A Year in the Life of Sarge's Person

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Summary

This is the tale of a year in the life of Sarge’s person, AKA James Buchanan Barnes, as he tries to recover from everything that’s happened to him over the past eighty years. During that time, he is forced to deal with bad therapists, people with their own agendas, memories he doesn’t want, horrible losses from his past and almost insurmountable odds.

But this is also the story of all the crazy people Bucky meets along the way, who help him when he’s at his lowest, point him in the right direction when he feels lost, make him laugh, grow to love him for who he is, and most importantly, give him hope when he needs it most.

It’s a long and difficult journey, as Bucky works not just to let go of his past, but to also rebuild his own identity and a future for himself. And with Sarge at his side, Bucky slowly comes to realize that not everything he once loved is lost, and if he can just have enough faith in himself and those around him, he might, just might, get his very own happy ending.

Bucky IS Sarge’s person after all. As the once abandoned puppy Bucky saved one night from freezing to death, he knows, more than anyone, just how much Bucky deserves it.
This is my contribution to the 2019 Captain America Reverse Big Bang, and it would not have been possible if not for the support and encouragement of quite a few people.

First of all, I want to thank the Mods of this fest, not only for organizing everything, but for their endless support and encouragement. It seems as if I can’t write anything under 150K these days, and this story ended up getting away from me. When I emailed them with my concerns about not being to make my deadline, they were simultaneously supportive and flexible, and I can’t thank them enough for their patience and understanding. There are so many great works in this Big Bang, and that’s all thanks to them. Thank you so much. You were all an absolute pleasure to work with.

I need to give a shout out to my artist, the lovely TT_Angst_Queen. Their art was the inspiration for this story, and they were both very kind and supportive to work with. I didn’t quite manage to work in all the things you asked for, but if nothing else, I hope this story makes you smile.

I also need to once again thank my friend Katheryne. I had a bit of a rough go of it writing this story, and once again she was nothing but an endless source of support, encouragement and laughter. Just…don’t ever tell her you’re about to write a sex scene. She will send you an endless stream of PMs that make you laugh so hard you won’t be able to stop for hours. **hugs to you though** You know I adore you.

Lastly, there is the ever amazing Merry_rf. There is no better beta in the world, and when I once again emailed Merry chunks of what ended up being yet ANOTHER huge fic, they yet again worked their magic, red-penned all of my horrible grammar and abuse of commas, and turned this story into something cohesive. Merry is a dream to work with, and I could never thank them enough. The only complaint I still have is that Merry lives so far away, because seriously, we need to share a couple of beers and giggle about our boys. You’re one of my favorite people in the world, and if ever given the chance, I’m gonna hug the stuffing out of you.

With that said, this is a long one. I’ll be posting it in several chapters over the next few weeks. Comments are GREATLY appreciated, and always bring a smile to this crazy Stucky fan’s face. I hope you enjoy Bucky’s adventures with his dog. =)
Chapter 1

A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF SARGE'S PERSON

WINTER
“Any changes to report since our last session?”

Captain Gregory McAdams, Phds in both Medicine and Psychology. Retired from the US Army in 2008, working at the remains of SHIELD under the direct command of Nicholas J. Fury, location Stark Tower, midtown, New York City. 6’4, two-hundred and thirteen pounds, fit in spite of his age, sixty-two years. Caucasian; salt-and-pepper hair; clean shaven, except for a neatly trimmed mustache; eyes pale blue. Over thirty-five years of medical experience, and six tours of duty. Currently serving as SHIELD’s head of Head Clinician for specialized cases.

Such as his.

“No.”

Yet no matter Captain McAdams’ size, experience, or training, he would still be an easy target. Too much confidence, too much swagger, an undeniable but easily exploitable belief in his own intelligence and prowess. Ego instead of common sense. An unshakeable belief that the world was for men like him, extraordinary men, to shape as he saw fit, instead of recognizing the truth that he was only one cog, among many, and easily removed if required.

He could do it in less than three seconds.

“And have you been following the protocols we discussed?”

“Yes.”

“Establishing and maintaining a routine?”

“Yes.”
“Ensuring to consume the prescribed amount of calories on a daily basis?”

“Yes.” (When he remembered to.)

“Engaging in enough exercise and activity to maintain your current physical status?”

“Yes.” (Although it was unnecessary. His body could sustain itself and remain at peak battle-ready condition no matter what level of activity he engaged in.)

Captain McAdams eyes narrowed, staring at him as if he were an interesting specimen pinned beneath a plane of glass, trying to decide at exactly which point to begin his dissection. It lasted for longer than a minute. It always did, Captain McAdams so seemingly sure if he stared long enough, he would break, and reveal something he had not until now. But he never did, and Captain McAdams would always eventually break first, and nod, as if he approved, before beginning phase two of his strategy.

“You know, at this stage of your recovery, I think it crucial that we decrease the amount of time you spend by yourself, and increase your exposure to others, to help with your resocialization. SHIELD has several programs which we could enroll you in that would provide you with a larger network of support and interaction with future possible teammates who, with enough time and supervision, you might find yourself willing to work with, once you’re ready.”

It was day two-hundred and seventy-six. There had already been two-hundred and seventy-five days of this. Prior to that it had been two-hundred and forty-two days of intensive tests on both his brain and his body, endured because there had been no other options at that point. Of SHIELD’s agents and doctors, routing through his mind and his chemistry to see what damage had been done, what was irreparable, what could be duplicated and what discarded. In exchange for his eventual freedom, he had to provide any and all data he had managed to retain on his captors to an endless stream of investigators, while another series of supposedly trained and highly-ranked personnel forcefully ripped away the codes that had been implanted in his brain. It was supposedly for his own good, and a caveat to his eventual release, but that did not mean it had been easy. But he had endured it, like he had endured so much else, and never uttered a complaint while they first said, then shouted, the WORDS at him, while his body shuddered and shook and blood dripped from his nose. Eventually, they had been satisfied, and considered their “revolutionary deprogramming techniques” a success. He knew, from experience, that it was to his benefit to allow them to believe what they would.

Before that, it had been three-hundred-and-forty-one days of freedom. Unaccustomed to and almost too expansive for him to bear. But he had been created and trained to be able to adapt, and as there had been no additional orders, aside from the one (RETURN) that he had already somehow managed to overwrite, he had set himself to the new task of base establishment, concealment and integrating himself into his surroundings. He had thought himself successful, until he had –
Until the parameters he had established for himself proved faulty, and he had failed his mission.

But this time there had been no chair. No modifications to his program. No erasure of his memories.

He had not been able to understand it. He still could not understand it. But it had not taken him long to realize it did not matter. The environment and faces may have all changed, but their objective was just the same. Retrieve the Asset, obtain all gathered intel, modify, modify, modify, until he was functioning within acceptable established parameters, and then ensure cooperation by any means necessary. No matter what promises had been made, oaths sworn, clemencies guaranteed, their ultimate goal was the same.

Acquisition and maintenance of the perfect weapon.

But, and this was a failure in all of their observations and supervision, there had been an oversight, a lapse in their judgment. Because while nothing else may have changed, except for the faces, and his location, and the fact that there was no chair, he had.

They thought him stupid. Or perhaps too damaged to be able to understand what was really going on around him. But he had always been the most successful weapon any had ever possessed, HYDRA’s Fist used to change the shape of history. But even a fist was only effective when the mind controlling it was able to adapt and adjust to even the tiniest of variables, and he had learned long ago how to respond to changes in his environment and protocol, while pretending not to change at all.

So he let Captain McAdams drone on and on, speaking optimistically about the future, and the paths being mapped out for his continued success, responding when he knew it was required. Flat one-word answers that neither encouraged or denied, but provided what was expected of him. Until last Captain McAdams nodded and he was dismissed.

“Remember, it’s the holidays next week. So our next three sessions have been cancelled.”

“Understood.”

“There were some that were hesitant in allowing that, but since you’ve been doing so well lately, I decided to permit it.” The generosity was both sickly sweet and boastful. As if he wouldn’t recognize the technique, had not experienced it time and time again. Offer a reward as a way to build trust and
a sense of understanding, so the prisoner would be more compliant in the future. Captain McAdams was so certain of his own success, they all were; the initial programming had been broken, and he was ready to be re-introduced as a contributing member of society. (As long as his contributions were ones they had predetermined were acceptable.) But he knew something that Captain McAdams didn’t, that none of them did.

“Merry Christmas, Sergeant Barnes. I’ll see you in the new year.”

They had failed.

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It had been brutal, his deprogramming; a vicious exercise that was tortuous and bloody. WORDS said in his ear that led to screaming in his brain, as they broke him over and over again, while claiming to fix him. Locked in a room that was monitored, while they repeated the WORDS over and over again, to let the commands that been initiated play out. Exposure therapy, they told him, the only option available since the drugs they had attempted to use were of no use. (The changes to his biology were too drastic and his metabolism too fast for them to have any effect.) There had been months of it. Months and months and months of it, until finally, he could sit and listen to the entire string of WORDS with barely a blink and then recount in perfect clarity exactly where he was, and remember everything he had done, which was nothing. They considered it a success, and congratulated him on his hard work, endurance and cooperation. But what they had not known, what none of them had been able to predict, was by eradicating the effect of the WORDS, they had released something else.

Something older and deeper, and much more malignant than anything eleven trigger words could call forth.

*So, that old windbag still calling you Sergeant Barnes, is he? I thought you told him to stop that.*

And there, there It was.

*Remind me what it is you like to go by now?*

He didn’t answer. He never answered. Answering only made it worse, gave It power, made It more persistent.

As he stood in the elevator, feeling the car’s smooth descent, he didn’t bother to look around. It had startled him at first, this voice he could hear as clearly as the cars outside, his neighbors arguing.

*Oh honey, did you think I was gone?* It had said, as clear as a bell, as sharp as the retort of a rifle.

He had jerked, searching for the sound, the intruder, the threat to his safety, but there had been no one there. Only the same four walls he had been staring at for the past hour. As unfamiliar as they had ever been in their familiarity. His heart had been racing and his eyes wide, because there was no more HYDRA and they had promised him no one would come for him, but yet here it was, another voice in his head when he had finally begun to understand that quiet was something he could have, no new mission, no commands to kill, no orders to get in the chair.

On his feet in less than half a second, he tore through his apartment, lifting up his mattress, tearing the doors from his cabinets in search of the source. But there was nothing, nothing, nothing.

And then, even worse, as his heart pounded and his eyeballs throbbed in their sockets from the terror of it all, he realized as he stared down at his shaking hands, it was not the first time he had heard It.

The first time had been on the hellicarrier, after the fight, and watching a body fall away and into the water below. It had been a screech then, a klaxon in his brain, a command code impossible to deny.

*SAVE HIM!*  

So he had.

It had gone quiet then, once he was standing on the shore, starting down at hi-

He had stood on the shore and stared. Stared and stared and stared, waiting for the next order, established protocol to follow.

Kill.
Retrieve and return to base.

Complete the mission.

But there had been nothing. *Nothing.* Only silence, within and without. So without any other options, he had walked away.

The second time he had heard It, it had been in Bucharest. Returning to his apartment to find *hi-

To see an intruder standing there, looking through his journal of scraps and scribblings, as if they had the right.

They had stared at each other, would have probably stared at each other for the rest of time, if the room hadn’t suddenly been swarmed by over a dozen armed soldiers, all intent on his death.

*Trust him. He’ll help you. He’s the only one that can.*

It had come at exactly the right (wrong) moment, causing a stutter that caused a stumble, that allowed for mission failure. And *he-

And that man may have prevented his termination, but he had allowed for his recapture, and he knew then that the voice was not his ally.

