back to work. He'd resigned himself a long time ago to always being a little lonely. To accepting

part of the job was keeping others safe by keeping them at a distance, but he doesn't have to protect Bucky from danger, at least not any more than Bucky needs to protect Sam. Sam can be Captain America and he can have Bucky. Sometimes life is amazing. The world is full of monsters but it's also full of miracles.

"I'm not sure I'll ever feel good enough for you," Bucky confesses softly into Sam's ear, "but I am going to keep trying."

Sam squeezes Bucky and gives him another kiss. "You got me vibranium wings and you make me low sodium mushroom casserole. What more could I ask for?"

The Elephant in the Room

Bucky watches Steve watching the monitor. It's painful to watch the Soldier talking to Sam. He'd rather watch Steve. Bucky has been so focused on Steve's legacy and the shield that he forgot how much he just likes being with Steve. How he's missed Steve's humor, his intensity, the way he wears his heart on his sleeve. Steve stares at the screen, his face hard and intense, but then melting into a soft and loving look whenever Sam does... anything. He used to resent how much Steve loved Sam. Now he understands.

James managed to gag down his spaghetti earlier with some coaxing from Steve. There was plenty of screaming involved, but Steve stayed calm. He just kept talking to James in a measured tone. Unlike Sam and Bucky, Steve can handle the Soldier without getting all lost in his feelings. It seems like he has had a lot of practice.

But Bucky doesn't want to think about that.

Bucky doesn't know why he went into the cell. He'd been watching the Soldier screaming, feeling detached and disgusted, but then he thought of Sam saying, "And you were so alone."

As much as he hates the Soldier, he suddenly saw him through Sam's eyes - not as a painful reminder of his own past but as a person. A human being in pain. Bucky would have done anything for a little comfort when he was between mind wipes. To feel something other than pain and fear.

Maybe he'll call Raynor and tell her he literally gave his past self a hug. She could probably write a paper on time travel as a therapeutic intervention. Maybe a book.

Holding James, hearing him hiss his angry, paranoid fears, Bucky did have a few realizations, like that there is only so much comfort you can give to a person who cannot accept it.

That it felt good to be kind, even when the kindness was unwelcomed. Even feeling his hatred and disgust for the soldier, he could see the man was lost in fear and pain and Bucky could feel compassion. It is a reminder that Bucky is not completely lost. Not completely unlovable.

“...you are the James “Bucky” Barnes I’m in love with...”

He should get it in writing, maybe have it notarized and add a 'no take backs' clause while Sam is feeling soft. The next time Bucky has a mental breakdown because he doesn't know how to answer a question like "do you need a receipt for tax purposes?", he'll want written proof that Sam actually wanted to be with this disaster of a human being.

They keep the volume down on the monitor, just loud enough to hear if anything sounds off but not quite loud enough to understand what Sam and James are saying. No one has discussed it out loud, they have just continued to lower the volume with every horrible, humiliating thing to come out of James's mouth. Bucky would thank Sam and Steve for their thoughtfulness, but that would mean acknowledging the elephant in the room.

Bucky wants to kiss Sam again, but kissing will lead to more and Sam is going to think about James begging for a chance to show his 'gratitude' and...

How could it not color the way Sam sees Bucky? Sam can pretend it doesn't matter, but that elephant is definitely going to be sitting between them in the bedroom.

"He is really taken with Sam," Steve observes.

"Are you in love with Sam?" Bucky asks.

Bucky is as surprised by the question as Steve. That was supposed to be an inside thought.

Steve blinks at Bucky and looks back at the screen for a moment.

Steve takes a deep breath and looks Bucky in the eyes and says, "Yes? It's complicated. I loved this Sam when I was here, but I have loved so many other Sams... I have met so many Sams and Buckys and even Peggys and I have seen all these different sides of each of you and learned to love and appreciate... It sounds like I am avoiding the question but it's hard to explain. The things I love about all of you, I see in version after version. I have never found a Sam or a Bucky that I didn't love. I always thought true love meant there was one person out there meant for you, but I don't think that is how it works. I think there are lots of people who could be the one, and circumstances in your life put you on a path towards this person or that one. So, yes. I am in love with Sam. And with you. And with Peggy and with Tony and with Sharon and, well, you get the picture."

Bucky doesn't know what to say to that. Steve had always pulled away when Bucky got too affectionate back in the day. Bucky spent years training his brain not to think of Steve in romantic or sexual terms. It felt sacrilegious.

