#### A Flash of Something Human

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# A Flash of Something Human

by concupiscence66

#### 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 query 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 Buckys, 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 doppleganger. 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.

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

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

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

you that left."

### 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."





"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."

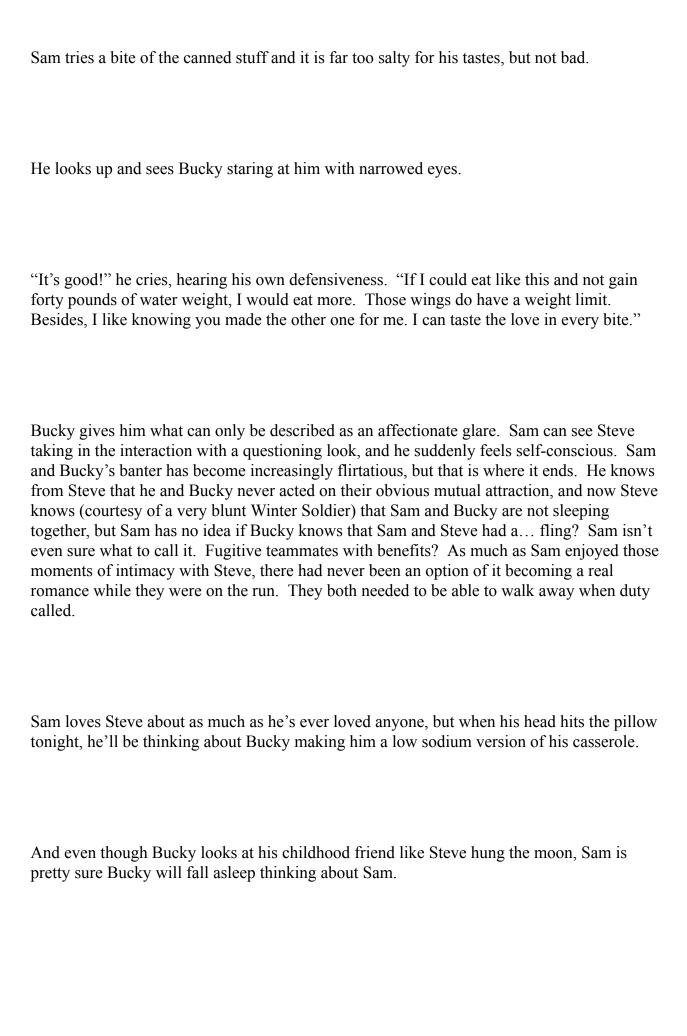
# **That Could Have Gone Better**

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?"









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 then when he was young. It's one of those things that would make Sam feel a little



Steve licks his lips and shakes his head.	"I don't know.	It's complicated.	There are factors l
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.