It had gone quiet then, for a while. And he had thought (hoped) that was it. But apparently, It had just been waiting, biding its time. Because once all of the cascades caused by the WORDS were removed, It had returned with a vengeance.

It was unpredictable, making Itself known with no discernable pattern. Darker than any shadow, as venomous as any snake, but always, always there. Hidden and patient, but waiting. Always, always waiting.

And It didn’t belong.
*Is that what you think?*

He knew what It was. HYDRA had always been efficient, and by eliminating the WORDS, all the remnants of SHIELD had done was activate a failsafe. A tool to drive him to madness, and in his madness he would return to them to eliminate the distraction, repair the systems failure, and recalibrate him to full functionality. He had tried to do it himself; had looked for the source, attempted to locate the origination point. But all his efforts had resulted in failure. How could you fight an enemy you could not see. The best he could do was sometimes get an impression, if It was feeling generous enough. The sense of a long leg resting on his window ledge. An awareness of a cocked head. And, the most common indication, that usually announced its arrival…the scent of cigarette smoke, heavy and cloying (and familiar?) in his nose.

It was clinging to him now, and he wondered how no one could smell it as he stepped out of the elevator and made his way through the lobby toward the exit. Once he reached the street, it didn’t diffuse. If anything, the aroma seemed to grow stronger. He turned to look over his shoulder to make sure no one else was close enough to be the source of the scent now clinging to his nostrils, catching a glimpse of the exterior of the tower as he completed his circle, blinking against the sunlight its matte grey glass reflected in his eyes.

*Ugly, isn’t it?*

He didn’t answer It. He never answered It. That only encouraged It, and served no purpose in the long run.

*Well, at least we don’t have to go back here for the next ten days. Even if that asshole thinks you should be kneeling at his feet because he’s being oh-so-generous.*

Even if it was just ten days, he would still take it. As he had the thought, he could feel Its disappointment.

*Hmm,* It hummed. *But then again, maybe you will."

Tearing his eyes away from the building, he shook his head and made the trek across Bryant Park and toward the train station. It was time for him to go home.

*Ignoring me again, honey? Think I’ll go away if you just give it enough time? Maybe you are just
as stupid as everyone back there thinks you are. Haven’t you learned by now, you can’t get rid of me. But that’s okay. You’ll figure it out one day. Take all the time you need. I can wait.*

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Home was a small, one room apartment on Water Street, on the third of floor in one of the buildings of the housing projects on the Lower East side. The façade was a sand colored brown, and nice enough, he supposed, but the interior was seldom, if ever, maintained. The stairwells smelled like piss and marijuana, but since the elevator smelled of piss, marijuana and puke, they were always the option he chose. It wasn’t like they were a challenge to him in any way. His neighbors were a varied bunch; families with smaller children mostly, but there were also a number of elderly, and a few singles like himself, who tended to occupy the smaller units. They were a variety of ethnicities, and spoke a multitude of languages, all of which he understood, but most importantly, they were unobtrusive and by and large left him alone. The only one he ever interacted with, with any regularity, was his next-door neighbor, a middle-aged woman of Hispanic descent, whose path he sometimes crossed as he was coming or going. She always smiled and nodded whenever she saw him, usually when she was returning from her own grocery shopping, and he found himself always returning the nod, if not the smile. She was a quiet neighbor, although he did occasionally hear softly playing music, or a phone conversation through the walls, and the smells that emanated from her apartment were interesting. (He supposed that was how her groceries were put to use.)

*She’d probably invite you in for dinner, if you just asked her. She seems like a nice enough lady. Probably a bit on the lonely side too, could use a bit of company if you ask me. And the food wouldn’t hurt. That body doesn’t just belong to you, you know. You need to start taking better care of it.*

That was another thing It was relentless about. Eating. It wasn’t mission critical, and he knew he was designed to run for much longer on much less. Food was something that had never been a priority –

*Oh, is that what you think?*

- and somewhere, somewhere deep, deep inside, he knew there had been periods of time when he skipped meals because, well, because that was what had to be done.

*It’s called poverty.*

Truth be told, he often forgot to eat, or was unable to find the motivation to do so. But It was in a tither today and he knew It would grow increasingly restless and annoying if he did not consume something soon.
There was some stale bread, and old cheese he piled on top of it, that scratched at his throat as he stood in his kitchenette and surveyed his surroundings. It was an old dump of a place, draughty and damp. A single room, with a small kitchen and an even smaller bathroom. The windows were grey with age and grime, their frames covered with layer upon layer of cheap, peeling paint, currently a faded navy. The floors were a uniform greyish-green tile, cold and hard beneath his feet, and the appliances several decades old. The radiators choked and sputtered, and the temperature never varied from either being too cold or boiling hot. There was a mattress, with several blankets wedged into the corner, a lopsided bookshelf he had found on the street and repaired, a two-seater couch, also rescued from the street, and two cinderblocks with a board across them that he used for a table.

He thought it ironic that his life was supposed to be so much better now, when in truth his apartment in Bucharest had been nicer and more spacious, although not by much. But he had needed to fight for even this, and it had been one of the few stipulations he insisted upon in exchange for his full cooperation. An apartment of his own choosing, once he had proven to no longer be a threat to society, and to never, ever have to see or interact with hi-

His keepers had so far been holding to the second part of the deal, but he’d had to fight for the first, Captain McAdams consistently refusing to give his approval, no matter how many times he had argued for them to uphold their end of the arrangement. It had gotten so bad that they had spent at least three sessions with him saying nothing and Captain McAdams growing more and more frustrated with his silence, informing him in a voice filled with blisters and pins, that each session where he remained uncooperative would only be added to his total required visits at the end of his probationary period. But someone (someone) must have intervened on his behalf, because during his next session, Captain McAdams had begrudgingly signed his release papers and shoved them at him at the end of their allotted hour.

Someone (someone) may have intervened on his behalf, but that did not mean SHIELD was done playing their games with him yet. He had been informed at the very beginning of his probationary period that there was supposedly money, a lot of it, coming to him. Something to do with over seventy years of backpay, along with a pension, and a compensation package for no one verifying his status and intervening on his behalf. But as of yet, he hadn’t seen any of it. Instead, he had been informed that since he was still under probation, he would be provided with a carefully monitored stipend, available to him at the end of each month, that would be sufficient to cover any living expenses he may incur. The amount had been laughable, barely enough to cover most of his essentials, if that, and certainly not enough to do all the life enriching activities Captain McAdams claimed were necessary if he ever hoped to fully integrate himself back into society.

He knew what they were doing. SHIELD hadn’t wanted to let him go, so they put him on a leash. Longer than the one he had been on, but still a leash none-the-less. They wanted to make sure they appeared to be the better option. So of course he could live on his own, if he managed to find a place he could afford. But why would he, when they had perfectly serviceable and better maintained living quarters available for him at SHIELD headquarters. As well as a twenty-four-hour kitchen he would have unrestricted access to, where he could select any food he wanted, as often as he wanted, while they monitored his food selections. They were offering him the freedom he had insisted upon, but
staging it so the one choice, the better choice, would be the obvious one, and he would be an idiot to refuse. Give him the bitter to choke on, and then slip him the sweet to make him malleable to their desires.

But his life had been filled with the bitter, with so much worse than the bitter, and he knew somehow, deep, deep, deep in his bones and beneath all the layers of skin and metal that constructed his body, that he knew, had always known, how to squeeze blood from a stone, and would be able to survive.

So he had taken the packet they provided him without a word, turned and walked out of Captain McAdams office to find himself an apartment.

And now here he was, standing in said apartment, looking around. He currently had ten days free from any obligations or required meetings, and he was looking forward to it. Once he figured out what he was going to do with this sudden and unexpected abundance of time.

*

*Maybe take a shower, and wash some of your fucking clothes. Because I’m telling you honey, I’ve smelled drunks on the Bowery that don’t reek as much as you.*

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Four days and eight books later (books were easy enough to procure. They could often be found left in piles in certain places on certain streets, or at the discount table at libraries. And if there was one thing that would shut It up, it was a long book; It seemed to have as much fondness for reading as he did), he lifted his head and looked around. The radiator was clanging (apparently the apartment was on its boil cycle) and his skin clammy with sweat. And even he couldn’t help but notice he was starting to reek. As he rubbed at his eyes, he realized he could not remember the last time he had eaten or drunk anything. He thought there may have been some water and another sandwich approximately twelve hours ago, but he couldn’t be sure. He was in violation of his mission protocols, and it was time to remedy that. So he rose from his seat on his mattress, and made his way toward the shower.

*’Bout damned time.*

Except once he was done, he realized that yes, his clothes did carry a particularly strong odor, and he needed to rectify that situation, or during his next session with Captain McAdams, he would get another lecture about proper appearance, and making sure he maintained of level of self-grooming appropriate for any soldier.
It was time for him to do laundry.

*And pick up some damned food. Aren’t you tired of cheese sandwiches yet. You do know there are plenty of other options out there now, don’t you? Or are you so damaged you can’t even do that right? Oh wait, nevermind.*

He ignored It, as he always did, gathered his clothes into two pillow cases, and made his way to the laundromat three blocks over. It had snowed the day before, and he knew the holiday had come and gone; he had overheard his neighbor saying something about a white Christmas in a happy voice as she spoke to someone on the phone. But the skies were overcast and heavy, and the streets now covered with a thick layer of dirty grey slush that soaked through his boots as he walked, stopping first at the bodega on the corner to pick up a sandwich and a bottle of soda to pass the time and shut the voice up while his clothes washed.

Two hours later, once he was done, the overcast sky had delivered on its promise, and was now releasing a sleet that had already combined itself with the mess on the streets. With a sigh, he gathered his bundles closer to his body and decided to cut down the alley that ran behind the laundromat. It was gated, but it would cut three minutes off his travel time, and the fence would prove no obstacle for someone like him. He had just passed the dumpster, that smelled of dead fish and cat piss, when he heard it.

A soft, tiny whimper.

It was probably a rat, or maybe even a raccoon. He decided to ignore it, he was already wet enough, when he heard it again.

Weak, helpless and…in pain.

Turning, he made his way toward the dumpster and knelt down, searching for the source. When it came again, he found himself pushing aside two trash filled bags, until he uncovered a damp cardboard box. Lifting the lid, he found himself staring down at a small, strange creature, curled up in the corner, whimpering as it shivered in obvious distress.

It was one of the ugliest things he had ever seen, this small brown and black lump, with a stubby, little tail, and paws that looked as if they had been dipped in coal. He thought it may have been a possum, or maybe a piglet, until he realized that no, no, it was a–
*It’s a puppy.*

He leaned closer and realized the voice was right. It was a puppy. That someone had put in a box and left in the cold…

Put in a box and left in the cold…

Put in a box and left in the cold…

With a rage unfamiliar to him, he heard himself cursing in what may have been Russian, or Korean, or who knew what fucking language was coming out of his mouth, before he reached out and gathered the puppy into his hands.

It was small, so small, as he lifted it up to get a better look at it. From the cradle of his palms, it whimpered again, and then wriggled, as if it had realized someone was there, and was desperate for any warmth they were willing to share. It was helpless, such a little thing, and someone had just tossed it away, as if they didn’t care how horrible it was to left alone and forgotten in the cold, when death, a true death, was the only thing you could remember how to pray for.

As he knelt there, in the sleet, with the puppy held carefully in his hands, James made two decisions. The first was that he would make sure this little puppy would never know what that was like. The second was that if he ever found the bastard who did this, he would rip him to pieces with his own hands, and fuck whatever Captain McAdams and the rest of those SHIELD bastards had to say about it.

Then James rose to his feet, picked up his pillowcases of laundry, tucked the puppy against his chest, jumped the fence and ran all the way back to his apartment.

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Except once he finally got there, he realized he now had a puppy he had no idea how to care for.