"I'm happy that you and Sam are... whatever you are," Steve continues. "You are two of the people I love and admire most in the world. You deserve to be happy."

"I'm not sure I can make anyone happy, but there isn't a jar I can't open and I have no problem killing silverfish."

"Sam does hate silverfish. Does he still have that massive record collection? He definitely needs a boyfriend with super strength to help move that around."

"I pick up those milk crates full of vinyl like they're empty. He swoons every time."

Bucky glances at the monitor. Sam and James are both sitting next to the glass, hands pressed together through the glass like the Star Trek movie. And like the other Star Trek movie.

"Is he fascinated with Sam because he's Sam or because he's the most palatable option out of the three of us?"

"Sam is good at soothing crazies. It's a tent pole of our relationship."

"You aren't crazy, Bucky. It's good to see you being you. Not just pretending to be the Bucky you think I want to see," Steve says with a sweet smile. "I guess I will always be a sap for you. It's kept me running in circles for god knows how long."

"How long can you stay? Do you know?"

"I usually get about two weeks before things get... complicated. The way James is already remembering things, I can probably be gone sooner. The food is really having an impact."

"Sam can tell you all about smells and the amygdala. But don't ask if you aren't ready to sit and listen. He's going to draw a brain and it's a 'please stay seated until the ride is complete' type of lecture."

"I'll have to keep that in mind for the future."

"You don't have to keep doing this. Drop him off in his time line and come home. Or go somewhere else and live your life."

Steve's face falls at that. "I've tried to drop out, but it doesn't work. I always end up back in the loop."

"Can Sam and I help? Sam can't stay gone for long and I don't want to leave him alone in the field, but we could always come back to this time and..." Bucky looks at the monitor. James is rubbing his forehead on the glass like an animal in a zoo. "And he'll do anything for you if you give him some pajamas and spaghetti."

"James needs to return to his timeline."

"But does he? Does it really matter? If you don't save him, he's probably just stuck with HYDRA forever so..."

Steve looks a little shocked, but thoughtful.

"James doesn't have a Sam in his timeline. Sam died as part of the Falcon program," Steve muses.

"Then fuck it. Keep him."

"He's not a cat, Bucky."

"Of course not. Cats are low maintenance compared to that pain in the ass but he's a good fighter and he'll follow you anywhere. Any Bucky would. It's in the DNA."

Steve laughs and says, "Impossible," but Bucky can see the wheels are turning.

Bucky watches Sam getting in a few squats while Steve showers. Sam never skips leg day.

Steve has decided to sleep downstairs and keep an eye on James. Sam and Bucky have already set up a mattress and bedding for him, making it as cozy as possible.

"You could join me," Sam suggests. "Get in a work-out instead of sitting there eating chips."

"I have spent the day being reminded it took me years to be able to eat real food without getting sick. Let me enjoy this simple pleasure."

"Chips are not food."

"No, they are comfort in a bag. Aren't you supposed to go a little lower with those squats? Really work your quads?"

"Shut up."

Bucky continues eating chips while he watches Sam working every muscle in his body.

"I was thinking..." Sam trails off and looks unsure. They are standing outside their respective bedrooms and Bucky's heart is beating out of his chest.

"Yes, Sam?" It's a prompt, but also the answer. He's going to say yes to anything Sam suggests.

"I was wondering if you wanted to sleep in my room tonight. Just sleeping. I'm not trying to rush anything."

"Yes. That would be great. I mean, yes."

Bucky kisses Sam. He keeps kissing Sam as he fumbles with the door and pulls Sam towards the bed.

"Maybe we should only kiss standing up," Sam suggests between kisses. "This seems..."

"We don't have to stop," Bucky promises, trying to push James and Steve out of his head. Everyone in this goddamn house wants to have sex with Sam and Bucky doesn't want to be the idiot who misses the opportunity.

"Buck. It has been a crazy day and I just did a lot of squats..."

"You can just lay there and think of the Statue of Liberty," Bucky teases. "I don't mind doing all the work."

Sam laughs and kisses Bucky again, but his kisses are more sweet than passionate.

"There's no rush here, Bucky. I just want to hold you. Let me hold you."

So Bucky lets himself be held.

To Avoid a Homicide

After a week of being a guest at Sam and Bucky's home, Steve goes down to the bunker to find James waiting with a friendly smile on his face.