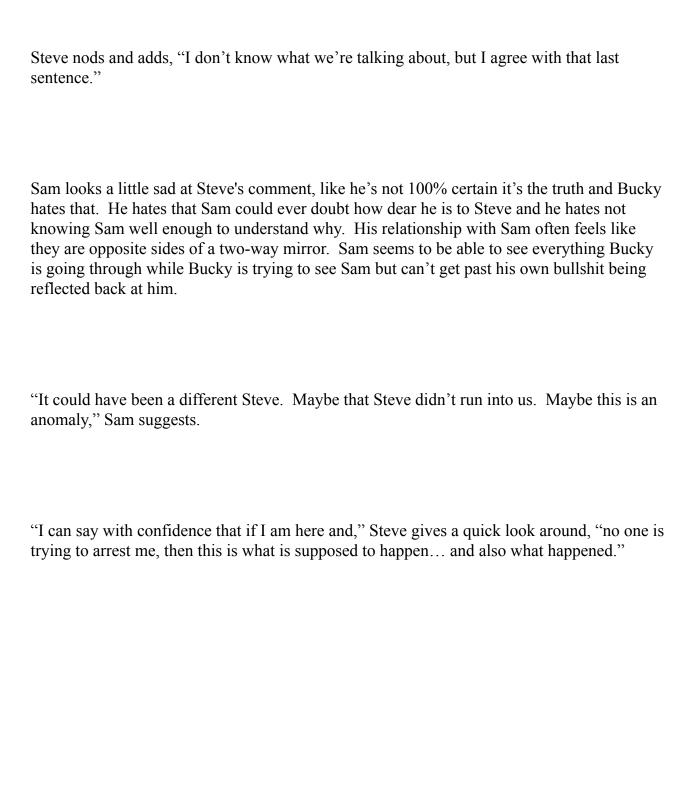




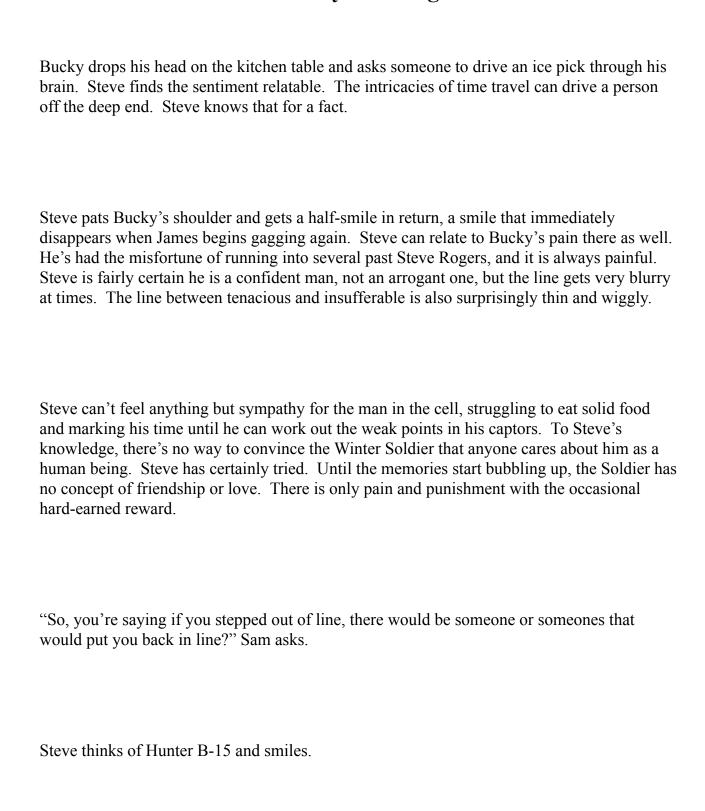




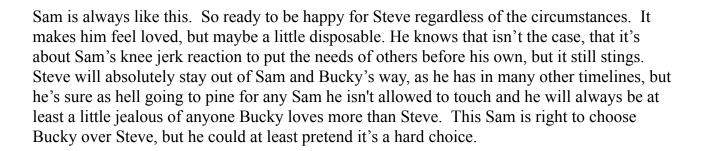




## **Bucky Training**



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



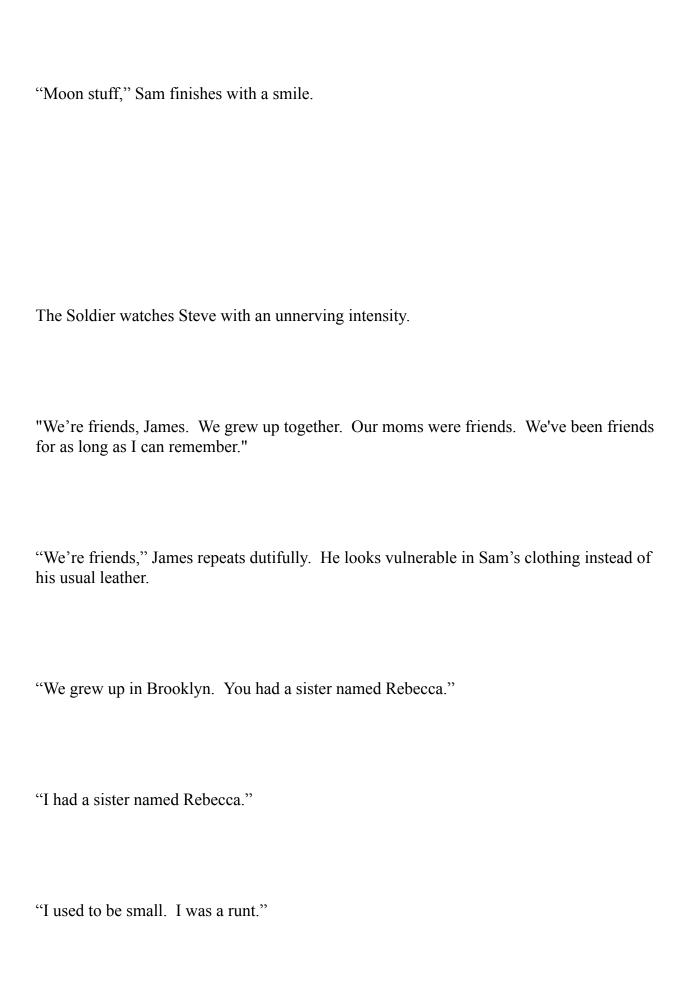
"Well, yes, she is attractive, but no, Sam. It isn't anything like that. There are people monitoring the timeline and they are pretty aggressive. And mean. Very mean."

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.

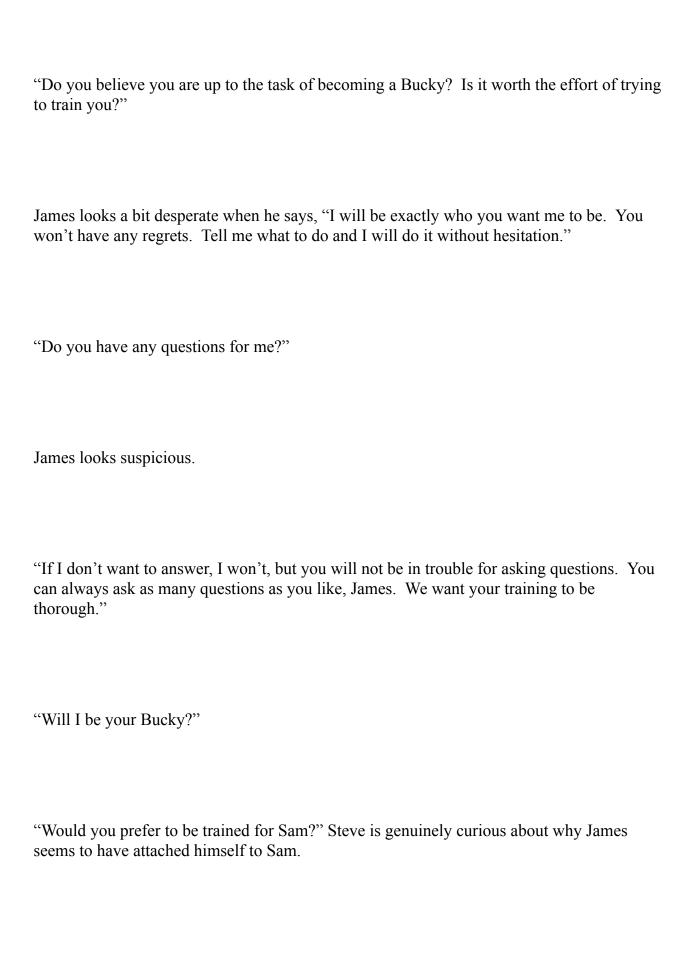
"I'll go and have a chat with him," Steve offers. "See if I can jog some memories. The two of you can discuss..."



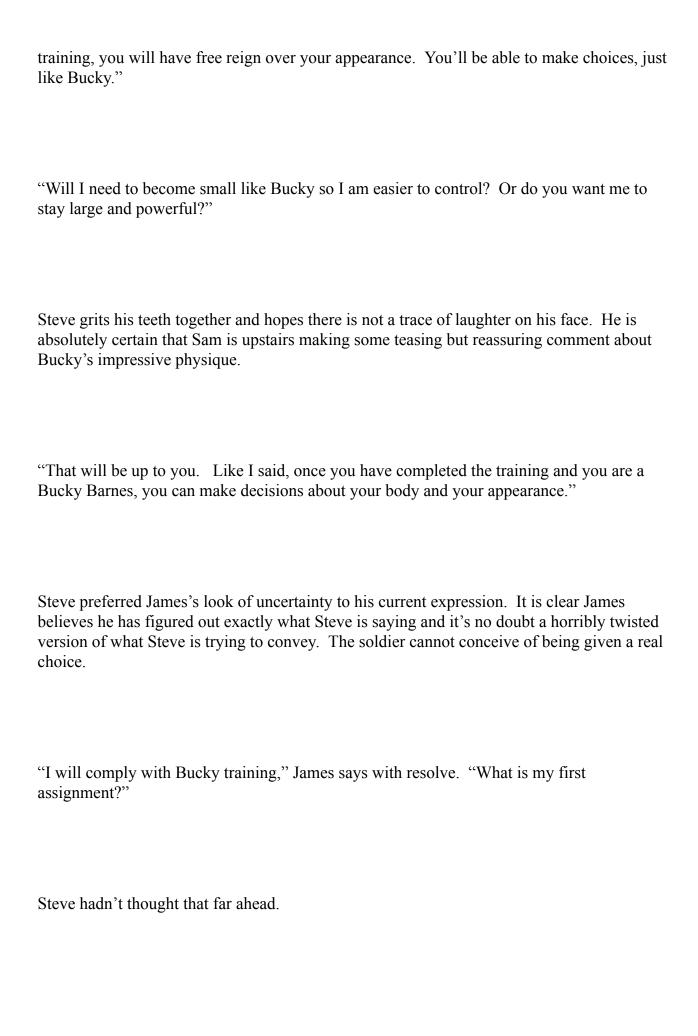


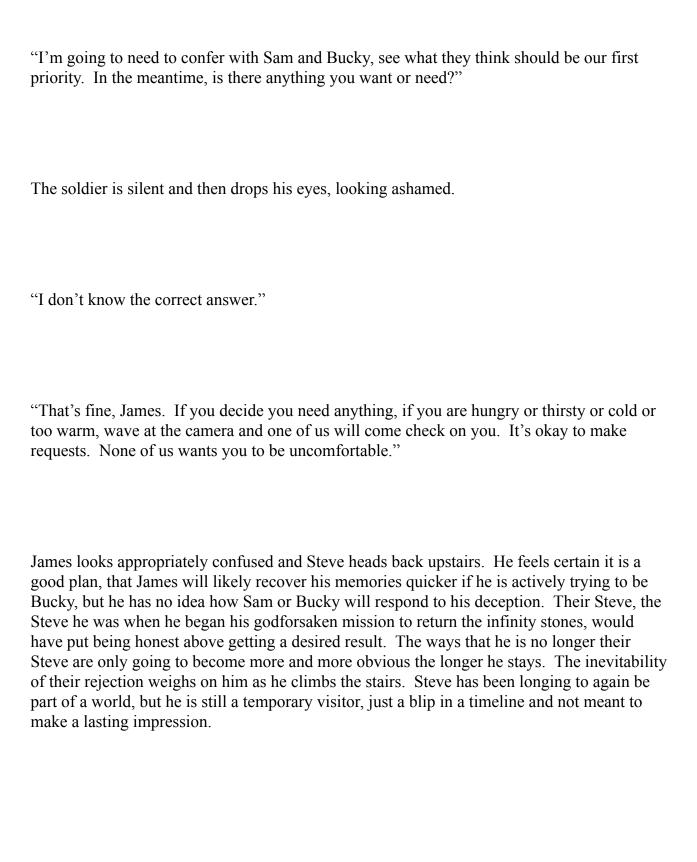












## A Broken Bucky

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.