*It’s okay, it’s okay. You’ve done this before, you can do it again.*
“How?” he growled, not caring that he was responding to It, destroying years of avoidance in less than a minute.

*I know how. I can show you. Let me show you.*

“How?” he asked again. “You’re not even real, you’re just some program—”

*You can argue with me until the cows come home. But while you’re doing that, the puppy’s going to die. Or you can accept my help and let me show you. Now, what’s it gonna be?*

When he glanced down at his hands, the puppy was still shivering, its whimpering even louder than before. And he knew, he knew he had made this choice. It was now his responsibility to deal with the consequences.

“Fine, do it. Whatever you’re going to do. Just help me…Please.”

The voice didn’t answer him that time. Instead he felt it sigh, as if pleased, and then came…

And then came…

He thought it would be like the shriek of lightning, fire in his brain, neurons and synapses exploding, followed by the white, the endless, endless white that ripped flesh from bones and left nothing more than a blank page, waiting for the instructions to be written upon its surface.

Instead it was an echo, static-filled and distant, blurred. Sounds at first, voices, that grew clearer and clearer as he cocked his head, twisting in search of the source, like the antenna from one of their old radios, back, back, back…

“Slowly, slowly, warm water, not too hot. Too hot can do more damage than good.” A woman’s voice, guiding his hands beneath a stream of barely warm water, both of their fingers carefully wrapped around those of another, long and knobbly, but graceful, always so graceful, their tips a whitish blue, and he had known then something was wrong. “We have to bring the temperature up slowly now, you hear?” A pause. “Gently now, good, good, just like that. Hold them there, and start to rub, it’ll help bring the circulation back…Yeah, I know boy, it hurts. But that’s what you get for
going outside in this weather without your gloves. You’re going to be the death of me Ste-“

And then…

Snow all around, on the ground, in the sky, stinging their cheeks. An encampment or, no, no, a foxhole. Shaking hands, struggling with their own battles against the cold as numb fingers struck first once, twice, and then again, before the match blazed and the tinder caught.

“Oh thank god.”

“Now fill that pan with snow and bring it over here.” Mud encrusted boots, rank socks, toes colder than ice, coarse palms chaffing over callused skin, moving, moving, moving, get the blood flowing, and then the water, warm, but not too hot, and color finally starting to return.

“How’s that feeling?”

“B-better, better. Thanks Barn-“

And then it was gone, and James was left standing in the middle of his room, clutching the still shivering puppy to his chest.

He sprang into action, dashing into the bathroom where he turned on the taps of the sink. His apartment may have been a shithole, but if it had one advantage, it was that there was always plenty of hot water, and even if the pipes were old and rattled, the pressure was always steady and true. As he waited for the water to fill, careful of the temperature, he grabbed a towel, one of only two, and used his left hand to vigorously run it over the puppy’s body, while keeping it pressed to his chest. Once the level of water in the sink was sufficient, and the temperature adequate, he carefully submerged the tiny puppy into the water, and rubbed, rubbed, rubbed at the skin, hoping that it hadn’t lied to him.

It took more than half an hour before the shivering finally stopped. During that time, he had to drain and replace the water several times, increasing the heat in small increments. Once he was done, both the basin and his hands were covered in an oily coating of dirt, grime and who knew what other detritus. But the shaking had stopped, and he was able to get a good look at the puppy for the first time.
It was still small, that hadn’t changed, easily cradled in the palm of his left hand. The calibrations in
that arm told him it was a little over six pounds, and obviously too young to be left alone as it had. It
had a rounded belly, and short stubby legs that ended in stumpy little paws. As its hair slowly began
to dry under his ministrations, it transformed from the matted rug it had been into a soft fuzz that was
striated in sables and browns. The colors swirled along its spine and out towards its legs. The tail was
black, and so were its paws, except for the left foreleg, that looked as if it was wearing a glove,
ending past the shoulder joint, just like…just like the metal of his own arm.

Frowning, he held it up to his face for further examination, as it stared back at him with blue eyes
that slowly blinked, from a patch of even blacker fur that looked like…that looked like…

A mask.

“Oh, are you fucking kidding me?”

The puppy blinked at him, yawned, and then started to whimper again.

“What? What’s the matter? Why are you crying? You’re warm enough now,” he said, as he began a
second inspection. There was no blood, and from an initial palpation, it didn’t feel as if any bones
were broken. But still, the puppy continued to cry.

“What? What? Why are you crying?” he asked it again as he cradled it against his chest, ignoring the
dampness of his own shirt. He began to rock it back and forth, jiggling it against his chest like he
would a baby (had he ever held a baby?) while its whimpers increased in pitch and desperation.

“What’s the matter with you?”

*It’s probably hungry. Eating. It’s a thing we do.*

“What the hell do I feed it?” he snapped as he dashed into his kitchen and ripped open his
refrigerator door. There was nothing there, or at least nothing he was sure he could feed a hungry
puppy. An old bottle of ketchup he didn’t remember purchasing, more stale bread, two protein bars,
and half a bottle of flat soda. Nothing he could give a puppy. Nothing, nothing, nothing, and the
whimpering just kept getting louder and louder.

“What the hell do I do?”
*Oh, now you’re asking for my help? You’re the one who got us into this mess. You’re the Soldier. You never failed a mission in your life. Figure it out yourself. I’ve already given you your one freebie for the day.*

And then It was gone, leaving him there in his kitchen, clutching a crying puppy to his chest, while he cursed at It, himself, the world, and even the puppy in Russian.

But…But It had been right. He was the Soldat, and he had never failed a mission in his life (until he had), and he would not fail this one. It was vital, for reasons he could not even begin to fathom, that he not fail this one.

He scrambled back into the main room, toward his mattress, dug around beneath the sheets until he located one of his knives, before heaving the rest of the bedding easily off the floor with his left hand. There, in the corner, beneath a tile that looked exactly the same as every other tile in the room, was another secret he’d been keeping, a failsafe he himself had installed.

Using the knife, he carefully pried the tile upwards, to reveal a hidden little cubby hole, self-made, that concealed within a small stash of items that would ensure his own personal security.

He had a cell phone, one issued to him by SHIELD that held within it only three numbers; Captain McAdams, Dr. Fremore, the head of his medical team, and the number to the front desk of Stark Tower. He never used it, except when it dinged with the reminders for his appointments. They thought he didn’t know it was filled with tracking devices and spyware that would keep them informed of his every movement and any communication he might make.

But in this little corner, dark and damp, was a new one, updated with the latest security features and software, as well as a laptop, five guns, six more knives, and enough ammo to kill an entire platoon of soldiers, all sealed within a watertight plastic bag. Along with a tightly rolled bundle, several of them actually, of cash. Fives, tens and twenties mostly, nothing that would ever garner a second glance, all of it stolen from several local HYDRA safe houses that he may have forgotten to mention in his testimony. They had thought him stupid, broken, eager to reveal everything he knew, but the Soldier had always been a secret, and he knew how to keep his own, especially when it was critical to mission success.

As he tore open the bag and removed the phone, turning it on while still cradling the little dog against his chest, he decided right then and there that he had a new mission.
And that was to get the goddamned puppy to stop crying.

***

Dr. Sapna Patni, a doctorate in Veterinary Science and Surgery. 5’2, one-hundred and forty-two pounds, age approximately between thirty-eight and forty, dark hair knotted tightly on the top of her head, red spectacles, Asian-Indian descent. Current veterinarian on call at the Blue Pearl Emergency Animal Hospital.

Threat level, low. Time to incapacitate, less than 1.5 seconds.

It was forty-five minutes later, and he was standing in one of the examination rooms of a twenty-hour emergency vet clinic on West Fifteenth Street, while the woman concluded her examination of the puppy.

He had been surprised to discover there were actually doctors for animals. Animals had never been mission critical, and it would have been considered wasteful to use any resources for their care. But apparently society in the twenty-first century had decided not only to devote a large percentage of their attention to animals, but spent huge amounts of money on their health and maintenance. There had been an abundance of veterinary hospitals when he had done a Google search, but as it had been nearing nine o’clock when he had made this discovery, none were open, except for this particular clinic, which had necessitated a taxi ride to him get to the clinic in a timely manner.

The receptionist at the front desk had frowned at him when he entered, apparently offended by his appearance, which he could not understand as it was irrelevant to the completion of the mission, and insisted on payment up front. Once he handed over the required money things proceeded much more rapidly, and now here he was, standing in front of Dr. Patni as she carefully held the puppy in her arms, while it suckled and slurped greedily from a small bottle she had pressed to its lips.

“So you found this little guy in a box behind a dumpster, and then what?” she queried. She seemed nice enough, although he could tell she was wary of him.

“It was shivering, so I brought it home. It appeared to be hypothermic, and I remembered the protocol for restoring core temperature, so I followed the procedures until it stopped crying,” he reported.

“Good job on that. You probably saved his life,” she told him. “Then what?”
“But then it wouldn’t stop crying, even though it was warm. I didn’t know what to do, so I brought it here.”

“He’s starving, the poor little thing.”

“Starving? But it doesn’t appear emaciated.”

“He’s a puppy, Mr. Barnes. Barely two and a half weeks old, from my best guesstimate. They need to be fed every few hours. Usually the mother takes care of that, but you said there were no other dogs in the area?”

“No.”

“He was probably abandoned then,” Dr. Patni sighed and shook her head. “Lots of idiots think it’s a good idea to adopt a puppy, especially around Christmas. But once the excitement wears off, and they realize how much work it’s actually going to take, they decide it’s not worth it. Best case scenario, they find another home for it or drop it off at a shelter. But there are already enough animals waiting for homes, and shelters are usually filled to capacity at the best of times. Worst case scenario,” she shrugged, “you get a situation like today.”

“People throw them away? Like they’re garbage?” He was astounded, furious with the idea. Yes, animals were a waste of resources, but they were living things. And no living thing deserved to be discarded, abandoned, thrown away like trash.

Then he suddenly remembered himself, and where he was, and Captain McAdams’ voice informing him how anger or any indication of emotion would result in punishment, warnings, reminders that he needed to learn how to control his emotions if he ever expected to return to active duty.

But, to his surprise, that seemed to be the response Dr. Patni was looking for. Even though it was obvious she was angry, it was not directed at him. Instead she nodded her head and smiled at him in approval for the first time. Then she looked down at the puppy again, her eyes growing sharp, before meeting his gaze directly.

“So, we have several options at this point,” she began. “We can try to find a shelter that would be willing to take him. Normally, that wouldn’t be a problem, because puppies get adopted pretty quickly. But he’s still too young for that, and needs to be fostered for at least ten more weeks until
he’d be ready to be adopted. But they’re filled to capacity right now, as well as short staffed due to the holidays. I don’t know of any foster families with an opening right now either. Of course we can keep him here until we can find someplace to take him, but we’re going to have to charge you for that. Or…”

“Or?”

“Or, you could take him home and foster him yourself, until he’s ready to be adopted, or you decide to keep him.”

“Keep him?”

“He’s in pretty good shape, in spite of the circumstances. His lungs sound a little congested, but I can give you some antibiotics to take care of that. It will be a lot of work, but you did a good job getting him warm enough, and he seems to like you already.” The puppy had finished feeding while she spoke, and he realized he was already reaching out for it again, bringing it back against his chest, where that small, chubby little body nestled itself against his sternum.

“But it is a lot of work,” she said again, as she watched them. “You have to be sure you’re willing to take on the commitment, because he’s going to need a lot from you, more than just feedings and making sure he’s warm enough. Are you sure you want that type of responsibility, Mr. Barnes?”