"Mornin', Stevie."

He looks and sounds so much like Bucky back in the day that it's like stepping back in time. Yesterday, Steve gave James a haircut at his request. Steve really only knows one haircut, so James looks very much like his old self.

Steve had talked to Bucky and Sam before cutting James's hair and they both brought up good points. Sam expressed concern James was only trying to be more physically pleasing to Steve, and Bucky added, "He might be trying to murder me and take my place, so make sure to go really short on the sides so you guys can tell the difference between us."

But Bucky ultimately felt a haircut was a good idea to help James feel more like Sergeant Barnes and less like a pet. Bucky didn't go into detail, but he made it clear the long hair had some pretty specific associations that were best left in the past.

So it was the old cut, but tight on the sides to try and avoid a homicide.

Steve waits until Bucky enters the room before he opens the cell. James steps out and gives Steve a big hug while Bucky stands guard. They've been letting James spend most of his days

out in the living area but with constant surveillance. He still sleeps in the cell so they can all get some rest. It's easy to feel lulled by James's easy-going and friendly behavior. He seems just like Bucky from before the war.

But Steve has spent a week with the real Bucky and it has been painful to realize how much of Bucky's seeming recovery has always been an act, or at least a cleaned up version of reality. Bucky has never stopped drowning in guilt and shame. He's still trying to make peace with his past and find a way forward. There are moments when he laughs and his eyes sparkle just like the old days, but then a shadow will cross his face and he's back to this new, more serious Bucky.

Steve knows that Bucky's recovery has been far from a straight line. That he has good and bad periods, that sometimes he feels like his old self for weeks or months and then the feeling of being a fraud returns.

James may be genuinely happy to see Steve, but the sunshine act is definitely an act. He is being the Bucky he thinks Steve is training him to be.

And the Soldiers are so very good at pretending to be Bucky. Once the memories start to kick in and they get a sense of what the person in front of them wants to see, they can be shockingly convincing. More than once, Steve has been fooled into thinking he was going to bed with a consenting Bucky only to realize later he was being manipulated by a desperate Winter Soldier. While Bucky and Sam seem to be making an effort to open up to Steve during his stay, he's finding there is more and more that he needs to keep hidden from his friends. The Steve Rogers they knew was inexperienced and reserved and afraid of intimacy. Now he's just afraid of intimacy. He has now been with between 10-112 people (depending on how you count the variants) in his years of time hopping. Sam and Steve might not judge Steve for being deceived into questionable sex with a Winter Soldier, but they might have some feelings about how many versions of Bucky Steve has taken to bed.

It was something that happened slowly over time, but once Steve became accustomed to having one to two weeks with someone, it seemed silly to waste that time. It wasn't like he had anyone to answer to. There was no one to hold him accountable.

And wouldn't Sam and Bucky be surprised to know Steve apparently needs someone to hold him accountable? He wouldn't try to lift Mjölnir now.

"I had a dream about you last night," James says, looking up at Steve through his eyelashes as he follows Steve up the stairs to the kitchen.

"We're going through your family tree today," Steve responds, making it clear he is all business.

James glowers back at Bucky. James seems to blame Bucky for everything that doesn't go his way.

Steve sits at the table and goes through family photos with James. Sometimes, James dutifully recites the names he is told. Sometimes, his whole face fills with emotion and he becomes incoherent as he is flooded with memories. James is overwhelmed by remembering so much, so fast, but Bucky thinks it is better to keep at the accelerated pace, that the pain of the memories is preferable to remaining in limbo. Bucky looks haunted when he talks about the space between being fully programmed and fully aware. Bucky spent years on the run in that personal hell.

During a break, James writes *I thought about what you said* on his notepad and pushes it towards Steve. Steve glances at Bucky who is already glaring at James. Sam was the one

who suggested James write things down when he wants privacy in a conversation, since he is always being guarded. James uses Sam's suggestion almost exclusively to try and convince either Sam or Steve to use him sexually.

James continues to write.

I understand. You're a good man. Moral. It's part of who you are. You don't want to take advantage.

Then James licks his lips, catching his plump lower lip with his teeth. It's seductive and gives the lie to the note. James doesn't understand. Steve promised James (to Sam's horror) that they could have sex just as soon as James was capable of meaningful consent. James has since been determined to prove that he can and wants to consent. If Steve hadn't seen it all before, he could have easily fallen for James's lines. He looks and sounds like Bucky. He seems 'normal'. His desire seems authentic.