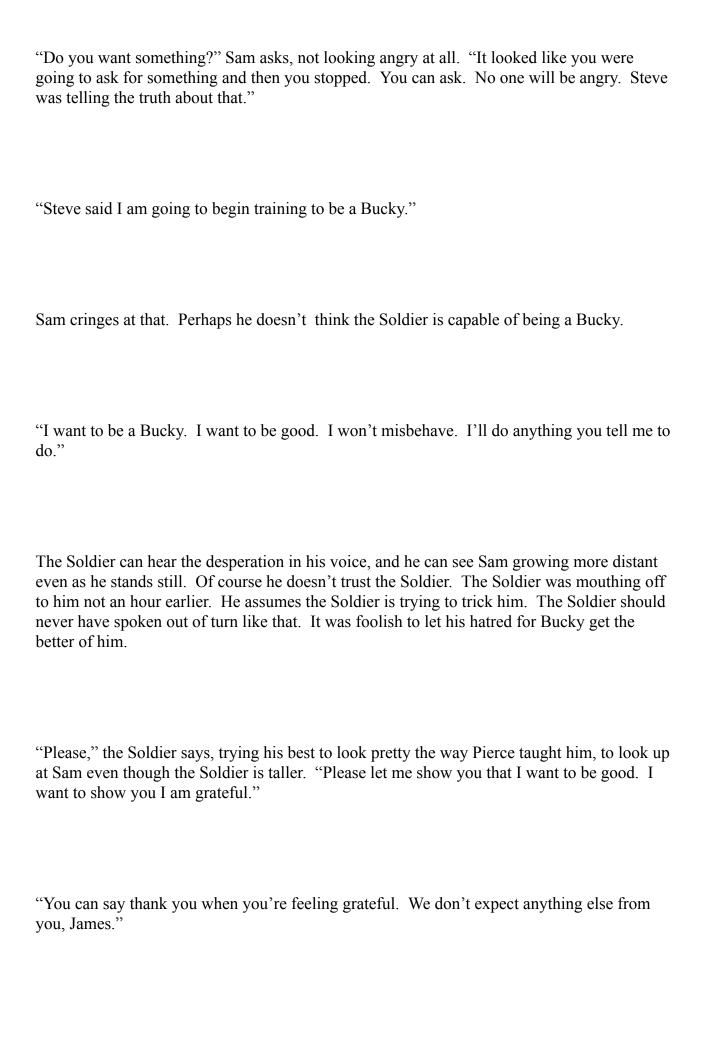
He knows he can be good for Sam or Steve. They don't seem like the types who want to see the Soldier limping or crying after sex, at least not on a regular basis. They are soldiers and it is only normal they would occasionally need to take out their aggression on someone or something. He doesn't really 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.

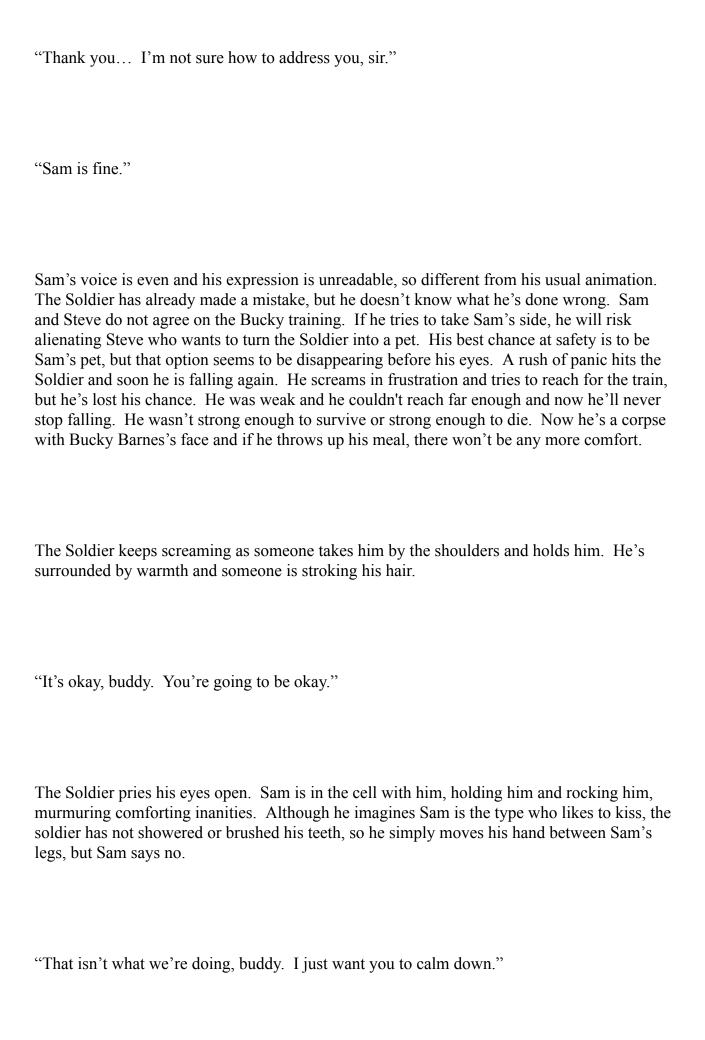
The Soldier looks at the mattress on the floor. He hasn't dared to lie down on it, but it looks soft and inviting. He doesn't remember the last time he truly slept.

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.





"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.

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

<sup>&</sup>quot;Whatever you think you're seeing in him..."

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 deescalate 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 Buckys 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.

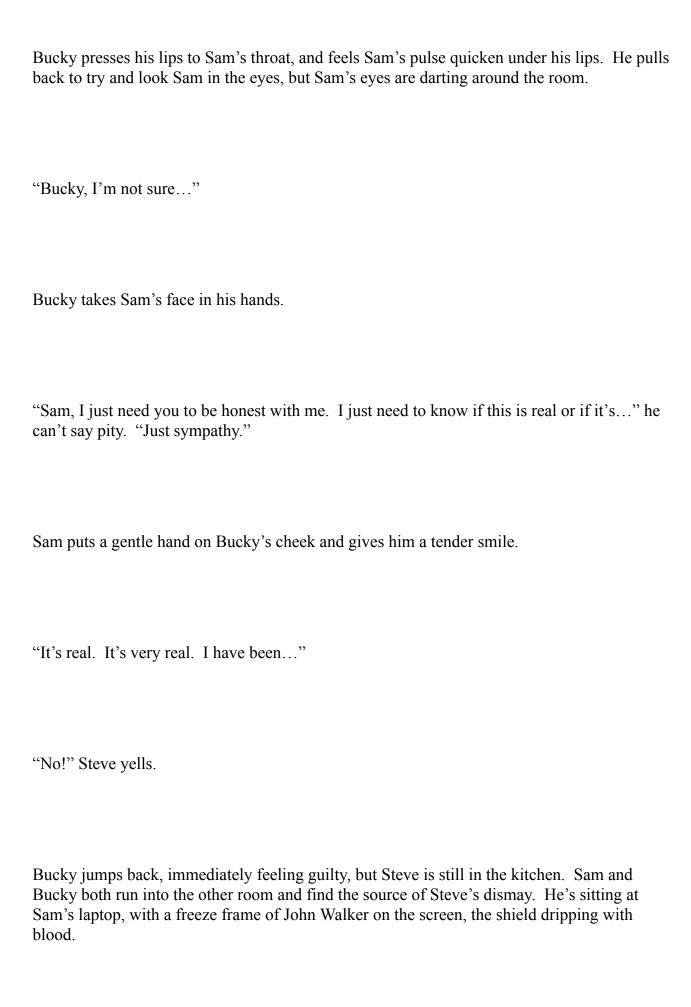
Sam has been the carrot dangling in front of Bucky, driving him to pull himself together and re-enter the world. Bucky thought he was moving towards a genuine partnership.

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







# **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."



"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."