It was a mission. Not one that was being forced upon him, but one she was giving him the choice to accept. And the puppy was so soft, so warm against his chest and under his hand. He could not remember the last time anything had felt this soft or warm against him in his life. Could he do this? Could he shift the parameters of his mission protocols, his self, from termination and the elimination of any and all threats, into...What? Softness, protectiveness…Care.

As he stood there, staring down at the puppy that was whimpering again, but this time as if content, he knew it was irrelevant. The tasks had already been assigned, the mission accepted. The puppy was now his.

“I’ll do it,” he heard himself say, his voice so soft, so hushed, he had a difficult time recognizing it as his own.

“Are you sure, Mr. Barnes?” Dr. Patni asked.
“Yes.” This time his voice was firmer, but still just as soft, just as foreign to him.

“Right then,” she nodded and then took a step back from the examination table. “Have you decided on a name yet, so we can put it in the file?”

From somewhere deep within, he felt something stir. An image, whose source was unknown.

Standing on the edge of a cliff, staring down into a ravine, jagged and icy, and being momentarily blinded by the slicing winds that cut across his face. But then, a feeling of warmth, as he looked upon broad shoulders, in a uniform of red, white and blue, wind-chapped lips, and the bluest eyes he had ever seen. A hand clasping his shoulder, as a voice that was as familiar to him as his own said, “Ready to do this Sarge?”

It had been warm, that hand, as had the voice. Warm like the sun. Warm like…like love. And he thought it may have been the last time he had felt that heat from within in over decades worth of time. He was certain that whoever Sarge had been, he’d been loved and cared for, a treasure to the person who had spoken his name, at least once upon a time.

Maybe it would be warm enough for the puppy he now held cradled against his heartbeat, that was starting to creak and ache like old bones coming to life, or the first shoots of grass pushing their way through the dirt to embrace the spring.

“Sarge,” he heard himself say around a throat that was both swollen and dry. “His name is Sarge.”

***

Later that night, after reading through a seemingly endless packet of instructions and a list of supplies he would need to purchase, James lay on his back in his restored pile of bedding, Sarge sleeping in a contented little ball on his chest. He thought the puppy had the right idea, because he was suddenly so tired. More exhausted, within and without, than he could remember being in a long-damned time.

But, and this was a strange realization, content too. The apartment was an adequate temperature for once, not too hot nor too cold. And it was still early enough that the streets outside were quiet, with no noises or voices to distract him. And It had been remarkably silent during the past couple of hours after Its last hissing remark. His eyelids were heavy enough, and his arms nothing more than loose weights at his side, that he thought maybe, just maybe, for the first time in years, he would be able to manage a few hours of uninterrupted sleep.
He should have known better. Just as his eyelids closed one last time, too heavy for even him to lift, It came for him again.

He felt It before he heard It. Its tread was heavier than it had ever been, and It was coming closer and closer. But he was so tired, absolutely drained, and there was nothing left within him to even begin to try to fight it off. So he lay there, silent and still, as the last of his consciousness slipped away, knowing It was crouching over him.

*Oh honey,* was the last thing James heard It say in a voice that was greedy and pleased, before he slipped away, *you've just given me everything I needed.* And then a hand that was not his own was reaching out and running Its fingers through the puppy’s fur.

***

When James woke up the next morning, his own fingers were curled in the exact same position on the puppy’s back.
Even though it had been explained to him, James had no idea taking care of a puppy would be so much work. Dr. Patni had been very thorough in her instructions, yet still, it seemed as if there was always something required, that James would need to provide. Feedings every few hours to make sure Sarge was consuming enough calories. Stimulating the lower regions of his body to initiate urination and defecation (Dr. Patni had arched a doubtful eyebrow at him as she explained this. But as the Soldier he had spent so much of his time knee deep in entrails and viscera, and after that this would prove easy, as well as much more sanitary). Cleaning the area once the puppy was done, to prevent further risk of infection as well as to maintain a healthy coat. And, most importantly of all, making sure the puppy was always warm enough.

It all sounded simple enough at the outset, but her instructions had not provided an accurate estimate of just how much time it would actually take. He spent most of that first morning preparing the formula, making sure it was at the correct temperature, and then sitting with Sarge resting with his belly on James’ right arm, while he carefully angled the bottle’s nipple so he would suckle. He took to it readily enough, but unlike James, who could consume an entire sandwich in under five seconds, this process could not be rushed, or he ran the risk of Sarge choking. Once that was completed, he had to clean whatever remnants of the formula had dribbled over the puppy’s face, and then make sure he voided as appropriate, and cleaning that area as well. When those tasks were all finally completed, Sarge seemed content to settle down on his lap for a nap, and James took the time to review the list Dr. Patni had transcribed for him, carefully going over each item, while resting his right hand on the warm little curve of Sarge’s back.

It was a long list. A very long list. It would take him some time to procure all of the necessary materiel. Grabbing his phone, he did another internet search, and discovered there was something called a Petco, not too far from the emergency clinic, that appeared to have all the items he would need. Factoring travel times as well as how long it would take him to actually make his purchases, he calculated it would take him at least two hours. Given that Sarge had just completed his first scheduled feeding, he would not need to eat again for at least another two-point-five hours, so that was not an issue. However, the other major concern was heat. While the apartment was currently secure, he knew he would not be able to guarantee its warmth while he was away. And, (and this was yet another surprise after so many of them in the past twelve hours alone), he found he was hesitant to leave Sarge here by himself. Puppies required not only milk and warmth, but socialization and care. During this vital stage of his development, even two hours alone would cause damage.

*It’s awful, being left behind. All alone. Waiting for someone to come back for you, not knowing if they ever will.*

Its voice was soft, careful and…and something else James could not identify. But it was not wrong. The Soldier knew about waiting, being left behind until someone remembered he existed or there
was a purpose he could serve. Because at least that meant he was not alone, and there were others around him, voices he could hear, scents he could smell, and not the endless, endless cold of the tank.

James shook his head. That was not his life anymore, or at least that was what he had been promised. And while he was free, as limited as that freedom was, he would make sure it was not Sarge’s either. Shaking his head again, James sighed and slowly rose from the floor, maintaining a careful hold on Sarge as he did. There was nothing for it; he needed to obtain supplies. To do that, he had to leave the apartment and go shopping. Sarge was simply going to have to come with him.

As he prepared to leave the house, bundling Sarge up in a nest of pillowcases that he carefully tucked between his own body and the last clean hoodie he could find, James swore he heard Its voice laughing at him.

***

Except once he arrived at the Petco, James discovered his mission would not be as easy as he first assumed. He had his list, but that list in no way prepared him for the actual multitude of options available to him. The list said to obtain a pen, and bedding. How was he supposed to know what size to select or whether fleece, lambswool, or something called “memory foam” would be better. There were self-heating pads and others that you plugged in. He could locate the listed brand of puppy formula, but there were variations on size as well as powders versus liquids. Something called wee-wee pads, that seemed to be appropriate for puppies, but those were not on the list. Never mind the toys, an endless array of them that lined an entire wall and filled three shelves. Dr. Patni had said that Sarge would need external stimulation, mostly in the form of play, which would increase as Sarge grew older. Was Sarge even old enough for toys yet? James had no idea, and this was not something the Soldier had any experience with.

Even worse, when he looked around, trying to locate some form of assistance, no one seemed willing to help him. There had been an employee, obvious from the shirt they were wearing, who had seem him looking around and when their gazes met, half a second later they had turned and walked away, as if they had not seen him. James had not been able to understand why.

*Remember what I said about looking like a homeless person?*

“Shut up!” he hissed back at It, instantly regretting it when a second employee, who had just turned down the aisle, heard him and did an immediate about face, abandoning him there.

Desperate now, he walked to the opposite end of the aisle, where he was able to locate a third
employee, who was crouched down and restocking the shelves, and carefully, slowly approached.

She was a young woman of color, with long curly red hair that hung midway down her back. As his shadow fell over her, she looked up to reveal a face with freckled covered cheeks and hazel eyes that were gazing at him warily.

“Yes?” Her voice was abrupt, but not sharp, merely cautious.

“Please,” he said, taking a small step back, as it appeared as if his presence was intimidating her. “I need your help.”

“With what?” she asked in the same tone as before.

“With this,” James said, pushing aside the scarf he had wrapped around his neck to reveal Sarge’s tiny little face.

*You might want to try smiling this time. Works wonders, especially with the ladies.*

James wanted to snarl at It. But he was desperate, and she was the only one who hadn’t turned away from him, at least not yet. So he did as It suggested, feeling the tug and pull of muscles long since grown stiff with disuse. But it must have worked, or perhaps Sarge, who chose that exact second to yawn, had some intel of his own James was not aware of, because as she raised her eyes, and took in Sarge and the expression on his own face, she actually smiled back.

“Oh, hello,” she said, her voice brighter than before, if still a bit cautious, as she easily rose to her feet. She glanced at him again, then back down at Sarge before she shook her head slightly. The name tag pinned to her shirt read Tara. “I know we have animals for adoption, but we don’t actually take puppies here. I can provide with you a list of numbers if-“

“No, no.” James shook his head, wondering why she was telling him this. He was running out of time, and Sarge would need another feeding soon, and there were things he needed to accomplish before he could return to his apartment. “I’m not trying to get rid of him,” he insisted.

“Then what can I do for you?”
"I found him, last night. And I brought him to the emergency animal clinic. I’m going to keep him, but I was informed that there were supplies I needed to purchase." He reached into his pocket with his free hand, the one not cradling Sarge, and pulled out the stapled sheets of paper he’d been provided upon leaving. "Dr. Patni gave me a list. But there are so many choices, and I don’t know which ones are the right ones," he shook his head in frustration, "and I need help." And before It could even interject, he added, "Please."

“All right,” Tara said, taking a step forward and reaching for the list. “I can definitely help you with that. Let’s take a look at this list and see what we’ve got.”

Tara proved to be a truly valuable ally. James thought she would have also made an amazing CO, because not only did she assist him in obtaining all of the required items, but asked pertinent questions and provided necessary information in exchange, once she conducted an inquisition of her own.

“And who is this little guy?” she queried, coming closer to him than anyone except for James’ doctors in the past sixteen months.

“His name is Sarge.”

“Can I hold him?” Her hands were already reaching out, but she paused, waiting for James to hand him over before she proceeded. James found himself strangely reluctant to let go. But she was being kind, and he could detect nothing but curiosity on her face. And he did require her assistance, so he slowly removed Sarge from the vee of his jacket and handed him over.

To his great relief, Tara’s hands were both gentle and careful as she took Sarge from him, knowingly supporting him as she brought him to her face and gave him a quick but careful study.

“Well hello Sarge.” Her voice had changed yet again, becoming warmer, her eyes brightening as she cradled his puppy in her arms. “Aren’t you just the cutest little thing?” She ran the tips of her fingers over Sarge’s belly, causing him to wiggle and make a small, squeaking noise that did not sound like distress, so James resisted the urge to snatch him back. “How old is he?”

“Dr. Patni estimated two and a half weeks.” Could he have his puppy back now please?

*Easy, easy. Let her do this. It’ll help, you’ll see.*
“Aww, so he’s just a baby, aren’t you?” Tara looked back down at Sarge, running her fingers over the small tips of his fuzzy ears. “But you’re gonna be a very big boy once you’ve grown up.”

That brought James up short. Sarge was so small, easily fitting in his palm. “How can you tell?” he asked.

“You see the size of his paws?” Tara said, gently pressing the pad of the one of his left foreleg so it splayed open.

“Yes. They’re small,” he confirmed. And seriously, could she stop manhandling his dog and give him back?

“Not in comparison to the rest of his body,” she laughed, but she was being kind about it. She was also, he couldn’t help but note, correct. Sarge’s paws, which he initially thought small and stumpy, were actually the largest part of his body. “He’s going to end up growing into them, you’ll see. Do you have any idea what breed he is?”