But Steve knows that Bucky is still struggling with sex. Bucky, who always teased Steve for being 'uptight' about something 'natural' can't get out of his own head with Sam. According to Bucky, he's been 'coming at Sam like a creepy sex robot'.

Sam has a pretty different take on the situation, but he won't sleep with Bucky if there is any question about Bucky's motivation. He doesn't want Bucky in his bed just to keep James (and Steve) out. Sam doesn't need anyone to hold him accountable.

Steve writes back, *Not yet.*

James frowns and furrows his brow.

You said when I understood, we could.

James is angry and petulant, but he continues with his Bucky training, because he still doesn't believe he has an option. And maybe he doesn't. Steve needs him to be recovered enough to not turn on him when they are on their own and their time is always limited. He just has to trust that Bucky is right and James will ultimately want to work with Steve. Working with former Soldiers is full of moral gray areas.

But who better than a former Soldier to track down Soldiers? Bucky is upsettingly effective and efficient with James. He knows every button to push to keep the soldier in line or to bring out the hidden Bucky Barnes. Steve needs to try something different. He keeps getting pulled back into the same cycles.

And he's still carrying two Infinity Stones. One of the many things he can't and won't tell Steve and Bucky. If there is a future with Sam and Bucky, then Steve must have managed to return all the stones, but it's been something like twenty years and Steve is wearing down. Each stone has taken years and dozens of attempts. At one point, Steve was so convinced he was either dead or completely insane, that he took a Winter Soldier and did everything he wasn't supposed to do. They went back to the forties where Steve bet on some long shots, got in early on some stocks, and was rolling in money. He traveled the world with Bucky, completely ignoring any responsibility.

If Bucky had been happy, maybe Steve would have just stayed back in time. If Bucky hadn't just gotten more and more depressed, Steve might have let himself enjoy that hedonistic life.

But Bucky needs to have faith in Steve and he needs to make amends. Bucky needs to prove to himself that he is still a good person. Steve has learned there are no shortcuts for Bucky. Without purpose, Bucky just fell deeper into despair and there was nothing Steve could say, nothing he could buy and nowhere he could travel that would make Bucky smile for real.

For all that Steve has learned to compromise and compartmentalize, and bend further than he should, he is perpetually surrounded by good people and can never stray far from his path. One way or another, the people around him keep pulling Steve back into the light. No one has better friends than Steve Rogers.

James might be the key to ending the mission. And if not James then...

It's an absurd idea, but Steve needs to get the upper hand somehow. Sam ultimately shared the story of being given the shield, and Steve is growing increasingly convinced he isn't the Steve in the story. Possibly it was a Steve who opted to live his life out in this timeline. Steve has a feeling that is not a good sign for his future, but Steve doesn't need to grow old. He managed to survive more than a millennium and he's not afraid to die doing something that matters.

And this forsaken game needs to end.

Whole and Undamaged

Chapter Notes

Almost the end! Thank you so much to everyone reading, and special love to the people who comment. I know everyone is busy and no one knows what to say, but any comment helps. Every bit of encouragement helps battle the constant fear and anxiety that comes with sharing my stories.

James only has a few more days before he leaves with Steve to go wherever Steve wants to take them.

I want to consent to you, he writes in his notebook.

Sam frowns and writes, *You know I am with Bucky*.

It isn't cheating. We are the same person. I am Bucky Barnes.

Not even close.

Although James hates Bucky, the comment still stings. Sam likes his Bucky a lot.

But James is running out of time. He needs to stay focused.

He doesn't have to know. We can do it while he's sleeping. You can restrain me. Steve can be there with the immobilizer so I can't hurt you.

Sam sighs and writes back.

Anything that involves a person pointing a weapon at you isn't going to meet my criteria for consensual. This isn't going to happen.

James wants to punch Bucky.

Bucky still isn't taking care of you. He's selfish and lazy.

Sam looks annoyed and shakes his head.

Bucky is my partner. We make our decisions together. We respect each other's boundaries.

Sam is always trying to put thoughts in James's head. James can tell he is being manipulated, but he isn't sure of the point. It doesn't matter if Bucky has boundaries, James is going to do anything and everything to keep from going back to his old life.

James should back off, but Bucky makes him furious. Bucky has everything that James wants and he's wasting it.

He's wasting so much time and I want to feel what it's like with someone kind.