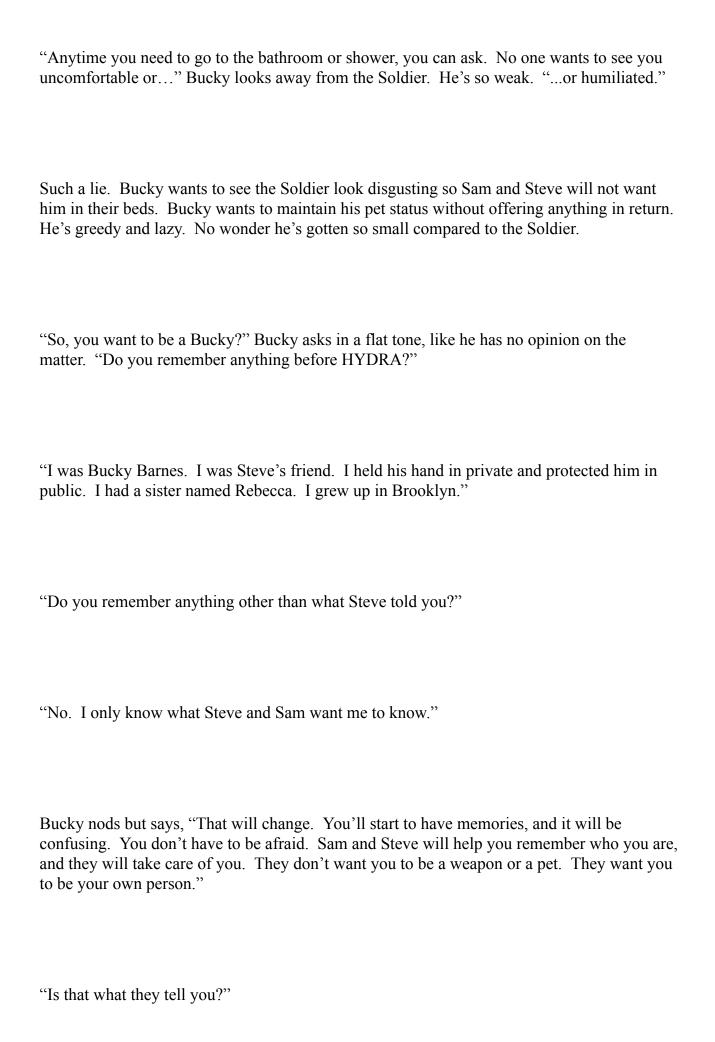
On the security monitor, James is still sleeping, but he's becoming restless.
"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Sam asks, placing a gentle hand on Bucky's arm. Sam has yet to use the arm that Bucky nearly yanked off in the living room. Steve feels guilty for noticing Sam has kept that arm nearly still. 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



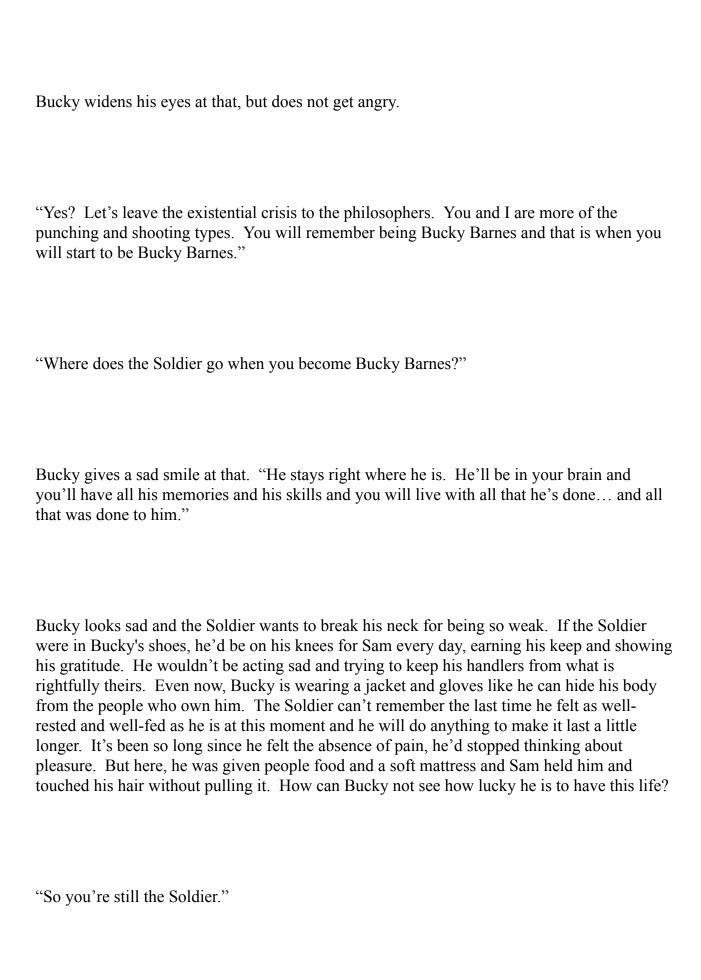
S	Has Bucky been talking to you about white fragility?" Sam asks with exaggerated uspicion. "He keeps hiding what he's reading. I thought he was getting into some weird orn until I saw his woke search history."
tl	Iteve doesn't want to be deflected with humor yet again, but it's such a Bucky thing to do hat he has to laugh. Bucky was always squirrelly about reading for self-improvement, eeming to think 'serious' books only belonged to intellectuals.
cc	He really loves you," Steve says, because it feels like it needs to be said out loud.
	am's eyes immediately drift to the screen where Bucky and James seem to be having a onversation. His eyes are so soft and full of love that Steve feels another pang.
tl	Can I get you some ibuprofen for your arm?" Steve offers. If he's managed to learn one hing, it's that pretending not to see Sam's pain in order to protect his friend's pride isn't elping anyone.
S	He can see Sam fighting his automatic response of dismissing Steve's concern before he miles and says, "That would be great. And maybe another ice pack for my elbow. And my vrist. And don't you dare breathe a word of this to Bucky."

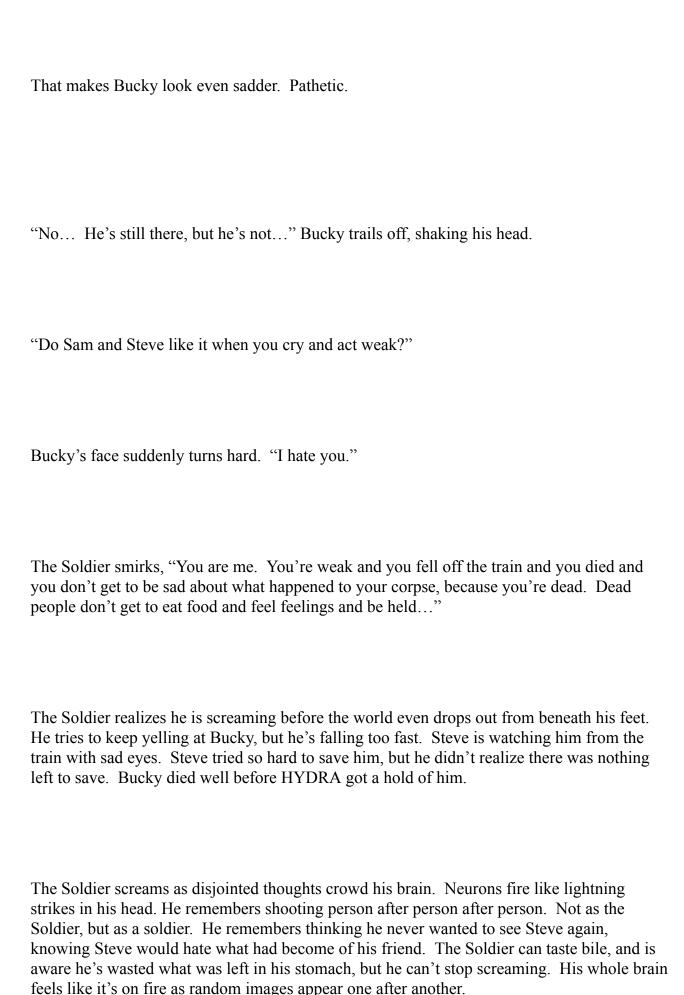
## Is That What You Tell Yourself?