“No,” James shook his head. “He is – was a stray. I found him in a box.” Her face shifted then, her expression resembling the one he had seen on Dr. Patni’s face the night before. But he recognized it now; apparently it was a very bad thing to leave puppies alone in boxes on streets. He was glad everyone he had encountered so far was in agreement. But not so glad that, as of yet, she had not given him back.

“Oh, you poor little thing,” she cooed down at Sarge, running her fingertip under his chin, obviously enchanted by his puppy. “It’s a good thing this nice man found you then.” That gave James pause. Was it a good thing? He wasn’t certain, at least not yet. But, after a brief instant of consideration, he came to the conclusion that it was not a bad thing either. “Anyway, as big as he’s going to get, you’re probably going to want to consider enrolling him in some training classes. Not now, he’s obviously not old enough for that yet, but at some point you will. It will make him easier to handle as he gets older. But anyway,” and then Tara finally, finally gave him his puppy back, “here you go. Now come on, Sarge’s person, let’s go get you a cart and take another look at this list. We should definitely have everything here, plus a couple of extra things you’re probably going to need. But don’t worry, we’ll get you sorted.”

And with that, Tara turned and started heading down the aisle, James and Sarge, now back where he belonged in the little papoose of James’ jacket, helpless to do anything but follow.

But that was all right. Tara was knowledgeable, efficient and (to his surprise) quite friendly once they were on their way. She was a bit talkative, but unlike Captain McAdams, James found everything
she said actually interesting. She helped him to procure all of the materiel he needed, offering her options on which item to select, but also her reasons why (‘Wet formula is probably a bit easier and less messy, sure, but you can better control the temperature when you mix it yourself, which is important for a puppy that young,’ and ‘You’ll need to stock up on more nipples, especially once his milk teeth start to come in. Once they do though, that’ll be around the time you’re going to start adding solid food to his diet, oh here, these are the perfect size for Sarge’). But she turned what had initially been an overwhelming experience into one that was relatively painless, and took a lot less time than originally estimated. Of course that did not mean there weren’t any challenges, especially once they were mostly done, and she guided him to one final display, leaving this last choice up to him.

“He’s a bit young for a collar just yet, but you’re going to want him to get used to one soon. That’ll make it easier on the both of you when you start leash training him. Just go slow and be patient with him, it takes them a little while to get used to it. The most important thing is that it’s not too tight. You don’t want to end up hurting him by mistake,” she warned.

“No, absolutely not.” It was easy to agree.

“Good,” she nodded in approval. “These should be the right size for him.” She pointed to one section of the shelf. “Now, you just have to pick a color.” James stopped and stared, taking in the myriad of selections. There were so many, in such a variety of colors. Greens and blacks, blues and greys, solid colors and ones with patterns. Some had studs while others had beads glued to them. But really, they were all just the same, and James found himself struggling to make a selection. Until there, in a lower corner, he saw one that caught his eye. Vibrant and bright, and he found himself thinking it would actually look…pretty against the deep, rich tones of Sarge’s fur. It had been such a long time since there had been anything pretty in his life, and he found himself unable to resist.

“This one,” he heard himself say, as he picked up the collar and placed it in Tara’s outstretched hand. She looked down at what he had chosen and then up at his face, and smiled at him. It was a pretty smile, James found himself thinking. As pretty as the pink collar resting in her open palm. And without It even having to tell him, James felt himself smiling back.

“Nice choice,” she nodded, before placing it in the cart. “Now come on, let’s get you checked out and on your way. Cos your little guy’s gonna get hungry soon, and you need to get him home so you can feed him.”

“Thank you,” he said to her. “You were a tremendous help. I would not have been able to do any of this without your assistance, but you were very kind. Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome, Sarge’s person.” Her smile was even brighter this time. “Good luck, and remember you can come back here anytime you need anything. I’ll be more than happy to help you.”
And then with one last smile, she turned and walked away.

As he watched her go, standing in front of a cart filled with items he now needed to figure out how to carry home, he heard a low laugh and smelt the now familiar scent of cigarette smoke, the only warning he got, before he heard Its voice.

*Good boy.*

“Oh shut up,” he grumbled at It, before he turned and pushed his cart the rest of way toward the cashier.

***

Living with a puppy proved to be quite a challenge. James was not only responsible for feeding, stimulating bowel movements, maintaining cleanliness, and also making sure it was warm enough. But, due to the puppy’s young age, by agreeing to take him in, James also had agreed to take on the role of being the puppy’s surrogate mother. It was a very strange concept to for the former Soldier to wrap his head around, and also a time consuming one. Because that meant not only completing the above assigned tasks, but also providing enough stimulation and interaction so the puppy was properly socialized, as well as, and this was the important part, always felt safe. It was an innocent life, the one James had decided to be responsible for, and he wondered if this was something he would be capable of, when he could not remember the last time he felt innocent himself.

Still, he had taken on this task, and as there was no one else he could turn to, he had to do the best that he could, and hope it was enough.

So, over the course of the next several days, he made sure that feedings were not only done at regularly intervals (every two to three hours, which he set an automatic alarm on his un-monitored phone so he never forgot), followed by stimulating the puppy so that it voided regularly, and then a careful wipe-down so the puppy’s fur was clean. After that, he set up the small pen, lining the bottom with the heating pad he had purchased, and covering everything in the fleece blankets Tara recommended. It would be soft and dry, and most importantly, warm enough to maintain the puppy’s body temperature.

Except after the first night, when the puppy had woken him with its whining, James had risen to feed and then perform all of the other necessities, the puppy still didn’t stop its pathetic little whimpers, James forewent the pen, pulled the fleece blankets onto his own mattress and curled around the puppy instead. He knew his body ran hotter than most (the doctors at the Tower had commented on it often enough), so he assumed he would be warm enough to keep the puppy at the appropriate
temperature. Once James had curled around him, the puppy quickly fell quiet and slipped into what appeared to be a contented sleep. To his surprise, not too long after that, James fell asleep as well, only waking when he felt the puppy suckling at his chin.

“Bleh,” had been his response, as he wiped at the spittle in his beard. The puppy couldn’t have cared less.

But from that point on, every night James went to sleep with Sarge curled up in his arms.

It was a mutually satisfying arrangement for the both of them. As were all of the rest of the things James found himself doing over the course of the next few days. He had always been the best at what he had done; that was the reason why he had been HYDRA’s ultimate weapon / assassin. He did not see any reason why that should change now, simply because he had a new mission. Not only did he meet all of Sarge’s basic needs, but he took on extra. Gentle, gentle grooming, with the softest brush Tara had also recommended he purchase (‘Not only does it feel nice for him, but you’re going to want to get started doing it as soon as possible, so he gets used to you doing it now, instead of fighting you when he’s older and really needs it.’) Gently playing with his paws, for the same reasons, but this time for when James would need to clip his nails in the future. And also, (and this was the most challenging part) talking to Sarge, because ‘his ears have already opened, which means he’s learning how to process sound, and you’re going to want to him to learn the sound of your voice.’ At first, James had no idea what to say. Aside from Captain McAdams, there was no one he interacted with on a regular basis, and he was pretty certain, as his recent encounters with both Dr. Patni and Tara had proven, it was not a skill he had any mastery over –

*No kidding.*

-so initially, all James did was what the Soldier had previously done, and reported his activities.

“I am going to prepare your food now Sarge, as it’s time for your second feeding of the day. I purchased the powdered formula, instead of the premade mix, as I was informed that I can better control its temperature that way. As you are still too young to modulate your own body temperature, I am the one responsible for making sure you stay warm. This is very important for your ongoing health and future development.”

*Jesus Christ you’re boring. No wonder Sarge spends so much of his time sleeping.*

And yes, it was possibly not the most engaging of subject material, but if Sarge had any opinions on the matter, he wisely kept them to himself, which was more than James could say for It. Besides, from the way Sarge’s eyes followed him while he spoke, he didn’t think he was doing too badly.
Except, after the third day, James discovered that at some point, conversation must have been a skill he once possessed, or maybe it was something he had once known, and not realized he missed, because he found himself saying things to Sarge he would never thought he would have reason to say to anybody. Observations of his surroundings initially, “There are four other units on this floor, all of them occupied. Husband and wife, three children in the first. Husband and wife, two children next. And a single occupant, female, older, next door.” Or “It’s snowing again outside. And there is sleet all over the ground, just like the day I found you.” Followed by, to his surprise, actual opinions on the matters he mentioned. “The ones in 3A aren’t too bad, pretty quiet mostly, except for the kids. But they’re teenagers, so I suppose it’s to be expected. The ones in 3B though, they fight a lot. I think the husband drinks too much and she keeps threatening to move in with her sister out in Long Island, but she never does. The woman is 3C works all the time, but the kids are pretty well behaved. I think she’s just doing the best she can. 3E is pretty quiet, but she listens to music and watches television sometimes, especially when she can’t sleep. I think she cooks a lot too, you can smell it through the walls. But she’s nice though, always smiles at me when I see her.” He paused in the middle of mixing Sarge’s latest batch of formula, stunned. Not that he knew all of the details he had mentioned; it was always mission critical to be aware of one’s surroundings. But by the fact that he had actually processed all of the details and arrived at conclusions of his own, that were irrelevant to the mission. But then again, aside from Sarge, he really had no new mission, with the exception of completing his probationary period, and gaining Captain McAdams’ approval for his release. Survival, yes, that would always take precedent. But secondary to that, and just as important, his freedom. He no longer wanted to be used as a weapon, by anyone, no matter how justified they claimed their cause to be. And, in spite of what Captain McAdams kept trying to insist –

*You mean shove down your throat.*

-he had no desire to return to active duty. He had not wanted to serve the first time, but he had been given no choice. Not that first time, nor ever again in the seventy-five years that followed. He supposedly wouldn’t have to once his probation was complete. But he knew men like McAdams, had known men even worse than McAdams for three quarters of a century, and if there was one thing men like him all had in common, it was that they lied and lied and lied and lied.

*Well, look at that. Maybe you aren’t as stupid as you look after all.*

James shook his head, and avoided looking at the shadowed corner where he could almost, almost see an upturned wrist resting on a knee, and went back to mixing Sarge’s formula. This was his third mission now, one of his own choosing, and while it had only been a few days, he was quickly discovering that it was becoming just as important as the other two.

So he devoted himself to it with all of the attention to detail and discipline that had been beaten into his skin. He made sure to feed, and stimulate Sarge’s bowels, then wipe him down afterwards. He also made sure to provide all of the necessary interaction a puppy of his age would need. And during
the quiet times, while Sarge napped in the curl of his lap, he either booted up his laptop or used his phone, and researched, researched, researched. There was an abundance of information available. Veterinary journals, advice from both professional and personal blogs, and an endless array of videos he could watch on something called YouTube, (he may have spent way too many hours on that watching clips of puppies doing various things, like being forced to wear booties for the first time, or barking at various, inanimate objects, but it was all relevant –

*Yeah, sure it is. And it's not because those are some of the cutest little furballs you've ever seen*

“Shut up.”

*Aw, don’t be like that honey. Now play that one again. Look how his whole butt wiggles whenever he wags his tail. Ain’t that just the cutest thing you’ve ever seen.*

- and he found himself learning a lot from them.) He found himself having to sort through what he found, comparing and contrasting the different opinions, trying to determine for himself which would be the most productive methods, while at the same time forcing himself to memorize such important data as the various stages of development in a puppy’s life and what to expect during each one. It was a lot of information, and he was once again forced to admit that raising Sarge was going to be a huge undertaking. But, he found himself admitting as he gently ran the fingers of his right hand in a gentle circle around the fuzz of Sarge’s ears, it would definitely be worth it if he succeeded.