Sam opens and closes his mouth a few times before saying, "The answer is no..."

Steve had been looking relaxed, reading a history book, but now he is staring at them. Steve says no sex until James can consent, but everyone knows James wants to consent to Sam. He isn't scared of Sam at all.

And James wants to be with Sam. James doesn't remember the last time he felt genuine arousal and desire without some kind of pill or injection. Bucky says no one has drugged James, that his body is just healing from regular food and sleep. James's body is coming back to life.

"..but I am always happy to give you affection," Sam continues before giving James a warm, tight hug. James feels safe and warm in Sam's arms. Sam is strong and solid, but his body feels good squeezed against James's. Sam isn't all muscle and bone. His body isn't as hard and unyielding as Steve's or a Soldier's. Sam feels so beautifully human.

And his skin is so soft and healthy. You can tell it's never been frozen.

And he smells so good.

And his eyes are so warm. James can imagine Sam looking at him during sex and it would make James feel happy to be seen instead of filling him with shame.

James writes, *I love you*.

Sam doesn't say it back, he never does, but he gives James another hug. James tries to absorb every sensation so he can remember it when he's back to his real life as Steve's Soldier.

James could have been so good for Sam. He would have worked hard and been helpful and Sam would have never regretted letting James have short hair, because he would have been perfectly obedient.

But Sam chose Bucky and James doesn't get to feel sad about it.

It is time to leave Sam. It's been two weeks. Steve says they cannot push it any longer.

And Steve has a plan. James is going to be Steve's partner again. He remembers working with Steve. He remembers how much he loved Steve, how much he trusted him.

He can almost feel it now. He sees the kindness in Steve. He sees the noble spirit.

He also sees the coldness of a successful Handler who can keep an Asset in line. Soon, there will be no Sam or Bucky to watch Steve and make him second guess himself. James can see how Steve holds back for their sake. He's not sure what to expect when he and Steve are alone.

Not that it matters. James has his orders. He will protect Steve and give him affection.

"Take care of him," Bucky orders. James nods. He will not let harm come to the kindest Handler he is likely to find. Steve asks for James's opinions and listens when he speaks. He helps James calm down when he starts falling. The memories make James fall, but Steve holds him and talks to him until James can feel the ground under his feet again. Maybe Steve really can save him from falling if James can keep him happy enough. If he can be a good enough Bucky.

"I know you can't trust him, or me," Bucky continues, "but he is your friend. 'Till the end of the line and then some."

James remembers the line. Steve's mother died and Bucky tried to take care of him the best he could. It doesn't seem to James like he ever did a very good job of it - most of his memories of Steve involve Steve being pretty seriously sick or injured - but he knows Bucky wanted to keep Steve safe and therefore, that is what James wants. He is absorbing and adapting to the memories as fast as he can, using every trick he learns along the way to pass himself off as the sweet and charming Bucky Barnes that Steve is trying so desperately to find. James won't be some sad sack like Sam's Bucky.

When James looks over at Steve, he is watching Bucky, his face soft and loving. Steve loves Bucky, no matter how poorly he behaves. Maybe he can love James, too.

Sam approaches and takes off his bomber jacket, handing it to James.

It is a buttery soft leather, light brown in color. James can tell from the texture that it is well-worn, but there are very few signs of damage. Sam has taken care of this jacket.

James wants to hug the jacket, press his lips to it and breathe in the smell of Sam. Instead, he just holds the coat and waits for further instructions.

“Once you are back to being yourself, you can buy a whole wardrobe of coats just like Bucky, but I thought you might like this one for now.”

James slides on the coat. It's still warm from Sam's body. It still smells like goodness and safety.

Bucky shakes his head. He doesn't approve, but he isn't angry. He seems less possessive of Sam today, less aggressive with James. He must have finally consented to Sam. James is envious, but he's glad Sam was finally taken care of. He hopes Bucky did a good job.

"Thank you, Sam," James says in a voice that sounds strange to his own ears. "Thank you for everything."

Sam gives James a tight hug. James wants to declare his love again, but he can't risk upsetting Steve and Sam doesn't want to hear it.

So he says it inside his head. *I love you, Sam.*

"Steve loves you so much," Sam says, his big eyes full of more warmth than James knows what to do with, "As a friend and as a partner. I know it's still confusing, but please believe me. Steve wants you to be as safe and happy as possible and so do I."

"I will be a good partner," James promises. "I will protect him and hold his hand when no one is watching. As long as his hand is above his waist."