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



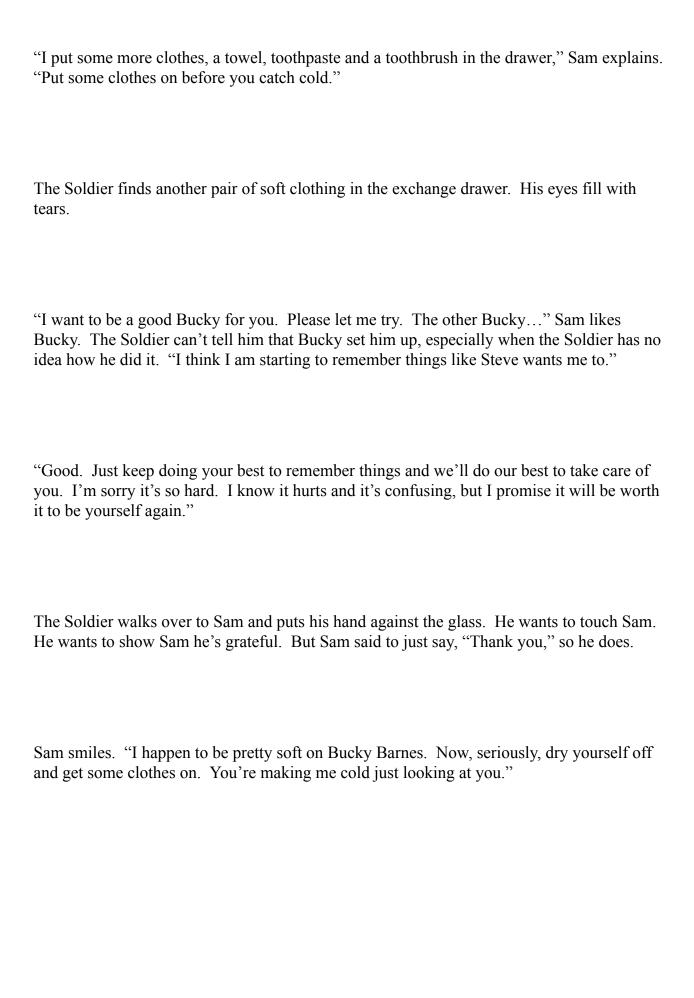
Bucky gives a tight smile. He probably wishes he could slap the Soldier again, but he is wisely on the other side of unbreakable glass.
"I went through it. I remember how it feels, and it's awful, but it's worth it. You'll remember who you were, but it will feel like someone else. You'll feel like you're 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?"



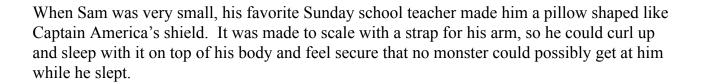


He's sweating and shaking, and there are strong arms around him. He wants so badly for it to be Sam, even though the Soldier is disgusting and there's vomit on his soft clothes. He wants to be comforted and to feel Sam's soft skin.
But it's Bucky. The Soldier can feel the immobilizer pressed to his back,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



## What Would Sam Do?



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 starspangled 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,



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.

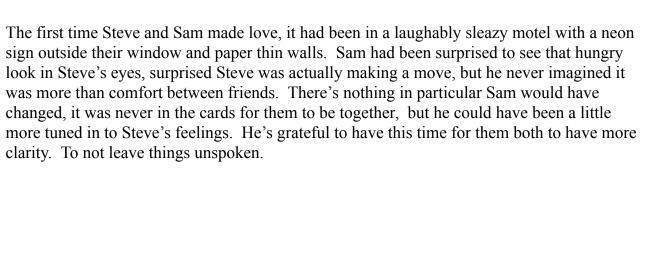
"Let's make this a Cap sandwich," Sam suggests as he shuffles Bucky backwards towards Steve. Steve laughs and Bucky calls him an idiot, but no one fights the three-way hug. They clearly all need it.

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,





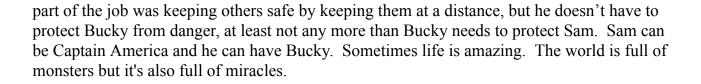
As soon as Steve is down the stairs, Bucky has his hands on Sam's cheeks.

"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



"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.

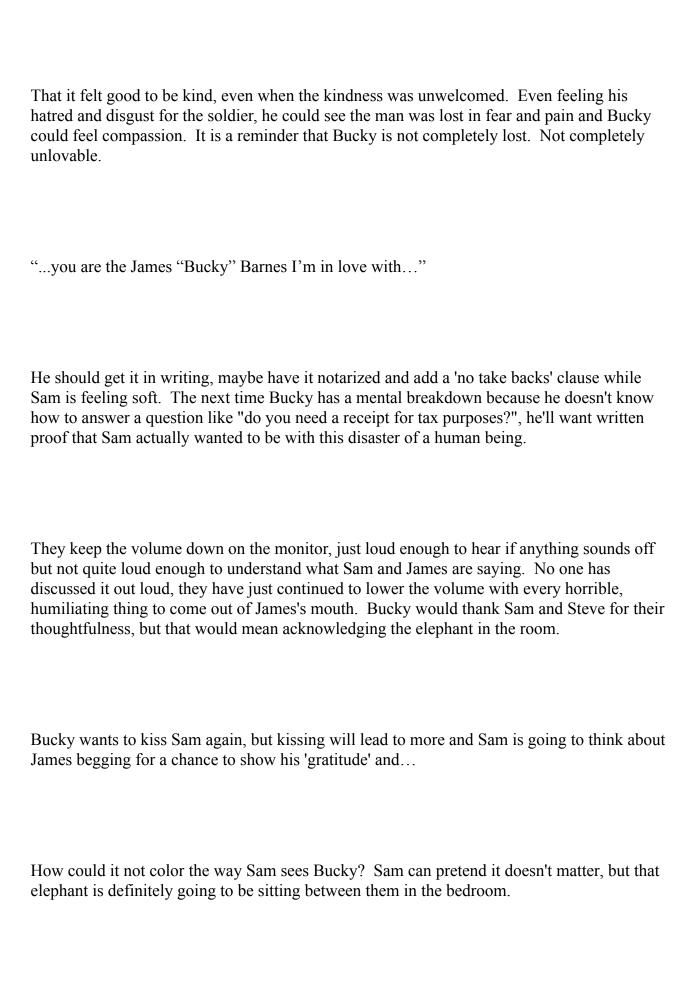
James managed to gag down his spaghetti earlier with some coaxing from Steve. There was plenty of screaming involved, but Steve stayed calm. He just kept talking to James in a measured tone. Unlike Sam and Bucky, Steve can handle the Soldier without getting all lost in his feelings. It seems like he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

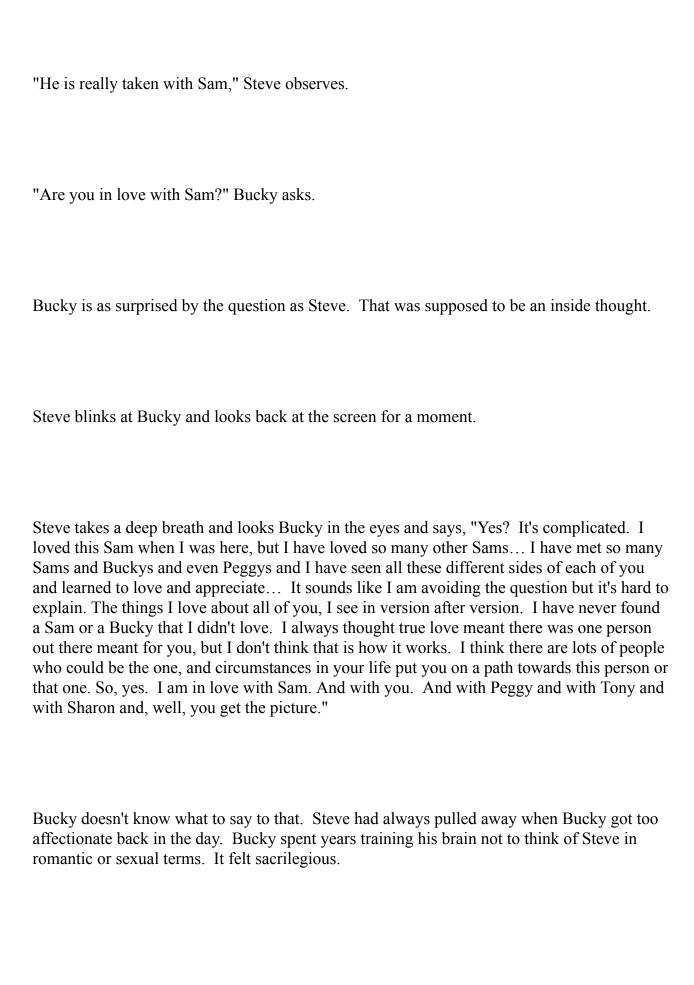
But Bucky doesn't want to think about that.