Because…

Because…

Sarge was soft and warm, and a good companion, even if he did have a tendency to leave James’ beard covered in drool when he wanted to be fed. He was a comfort in the night, and something to break up the endless monotony of James’ days. He demanded attention, which James was willing to give, and required constant supervision, which was also easy enough to provide, as James seldom let him out of his arms during those first few initial days. And (and this was probably the most crucial part) he was also absolutely adorable. His plump little body was quickly putting on weight since he was being fed regularly (and yes, it was only in the tiniest of increments, from what James could detect with his left arm, but from everything he had read, that was absolutely critical in this stage of his development). Now that he was no longer wet, and kept consistently clean and dry, his brindled coat turned into a velveteen fuzz that tickled the fingers of both of his hands. And he seemed to have quickly realized he was no longer in danger, and that this, this tiny apartment with only one other occupant, was a safe place, where he would be cared for and protected, and, just like Tara had said, that James was his person, who was trying his hardest to do his best by him. With that, as well at it being appropriate for his stage of development, came an increasing sense of awareness and curiosity about the world around him, as slowly, but surely, Sarge began expand his limits and explore his
surroundings.

The first time Sarge attempted to stand, after James had left him alone for just a minute so he could wash his hands after yet another cleaning, he returned to see Sarge on his mattress, clumsily using all four of his little legs to find enough purchase so he could heave his body off the bedding. He failed, his little body wobbling over into its side, ending with his belly and feet up in the air. James was enchanted, frozen for a second, as he watched. But then he was moving, because apparently Sarge was a determined little fellah, wriggling around to get back onto his belly while he squeaked quietly, and James needed to be closer.

“Come on Sarge, come on, that’s a good boy, you can do it,” he said from his knees less than a foot away. He could feel It, lingering there in the shadows of his mind, but It didn’t chide or sneer or voice any words. It just held, with what James could have sworn was a bated breath, just like he was, while during the next fifteen minutes Sarge made a second, third, fourth, fifth attempt, before he succeeded after the sixth try, managing to hold himself up on his paws for five full seconds, until Sarge seemed to decide enough was enough, and collapsed on the comforter for a nap.

Over the course of the next two days, Sarge continued in his efforts to learn how to stand, a little more successful each time. By the conclusion of the second day, he decided to include walking into his repertoire, which was more of a dragging of his belly along the floor while he used his legs to pull him along, but still, it was the effort that counted. The first time he’d done that, James had to stop, because there had been a sound, unfamiliar to him, echoing within the walls of his apartment. It took him a stunned moment to realize it was him; he was the one who had made that noise, and what he had heard was the sound of his own laughter.

*Well look at that. Who would’ve guessed you had that in you. I certainly wouldn’t have.*

He ignored It, because there were other things he had to do, like picking Sarge up and praising him, because everything he read informed him that encouragement and positive reinforcement was important.

“Who’s a good boy? Who’s a good boy?” he praised, lifting Sarge so he could press a kiss to his belly. And then, “Bleh!” because his lips were gritty, and when he pulled Sage away to look at his stomach, it was covered in dirt, even though he had just wiped him down less than twenty minutes ago. “What the?” he asked aloud, looking around. That’s when he realized the floor was filthy, as was the rest of his apartment.

*Yeah well, that’s what you get for never cleaning this shithole. What did you expect? You might want to change that, now that you’ve got a puppy to take care of. Can’t be good for him, especially if he’s going to start getting into things. Can’t be too good for you either, not that you seem to give a shit about that.*
He couldn’t even argue with It this time. So he didn’t. Instead, sighing, he reached for his phone, opened up the Google app, and typed in *cleaning products safe to use around puppies.*

“You really are a lot of work, you know.”

***

Two hours, a trip to the nearest grocery store (with Sarge once again carefully bundled in the front of his jacket), two bottles of white vinegar, a bucket, a mop, two sponges and three scrub brushes later, James sat back on his heels and took another survey of his living space. The surfaces weren’t gleaming (he doubted they ever would again, no matter how hard he scrubbed, given the age of the place), but it was definitely cleaner, and there was no longer any grit on the tiles. He’d had to rearrange a few things as well, removing anything that could potentially be a choking hazard, now that Sarge was at the point where he was starting to learn how to walk. He cursed at himself for the oversight, and reminded himself he would need to do better in the future. But, for all of that, his crappy apartment did look somewhat better for his efforts. It certainly smelled a lot better too.

Unfortunately, he couldn’t say the same for himself. The apartment may have been cleaner, but it appeared as if that was only because all of the dirt, in an attempt to escape his attentions, had decided to migrate to his clothes and skin.

Sighing yet again, he rose to his feet, checked on Sarge napping contentedly in his nest of pillows and blankets, and made his way towards the bathroom, It cackling in his ear the entire time.

*And don’t forget to wash your hair this time, honey.*

***

The next several days passed in much the same way as the previous ones. James continued to feed, stimulate defecation and clean Sarge, and Sarge continued his determined efforts to learn how to both walk and stand. He got a little bit better and surer of himself with each subsequent day, although it was still more of a four legged wiggle across the floor. But he was able to go farther and farther each time he tried, and his feet, while still clumsy, were somewhat better coordinated. James always urged and praised him in his attempts, ending each effort with a scratch of his ears, and then a kiss to his nose and belly, which were a lot less gritty now. James had had him for a little over a week at this point, although it certainly hadn’t felt that long to him. But time was passing, and his scheduled therapy would resume the very next day. And for the first time since their paths had crossed, James
was going to have to leave Sarge alone. Factoring in travel time, it would only be for two and a half hours, but it was the longest he and Sarge would ever be apart so far, and James decided he needed to perform a test run to make sure it all went smoothly.

Besides, even though he was being meticulous and as careful as possible, taking care of a puppy was a messy business, and his clothes were now all stained with puppy formula, drool and various other substances James knew would be offensive to his fellow commuters on the train, as well as incite Captain McAdams into another lecture about proper appearances. He needed to once again go do his laundry.

So he fed Sarge and then set him up in his little pen, made sure the heating pad was turned on, and provided plenty of soft, warm blankets for him to snuggle up in, once again gathered his clothes up into his pillow cases, and left his home for the first time in nearly eight days.

It took him less than two hours to wash and dry all his clothes, but by the time he returned to his apartment, it quickly became obvious that something was very, very wrong. Sarge wasn’t in his pen where he had left him; in fact the pen had been turned over and all of the carefully nested blankets spread out all over the floor. There was a small puddle of urine next to the bedding, and the worst, the absolute worst thing of all, was that he could hear Sarge’s pitiful little whimpers of distress from where he had wedged himself in between his bookshelf and the wall.

“Oh no, oh no, oh no Sarge, what’s the matter? What’s the matter?” He was there in less than a second, his laundry forgotten on the floor by the door. “Please be all right, please be all right.” With hands that were shaking, he reached out and very carefully gathered Sarge in his palms, lifting him up so he could examine him. He didn’t appear to be hurt in any way; there was no blood or wounds he could detect. Nothing in his mouth that he would have choked him, and his breathing seemed to be fine. He was a bit on the cold side, but not by much, since thankfully the apartment’s radiator had clanged on. But he was still shivering, and wouldn’t stop whimpering, a horrible, awful sound worse than knives slicing into James heart, that seemed to go on forever, but was really only a few seconds, until James gathered him close, pressing him against his chest, so Sarge could feel the steady constant of his heartbeat. It was then, and only then, that the crying stopped, and Sarge, with one final heart-wrenching whimper, wriggled even closer into James’ chest.

“What happened, huh? Why did you do that? I was only gone for less than two hours. What’s the matter with you? Why are you so upset?” he asked, as he carefully massaged the tips of Sarge’s ears, the top of his head, and the endless, endless velveteen fuzz of the fur on Sarge’s back.

*I don’t think he likes being left alone.*

“But I wasn’t gone for that long!” he answered It, all the while keeping up his constant stroking of Sarge’s fur.
*Two hours, two years, five, ten.* There was a strange tone to Its voice, flat, full of dread and a strange, strange, unwelcome understanding. *Does it really make a difference? Nothing more terrifying than feeling like you’ve been abandoned by the one who always promised you they’d never leave you behind.*

James’ throat was suddenly dryer than asphalt on the hottest summer day, his tongue scorched. Because that feeling was familiar, so familiar to him, but he hadn’t thought anyone or anything else would ever understand that, especially not some program HYDRA was using in an attempt to force his return. “How—how would you know that?”

It never answered his question, responding instead with *You’re going to have to figure something else out, because this, this ain’t ever gonna work unless you do.* And then It disappeared, just as quickly, just as silently as It had come.

Which was just as well, because It was right. This was not going to work, and James needed to figure something out, and soon, because his next session with McAdams was scheduled for 13:30 tomorrow afternoon, and if he missed it, he knew there would be hell to pay.

But he also knew he would do anything and everything in his power to keep Sarge from making those sounds, ever again.

***

“Well, hello there Sarge, and Sarge’s person,” Tara greeted them both, as she rose from where she was once again crouched over, restocking the shelves. But this time her smile was quick and easy as she stepped forward. “How are the two of you doing today?”

“We are both well, thank you for asking,” he responded, barely suppressing the urge to step back as her hands started to reach for Sarge. But she had been kind to him, was still being kind to him, and assisted him in the past. It was his hope that she would continue to do so today, so he allowed her to take Sarge from his grasp, scrutinizing her every move as she lifted him up to her face so she could kiss his nose.

“And look at you. You’ve gotten bigger already. And you feel like you’ve put on a bit of weight since the last time,” she observed, before turning her attention back to James. “Good job you.”
“He is already starting to learn how to walk…well, wobble really. But still, he continues to make the attempt, and he is very persistent.”

“Well of course he is,” she said as she cradled Sarge in her arms so she could rub his belly. “’Cos you are just the smartest little Sarge, aren’t you?”

“Yes, yes he is,” James heard himself admitting proudly. She smiled at him again, wider this time, so much so that the corners of her eyes crinkled. And this, this too he remembered. This was her being kind. She had been this way the last time as well. So he took a deep breath, and a chance as well. “And I am sorry to bother you, but I once again require your assistance.”

“Yes?” she asked, as if she had been waiting for this all along.

“Do you, um, do you have any jackets for a puppy Sarge’s size?” he finally asked. “Maybe in pink, to match his collar?”

This time when Tara smiled, it was so wide that dimples popped up in each of her cheeks.

***

“What the hell is that?” Captain McAdams growled at exactly 13:32 pm the very next day when James showed up for his appointment.

“It’s a puppy.” James was confused; he thought it was quite obvious.

“What is it doing here?” McAdams went on in the same tone.

James looked down at Sarge, who was once again in his favorite position, curled up against James’ chest, his head peeking out from the opened vee of his jacket.

“Sleeping.” From not too far away, he heard It snort.

“I can see that. What are you doing with it?”
“Holding it.” Again, James thought it was obvious. But then again, he had never thought Captain McAdams the most intelligent of men, and his current line of inquiry was not changing James’ perception in the slightest.

“Why?” Captain McAdams persisted, with a clenched jaw this time.

“To keep him warm.”

“Sergeant Barnes.” McAdams’ fists matched the clench of his jaw, and James was certain he could see his eyeballs beginning to throb. “Perhaps I should clarify the question. What are you doing with that animal-“

“It’s a puppy.”

“And why have you brought it into my office?” McAdams finished over him.

*Oh,* was that what he wanted to know. Again, it seemed obvious to James, but he supposed he should explain.

“I adopted him.”

“You adopted it?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“Last week.”

“Last week?”
“Yes.”

It appeared that was the point where Captains McAdams decided he needed to change his strategy. Unclenching both his jaw and fists, he leaned back in his chair, took a deep breath that he held for a few seconds before he exhaled with a heavy sigh.