James does not have permission to touch anyone below the waist or under a table.

Sam gives a tight smile.

"I am sure you and Steve can work out some new rules. Just make sure you let him know when you start falling. Shuri should be able to help you eventually. Until then, let Steve take care of you when you need it."

Sam thinks Shuri will fix James's brain and maybe even make his arm hurt less. Bucky says she is sweet and generous with her brilliance, that she won't expect anything from James other than his commitment to fighting for good.

James would be happy to pledge his fealty to a brilliant young princess, but his loyalty will be decided by Steve.

James isn't sure what to make of his returning memories. He knows he was Bucky, but Bucky died. Everyone tells him that isn't true, but James was there. He remembers Bucky slowly slipping away, fading until there was no longer a recognizable person left. He didn't go easy. The real Bucky wasn't a coward, not like the sad Bucky that Sam has chosen. The real Bucky tried to stay human.

Sam says there is a core "self", a Bucky, that remains whole and undamaged. He says that parts of Bucky took on the pain and fear and disillusionment, but there is still a Bucky inside of James that cannot be destroyed.

James doesn't really believe it. Even if some Bucky survived, he is surely broken and tainted.

But sometimes James can picture him, a young James Buchanan Barnes that lives deep inside James's brain. He is tiny and perfect, whole and undamaged like Sam said. He is too tiny and weak to face the outside world, but James can keep him safe until he is stronger.

It's a silly fantasy, but one that fills James with hope and a feeling of warmth.

Sam says they will probably see each other again. That is a bad thing because it will be because someone is targeting Sam and Bucky, but James wants to see Sam again. Until then, he will keep that little piece of Bucky safe and hidden, deep in his brain where not even Shuri can see him.

The Epilogue

Chapter Notes

The final chapter! Thank you for reading and I hope you enjoyed it. Rest assured that every hit, kudo and especially every comment is noticed and cherished and fuels me to write more .

Sam circles the area, not sure what he's supposed to be looking for. Torres had said, "You need to get here. Now."

"Torres at five o'clock," Bucky announces through the comm.

Sure enough, Torres peeks out from behind a building, his wings glinting in the sunlight.

"We need you, Sam!" Torres yells over the comm. "Bring Bucky! We could use another one."

Sam looks down and immediately sees Bucky, already in a wide open space and ready to be scooped up. Exactly where Sam needs him to be.

Sam grabs Bucky on a dive and carries him to the top of the building where Sam finds Torres.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Bucky yells as he takes in the scene. Sam is not really surprised to see Steve and James fighting yet another Winter Soldier. They all expected it to take Steve and James a while to get on top of things and for Sam and Bucky to be targeted again.

It’s the other five not-Soldiers/not-Buckys that are blowing his mind.

Sam has a sense of deja vu as he dive bombs the Soldier. This time, he lets Bucky do the kicking. The Soldier is immediately swarmed and restrained by James and the not-Buckys.

Sam lands in front of Steve with Bucky still in his arms.

“So this is the plan?” Sam asks.

Steve shrugs, “We make a shockingly efficient team.”

Sam can feel the weight of all those blue eyes. Bucky is not subtly putting himself between Sam and all the not-Buckys. He even shoots a glare at Torres. Bucky is convinced everyone is in love with Sam.

Seven gorgeous, identical men on one rooftop, all with slightly different hair-cuts and jackets. A little choreography and they could be a helluva boy band.

“Do you know what you’re doing?” Sam asks Steve.

“Not really,” Steve answers with a broad grin, “but it’s working. We are halfway there. I am sorry, but we have to go, we are being... heavily pursued.”

Sam gives Steve and James each a hug. James is still wearing Sam's coat. He looks confident and has a light in his eye that wasn't there before.

Sam hears Bucky saying something to Steve about taking, “ALL the stupid” with him.

Steve and his Bucky army are gone in a matter of moments.

Torres looks at Sam with wide eyes and pink cheeks and says, “I told him he was my second favorite Captain America and he said I’m his second favorite Falcon. He was so amazing.”

Bucky threatens to take a short cut and jump off the roof to get away from Torres, but ultimately agrees to let Sam give him a ‘lift’ home.

Sam holds Bucky tight as he flies. Bucky is heavy as hell and he complains the whole time, but Sam is happy to be holding his partner safe in his arms.

The world is full of monsters, but it's also full of miracles.

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