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.



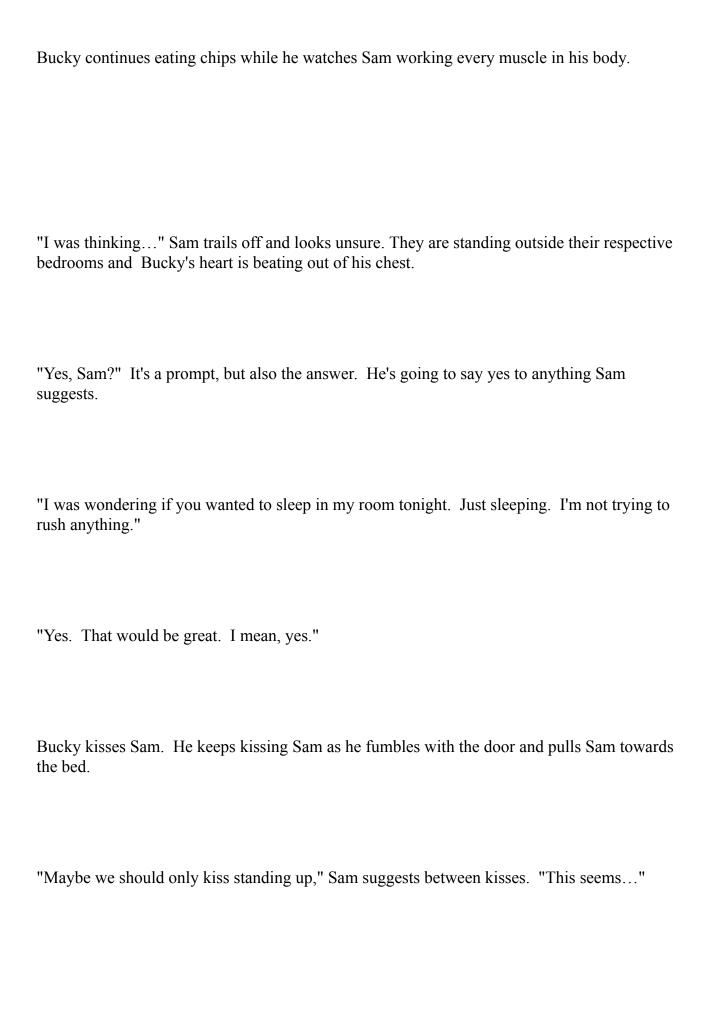








Bucky watches Sam getting in a few squats while Steve showers. Sam never skips leg day.
Steve has decided to sleep downstairs and keep an eye on James. Sam and Bucky have already set up a mattress and bedding for him, making it as cozy as possible.
"You could join me," Sam suggests. "Get in a work-out 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."





## 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

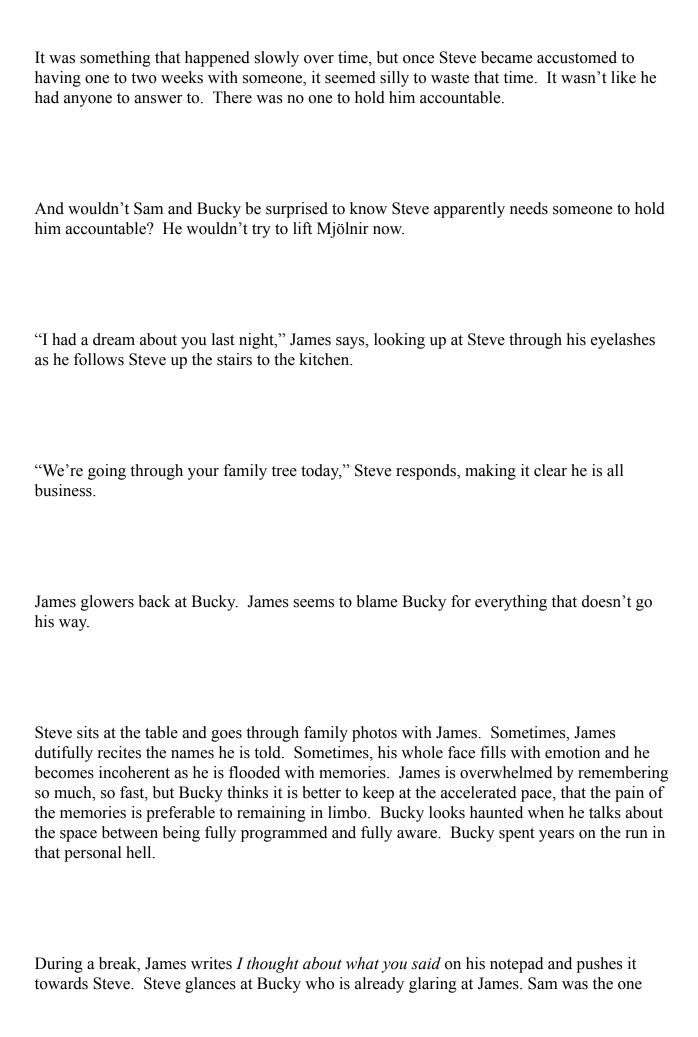
out in the living area but with constant surveillance. He still sleeps in the cell so they can all get some rest. It's easy to feel lulled by James's easy-going and friendly behavior. He seems just like Bucky from before the war.

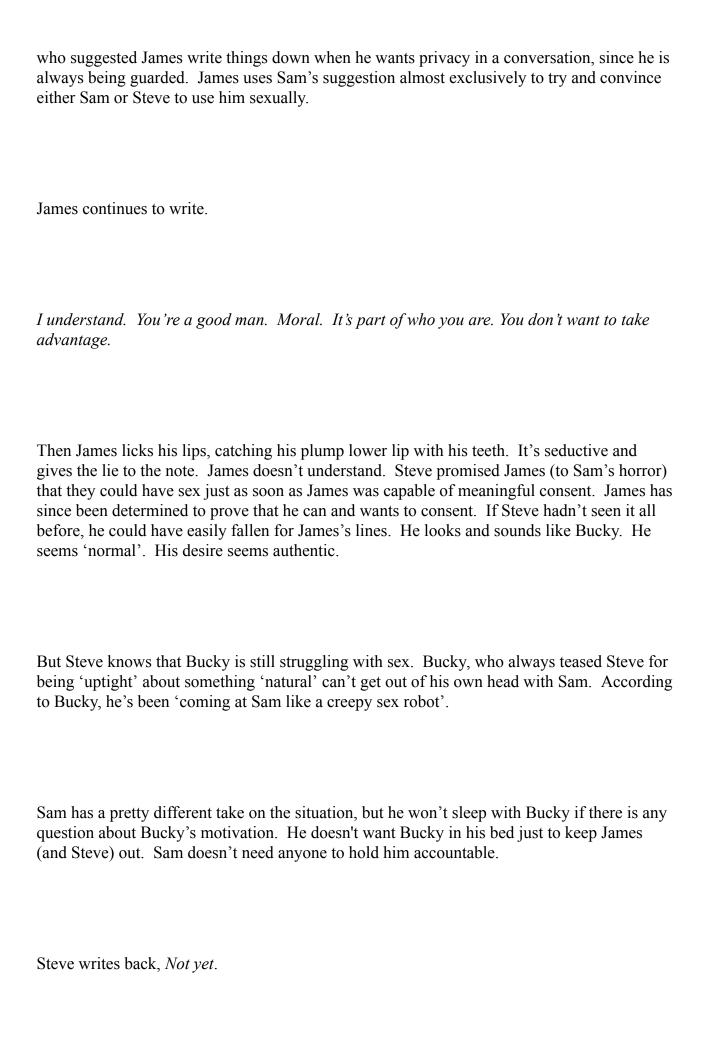
But Steve has spent a week with the real Bucky and it has been painful to realize how much of Bucky's seeming recovery has always been an act, or at least a cleaned up version of reality. Bucky has never stopped drowning in guilt and shame. He's still trying to make peace with his past and find a way 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.