*Here we go.*

“I have to say, Sergeant Barnes, I am extremely disappointed in you,” he began with a shake of his head. “When I signed off on the break in our sessions for the holidays, I thought it would be a good experience for you, and a chance to determine how well you would be able to do on your own. I thought it would be an opportunity for you to achieve some independence—“

*And then come crawling back, begging for attention.*

“-as well as spending some time reflecting on what your future goals would be. While it’s unfortunate that I’m disappointed, I can’t say I’m surprised. While it seems that-“

“Why?” James asked, doing something he had never done before, interrupting Captain McAdams in the middle of one of his diatribes.

“Excuse me?”

“Why are you disappointed?” he persisted, wondering why he kept having to repeat the obvious. As far as he was aware, there were no issues with McAdams’ hearing.

“Because it is obvious that you have no impulse control, especially if left unsupervised for any extended period of time.”

“It is not on the list,” James countered.

“The list?”
“The list of prohibited activities. I checked.” There was an entire list of things James was prohibited from doing, which he’d been forced to sign at the beginning of his probationary period. There were over a hundred items on it, forbidding him from travelling anywhere outside the city limits, purchasing an automobile of his own without prior approval, initiating contact with any members of HYDRA (*As if.*), and even going so far as not allowing him to pursue any romantic relationships without any potential candidates submitting to a security check first. But nowhere, nowhere on the list, (and James had double-checked) had it said he could not adopt a pet. “In fact, given all of the guidelines you have provided, it seemed a logical choice.”


“Increased responsibility, maintaining a set schedule to allow for a sense of security. Physical activity to help maintain peak performance, and interaction with social stimuli to improve overall cognitive function.” James looked down at Sarge, the top of his head a soft ball of warm brown and black fuzz emerging from the gap between his hoodie and chest, and gently began to stroke his ears. “Plus, he’s cute.”

“He’s…cute.” McAdams repeated flatly.

“Yes. Very,” James agreed.

“Still, Sergeant Barnes, if adopting an animal was something you were considering, we needed to discuss it first, so we could develop a plan and follow the proper protocols-“

“IT was not on the list,” James said again.

“Yes, I am aware of that. But still-“

“So I am keeping the puppy.”

***

“What is that thing doing here again?” It was two days later, Thursday, and James was once again sitting in Captain McAdams’ office for his 13:30 appointment.
James held in a sigh. Were they going to go through this again? After their last session, where Captain McAdams had spent the rest of their allotted hour ranting and raving about irresponsible choices and needing to consider the repercussions of his actions, he thought they were done with this. But apparently not. And apparently, McAdams’ memory was as bad as everyone seemed to think James’ was, if he was going to start asking all the same questions all over again.

“It is not a thing. It is a puppy,” James reminded him, using very small words and making sure he spoke clearly, in case McAdams did have problems with his hearing. After some careful consideration, James would not be surprised if that was the case. The man did seem to spend an inordinate amount of his time yelling.

“I am aware of that, Sergeant Barnes. What I want to know is, what is it doing here? I thought after our last session, we agreed that you would either find someone else to raise it, or failing that, leave it home during all of our future sessions.”

“I never agreed to that.”

“Excuse me?”

“You suggested it,” James said, proving he could pay attention, even though it was difficult when Sarge was once again curled up against his chest. “But I never agreed.”

“Sergeant Barnes-“

“Besides, it is not possible at this point.”

“Not possible?”

“No.”

“And just why is it not possible, Sergeant Barnes?”
“He’s just a baby,” James explained as he brought Sarge to his face so he could kiss his noise. Sarge made his happy little squeaking sound and wriggled in to get even closer. “Puppies his age are unable to modulate their own body temperature. Since I’m his surrogate mother, it is my responsibility to make sure he stays warm enough. The best way to do that is through shared body heat. Plus, he likes it.”

“Excuse me. Did you just say that you’re its mother?” When James glanced over, McAdams eyeballs were doing that throbbing thing again. The tightening of blood vessels, increased heart rate and blood pressure, all indications of an increased level of stress. Oh well, that was not his concern.

“He is not an it. He’s a puppy,” James clarified, for what felt like the millionth time. “And yes.” James smiled down at Sarge. He looked so cute in his collar and matching sweater. It was just the right size, and Tara had assured him it would help keep him warm enough against January’s bitter chill.

“Wait a minute,” McAdams interrupted his musings. “Are you telling me that puppy is a boy?”

“Yes?” Now it was James’ turn to be confused. He thought they’d gone over this, several times in fact.

“Then why is it wearing pink?” He was back to snarling. This was going to be a very, very long session. Thankfully he had Sarge with him to keep him occupied.

“Because it’s cute?” More confusion. Did the man not have eyes to determine the facts for himself? But then again, they were still throbbing. Perhaps his vision was also impaired, along with this hearing.

“Cute.” That was an interesting tone in McAdams’ voice. He wasn’t aware anyone could sound as flat as he when he had been the Soldier. Maybe he was waiting for his own mission protocols. Or maybe it was something even worse.

Startled, shocked, horrified, James looked up, cradling Sarge protectively against his chest, and asked, “Do you not like puppies, Captain McAdams?”

***
Forty-five exhausting minutes later, with Captain McAdams once again spewing on and on about appropriate protocols, proper appearance, and something irrelevant and useless that Captain McAdams insisted were societal accepted gender norms, *blah-blah-blah,* James stood in the elevator with Sarge once again carefully nested in his jacket, and watched the lights indicating the cars’ descent. While he did, he felt the shadows in his mind unfurl, and the whisper of cigarette smoke caressing his nose.

*Admit it, you enjoyed the fuck outta that.*

He ignored It. If there was one downside to the addition of Sarge to his life, it was that It had grown increasingly present, aggressive, and persistent. Harder to ignore and more vocal than It had ever been. But, well, as he looked back down as Sarge, whose little pink tongue was sticking out as he yawned, he decided even in spite of that, Sarge was definitely worth it.

Besides, It wasn’t wrong.

He had enjoyed the fuck outta that.

***

The next few weeks passed in much the same way. James attended his required bi-weekly therapy sessions, while McAdams continued to sputter and complain about *That thing in my office, distracting us from our work.* James ignored him. Everyone knew a soldier’s most important skill was his adaptability, and if McAdams could not adapt to changes in his environment, then James assumed that was why he had only made the rank of Captain, despite his many years of service. That was not his concern.

His main concern was Sarge, and his continued development and well-being. Because Sarge kept growing and changing, little by little and day by day. But he was doing it, and every time James looked at him, he could not help but feel a deep and satisfying sense of achievement. Because he had done that. This little puppy he had found shivering in the cold was still alive because of his efforts. Not only was he still alive, but according to all of the research James had done and was continuing to do, he was developing at an age appropriate rate. From what Dr. Patni had said, Sarge was approximately seven weeks old now. He had long since progressed passed his first belly wiggles across the floor and could now walk, and sort of galumph around the apartment happily. He would bark and yip instead of squeak or whine, and his ears, floppy though they were, seemed to have taken on a life of their own, and would cock or twist whenever James spoke to him (which he did, constantly), and seemed to recognize that his name was Sarge. His eyes had slowly bled from their original milky blue to a bright, clear brown, and now looked upon the world with an endless curiosity. His coat had transformed from its original fuzz into a puffy cloud of fur, which James thought made him look more like a long-haired teddy bear with a tail than a dog, but James found
him even cuter for it, especially when he played with the thick fuzz between his toes. It seemed Tara had once again provided him with valuable information, because she was right; all his earlier hours spent brushing his coat meant that Sarge would happily settle in his lap, allowing James to carefully comb through the fur on every part of his body with what could only be a sense of contentment on his face. With his increased age, weight and fur, James no longer needed to constantly monitor Sarge’s body temperature, but they still curled around each other every night when they went to sleep, and both seemed to prefer it that way.

Sarge had been weaned by this point, and instead of warm bottles of mixed formula, he now consumed a mix of kibble and formula, that more resembled a gruel than anything else, with James reducing the ratio of liquids to solids little by little every day. James could readily admit he missed the bottle feedings, when Sarge would lay against his forearm while suckling from the bottle James held, but the transition to a more solid diet meant Sarge was growing at an expected and healthy rate. James also thought the gruel mixture completely unappetizing, but he wasn’t a dog, so he supposed his opinion on the matter was irrelevant.

Of course, the switch to more solid foods came with issues of its own. Sarge was a bit of a sloppy eater, although that slowly got better day by day. There was also the issue of potty training, which James had recently begun. While he missed the daily bottle feedings, James could admit he was relieved Sarge no longer needed to be stimulated in order to go to the bathroom, except now there were…Well, accidents.Quite a few of them actually. They were frustrating, yes, but from all he had read, to be expected. As long as he was persistent and patient, Sarge would grow out of them in time. Thankfully Tara had once again proven to be the ultimate ally in his care of Sarge. Three more times during the subsequent weeks he had brought Sarge with him back to Petco, and each time she greeted him with a happy “Well hello there Sarge, and Sarge’s person. What can I help you with today?” (Even if she did still insist on holding his dog). The last time he made the trip, she helped him find a larger collar for Sarge, along with a matching lead he would soon need to start using, as well as an enzymatic cleaner that worked wonders at eliminating any odors. For that alone he would never be able to thank her enough.

And then there was the issue of Sarge’s size. Because while he was only seven weeks old, Sarge was starting to get, well…Big. He was not quite two months old, but he was already over a foot tall at his withers, and from what James could tell, weighed just a little over twenty-two pounds. He wasn’t fat, not from what James was able to determine, and still easy to carry around. But from everything James had read, it seemed that once again Tara was right, and Sarge was definitely going to be a large dog when he finished growing, whenever that was.

Sarge was growing and changing every day, right in front of James’ very eyes. So James was pleased, or at least he knew he should be. Except, there appeared to be a new problem James now had to deal with, and one he could not understand. Because while Sarge was growing and changing and exploring the world around him with increasing excitement and energy, James was tired. All the time. While he loved to play and interact with Sarge as much as possible, at the end of the day it was practically all he could do to not collapse on his mattress at night. There were times in the middle of the day when he found himself feeling shaky, and needing to sit down, Sarge immediately crawling into his lap to lick his face whenever he did. It was certainly cute (and kind of gross), but it did not
help him feel any better, and he could not comprehend why this was happening. While this was a new mission he had taken on, and longer lasting than any previously assigned to him, it wasn’t particularly grueling or a test of his endurance. And yet still, as Sarge continued to grow stronger, he felt as if he was getting weaker.

*Boy, you really are a fucking idiot sometimes.* It snapped at him while he was in the middle of preparing Sarge’s next meal.

“Go away,” he mumbled, not having the energy to even bother trying to ignore It.

*Oh hell no, not this time boyo.*

James closed his eyes, and shook his head, before he went back to mixing together Sarge’s kibble and formula.

*And here I was thinking you were doing okay, with the way you’ve been handling that asshole lately. So let’s break this down into baby steps, small enough so even you can keep up.*

If he had the energy, James would have rolled his eyes.

*What are you doing right now?*

“And you call me stupid.”


“I’m preparing Sarge’s food.”

*Right. Why?*

“Because it’s time for him to eat.”
"And there you go."

"There I go where?"

It sighed. *Right, even smaller steps. Try to keep up. Why are you feeding Sarge?*

"Because he needs to eat."

*Why?*

"Because…because he needs the appropriate amount of caloric intake to sustain his energy levels and supply him with enough nutrition for healthy growth."

*Why?* It persisted.

"Because he is a living creature and living creatures require nutrients to survive," he snapped back at It.

*And what are you?*

James’ hands paused in the middle of what he was doing as Its words started to click and form chains in his mind.