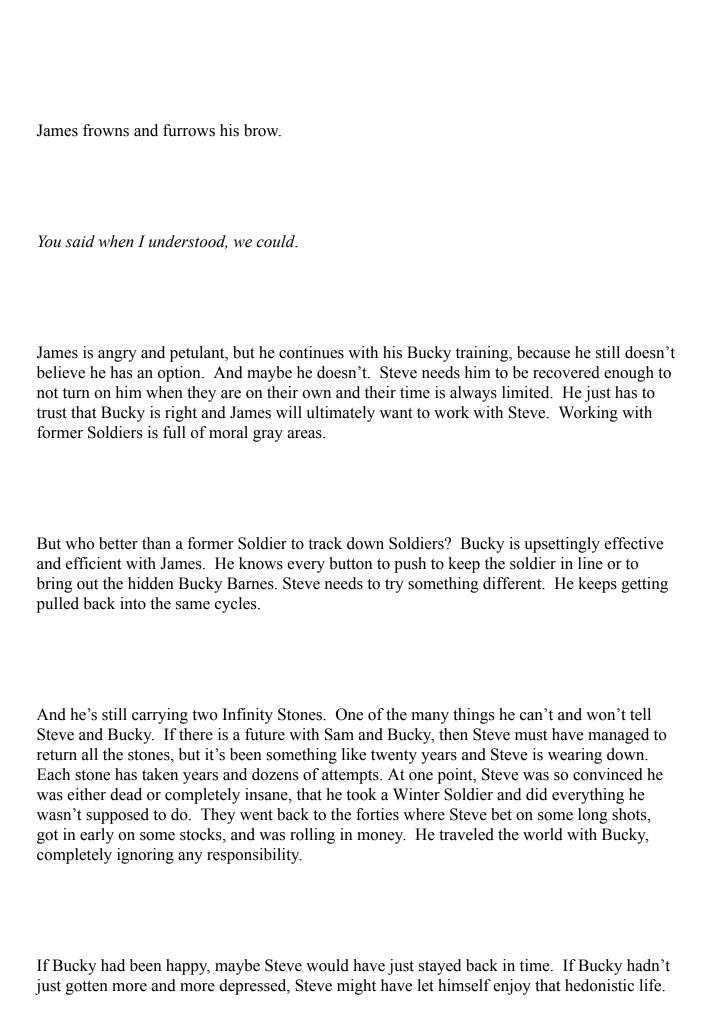
Steve knows that Bucky's recovery has been far from a straight line. That he has good and bad periods, that sometimes he feels like his old self for weeks or months and then the feeling of being a fraud returns.

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.







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.

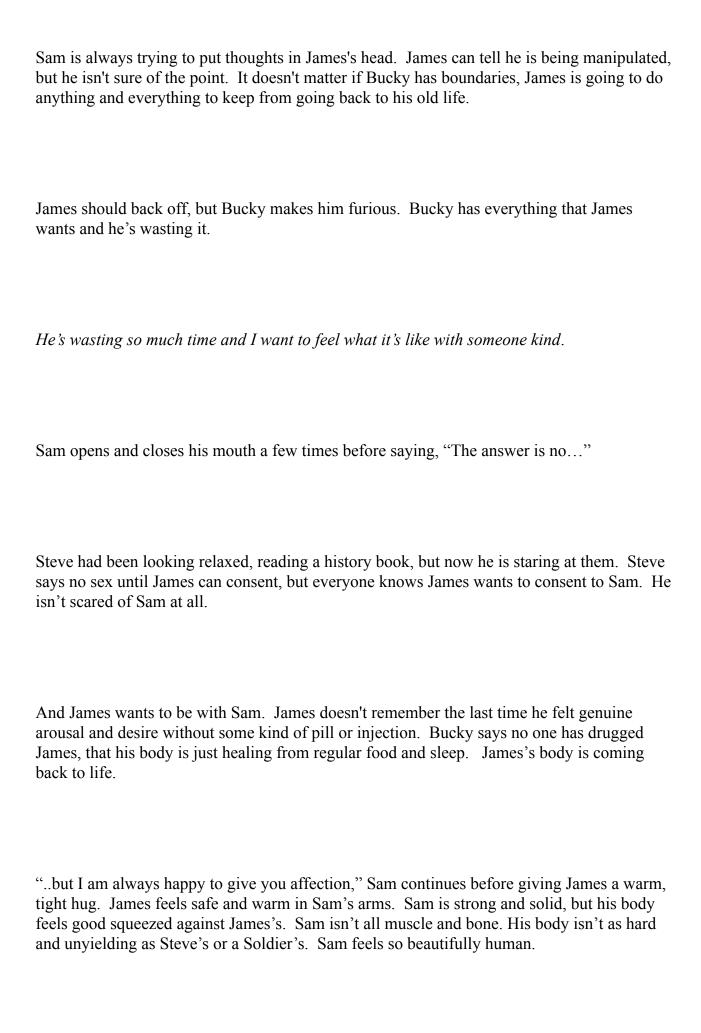
And this forsaken game needs to end.

## Whole and Undamaged

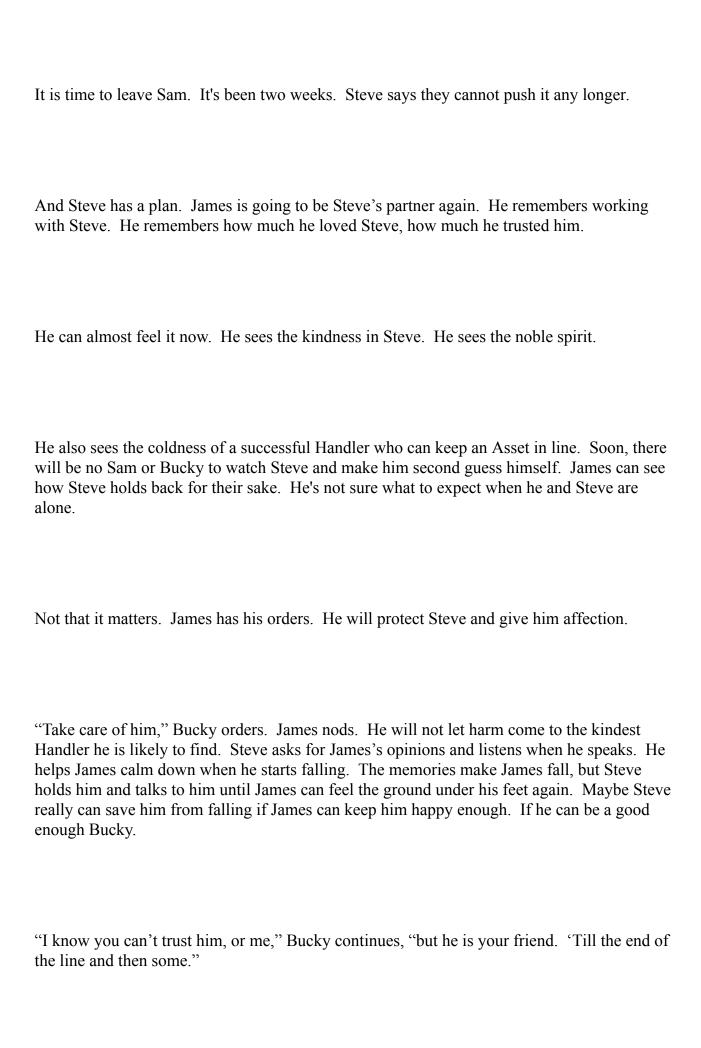
## Chapter Notes

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.

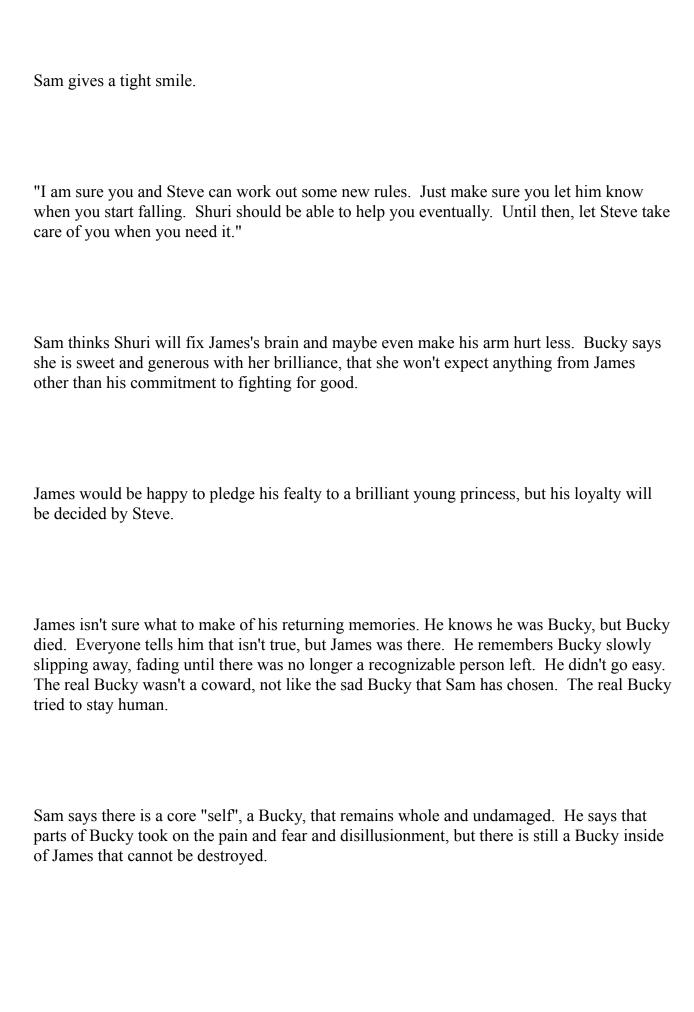


And his skin is so soft and healthy. You can tell it's never been frozen.
And he smells so good.
And his eyes are so warm. James can imagine Sam looking at him during sex and it would make James feel happy to be seen instead of filling him with shame.
James writes, I love you.
Sam doesn't say it back, 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.



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 wellworn, 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.

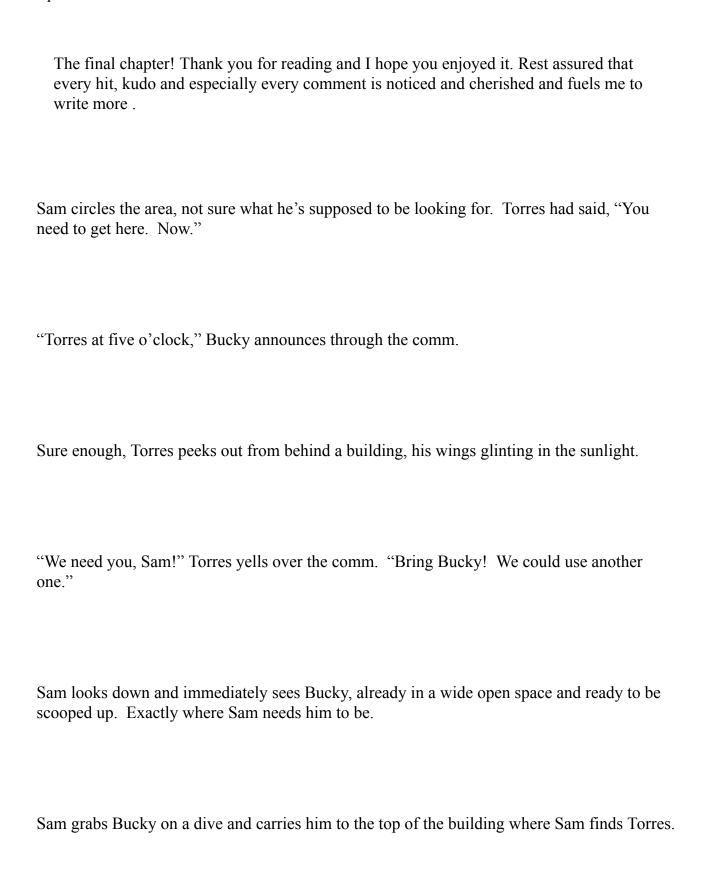




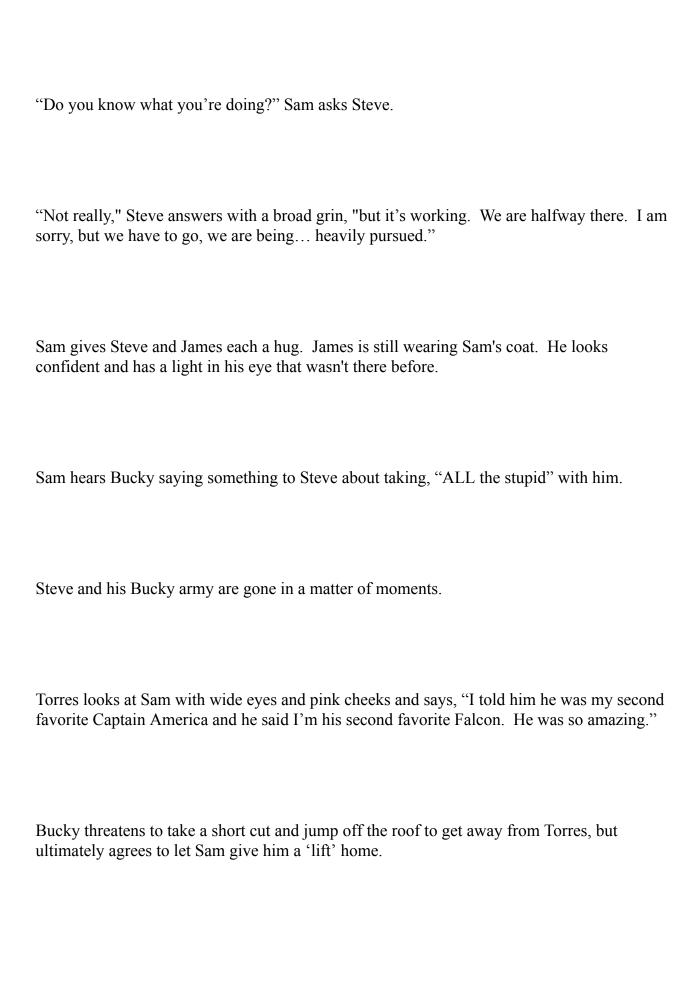
James does tainted.	n't really believe	it. Even if sor	ne Bucky sur	vived, he is sur	rely broken and
James's bra	_	d perfect, who	e and undam	aged like Sam	es that lives deep ins said. He is too tiny he is stronger.
It's a silly fa	antasy, but one th	at fills James	with hope and	d a feeling of w	varmth.
because sor	neone is targetin that little piece	g Sam and Bu	ky, but Jame	s wants to see	because it will be Sam again. Until the n where not even Sh

## The Epilogue

## **Chapter Notes**







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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