*Ah. Is the lightbulb in that big ol’ empty head of yours finally starting to click on?*

“I…eat.” Even he could tell that the words were halting.

*Yeah, and when was the last time you did?*

James found himself having to admit that it was taking him too long to come up with an answer.
*You had two protein bars and half a bottle of soda yesterday morning for breakfast. Over twenty-eight hours ago.*

“That’s irrelevant.”

*Oh really. Tell that to your shaking hands.*

“Food is not mission critical.”

*According to who?*

“According to…According to…”

*Do you really think those bastards were telling you the truth, when they lied about everything else?*

“Yes, but…We were designed to function at superior levels with minimal maintenance!” he heard himself arguing.

*You were injected with a serum, against your will, to turn your body into a weapon. And then they brainwashed you, again and again and again and again, so you would never question anything they told you. Do you really think those fuckers gave a rat’s ass about your overall condition when they could pop you into The Tank, and then pump you full of whatever they wanted whenever they decided they needed you?*

“But it wasn’t mission critical.” Even to his own ears, the counter sounded weak.

*It wasn’t critical to them. But we’ve got a new mission now. It’s ongoing and requires constant upkeep. And I hate to admit this, but that fucktard McAdams is right. You need to eat more.* When James had no response, It went on, even more viciously than before. *Don’t wanna listen. That’s fine. But what do you think’ll happen if you ending up passing out from starvation and dehydration. They’re gonna drag your ass back into that Tower, for good this time. And they sure as shit ain’t gonna let you bring Sarge. And who’ll take care of him then?*
James ended up gasping, because no, no, no, they wouldn’t, they couldn’t take Sarge away from him. Not now. Not ever.

*Wanna bet?* It challenged him. *You set up a bunch of alerts in that phone of yours to remind you to feed Sarge. Set up some more. Breakfast, lunch and dinner. Three squares. Every day. Or else you’re not gonna like what happens next. That I can promise you Buckaroo.*

And then It was gone, and it was just Sarge whimpering at his feet and him, his hands shaking against the countertops.

Chapter End Notes

So a couple of things at the end of this chapter...

First off, just to let you know, as this story is another long one, I will most likely be posting a new chapter every day, two at the most, in order to meet my deadline for the fest. So, while there will be an occasional cliffhanger or two **winks** you shouldn't have to wait too long for the next part. But uh, **glances to the side** I still have my old friend, the trusty bush, to hide in if you occasionally feel like yelling at me.

And that brings me to my second point. I posted this chapter yesterday evening, and when I signed back in to AO3, there were so many comments from so many familiar faces, welcoming me back and telling me you were all excited to read something new from me. As a few of you know, I had a really rough May, REALLY rough. But to receive so many wonderful and encouraging comments, meant the world to me. You have no idea. And I just wanted to take a minute here to thank you for that. You guys are the ABSOLUTE best, and I adore each and every one of you. **hugshugshugs - soMANYhugstoyouall**

EDITED TO ADD: For some reason when I first posted this chapter, a paragraph was missing. (Don't know why.) I've corrected the error now, but in case you missed it, it's right after the part where Sarge starts sleeping cuddled up with James instead of in his pen. Sorry. =( 
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

So. Eating.

A new protocol that needed to be added to his current mission parameters, one that could not be ignored, under any circumstances, if he wanted to protect Sarge.

Once It had left, James fed Sarge, and while he greedily slurped at his gruel, James consumed the last bit of food in his refrigerator (half a jar of peanut butter), put on his jacket, clipped the lead to Sarge’s collar, and once Sarge had done his business in a bush and been praised for it (they were having a good training day today), headed to the nearest grocery store.

An hour later, they were back in the apartment, where Sarge settled down for a nap, and James proceeded to unpack the three bags of groceries he had purchased. It wasn’t anything too fancy; cans of soups, stews and chilis, a loaf of bread, cold cuts, two boxes of cereals, packages of instant macaroni and cheese, ramen, frozen pizzas, butter, mayonnaise, mustard, some pickles, a gallon of milk and a jug of apple-juice. But it was a larger haul than anything he’d previously purchased. He ate a bowl of the chili, then as instructed, set up a new series of alarms in his phone. Once that was complete, he booted up his laptop, settled down on his mattress and began to research the daily caloric requirements for a male of his height and weight, surprised by what he found.

*I would at least double that, probably even triple it, if I were you.* was Its only contribution for the rest of the day. Since he had consumed one of the frozen pizzas, and made himself a sandwich after he’d completed his research, he concluded he had done enough for the day for It to leave him alone.

And, while it pained him to do so, he had to admit It was right. He did feel better. Not instantaneously. Initially the consumption of so much food was actually uncomfortable. His stomach felt bloated and distended, the food within an unfamiliar pressure against his insides. But as he could not remember the last time he had followed such a predictable eating schedule, he concluded that his body needed to become re-accustomed to regular meals.

It was the only negative side-effect, and one that eventually passed. The truth of the matter was, aside from that, he did start to feel better, almost immediately. His hands stopped shaking and the weakness went away. Along with that, his skin started to feel less pinched, his eyes no longer as dry, and he had more energy, almost an abundance of it, the simplest tasks no longer exhausting him. The protrusions of his hip- and collar-bones grew less sharp, his shoulders started to fill out, and he stopped having to use the last hole on his belt to make sure his pants remained secure. It was a slow, gradual progression, that almost mimicked Sarge’s continued growth from day to day. Difficult to
maintain, and not something that came naturally to him; if for some reason he forgot to set his alarms, at the end of the day he would rub at his aching head with shaking hands, and then try to recall his last meal. Inevitably, it would be sometime during the previous day. Cursing himself, he would rise, and quickly eat a bowl of cereal while he heated yet another pot of soup on his small stove. He attempted to be more mindful after that.

A successful addition to his rota of protocols, he had to admit, with definite and quantifiable benefits, to be sure. However, there was one downside to this new daily requirement, one he carefully needed to find a way to circumvent.

Because food was, well, food was expensive. And the monthly stipend he was being provided was certainly not enough, when combined with rent, his gas and electric bills, along with any transportation fees, to cover the cost. He still had his stockpile of cash, but he was hesitant to dip into that too much, as he wanted to make sure he always had enough funds to cover any bills that came from Sarge’s care. There would definitely be more of those soon; future visits to Dr. Patni, so Sarge could start receiving the required vaccinations, as well as eventually be neutered, the cost of his food, of the highest quality as he deserved no less. Not to mention all of the toys, collars and additional supplies James would need for his care, and any unforeseen expenses that could arise. The money would last him for quite some time, and if the funds did start to run low, he supposed he could hack into one of the several other accounts he knew about (although he was hesitant to take that risk), but if he keep dipping into it to pay for his own food, it would decrease at an even faster rate, and that was something he was not quite comfortable with.

As he slowly ran his fingers through Sarge’s thick coat, carefully working out the burr that had somehow gotten tangled in it, James sighed. He supposed he was going to have to start cutting corners.

***

The following Tuesday, after yet another session where McAdams spent the majority of his time complaining about Sarge’s presence, instead of heading straight for the lobby, James did something he hadn’t done since he had moved into his apartment, and entered the cafeteria level on the data pad of the elevator banks. It wasn’t ideal, but he had been granted access, and the food was free. It wasn’t much, but he could eat as much of it as he wanted, and it would remove the cost of two meals from his weekly budget.

It was as brightly lit and falsely cheerful as he remembered, resembling a combination of a casual canteen and social lounge. There was a series of tables with benches at one end, for those who wanted to grab something quick or not be disturbed while they ate, and more intimate groupings of tables and chairs for those who wanted to socialize with their coworkers and friends during meal breaks. All along the walls, there were food stations, with signs indicating what they served; sandwiches and soups, Chinese food and Sushi, quesadillas (whatever the hell those were),
barbeque, smoothies, an endless array of selections, almost too many to choose from. But he needed to eat, and this place had food, so he would find a way to manage.

It would have been easier if almost everyone who was there didn’t turn to stare as he walked in. It wasn’t too crowded at this hour of the afternoon, but there were more than enough people to make it uncomfortable. And this, this he remembered. It had happened each of the previous times he had entered, when still living at the Tower, everyone turning to get their chance to gawk at the freak that had been The Winter Soldier. It made eating there unbearable, and as it was not a positive experience, he learned to avoid it. But he was here now, and if his presence was that much of an imposition, he would let it be their problem, and not his, as long as they let him eat his food in peace.

In the end, he decided on the pasta station, where he obtained a large bowl of spaghetti and meatballs, three large rolls with an equally generous serving of butter, a plain but sizeable side salad, and a bottle of apple juice (he discovered he was actually quite fond of apple juice and tried to drink as much of it as he could), and found an empty bench in one of the corners. After carefully placing his plates down, he unzipped his hoodie and, sliding his hand through the lead he had attached to Sarge’s collar, settled his puppy on the floor with a chew toy that would hopefully keep him entertained, sat down with his back to the wall and commenced eating.

It was not the best meal he had ever had, and it certainly didn’t smell anywhere near as interesting as what his neighbor cooked, but it was warm and filling, and would do. Eventually, as he did nothing more than eat, while occasionally reaching down to scritch Sarge’s ear and call him a “good boy” in reward for his patience, the conversations around him resumed, although he could still sense curious onlookers casting a glance at him, trying and failing to be discrete about it. Let them. As long as they left him alone and allowed him his solitude, they were not his concern.

That solitude lasted all of ten minutes and most of his pasta before he heard It quietly whisper *Incoming, two o’clock.*

“Yeah, I know.” Did It think he was stupid? Yes, he may have not known about the meals, but this, this was something he had always known how to do, long before anyone…Well, for a very long time.

Ten seconds later, a shadow fell across the table accompanied by the sound of a throat clearing.

“James?” a male voice asked. “That is what you go by now, right? James?” James lowered his fork and slowly turned his face toward the source of the voice, to see a tall, sharply muscled and broad shouldered black man with neatly trimmed hair and goatee standing a few feet away. Seeing he had James’ attention, he held up his hands but didn’t step back. “Hey, easy, easy, I’m not here to bother you, I was just wondering if I could sit down for a sec,” he continued, gesturing at the bench on the opposite side of the table from James. James narrowed his eyes, wondering what the hell he wanted,
but the man never faltered nor stepped back. He just held, patient, his posture calm and relaxed, waiting for James’ response. It seemed as if he wasn’t going to go away until he got one, so with a sigh, James eventually nodded, and went back to eating.

“Do you remember me?” he asked as he sat himself down. James barely resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

Samuel Thomas Wilson, former US Airforce Pararescue Airman, former Air National Guard. 6’2, one-hundred-and-ninety-eight pounds, age thirty-six years. Specialist in hand-to-hand combat, and evasive aerial maneuvers, physically capable, but not difficult to overcome, especially once his wings were removed. It had already been achieved once. Given the current circumstances, he could do it again in six-point-nine seconds. Codename Falcon, member of the Avengers, currently serving under the direct command of hi-

“I know who you are,” James said instead of continuing that train of thought.

“Yeah? And who’s that?” he asked. And oh god, he was another one. What was it with everyone in this building? Could they not, just once, leave him alone in peace?

“Sam Wilson.” James put down his fork and reached for a roll. They were the best part of the meal so far, with a chewy texture, warm center and buttery flavor.

“Yep,” Sam said with a smile. “And who’s this?” He glanced under the table.

“My dog.” James swore right then and there that if Sam started to pull the same shit McAdams did every time he saw Sarge, he didn’t care how good the rolls were, he was going to shove the last two down Sam’s throat. Or maybe up his ass. He hadn’t decided yet.

“Does your dog have a name?” And that was interesting, because it had been over five weeks and not once, during all that time, had Captain McAdams once asked him what his dog’s name was, too focused on trying to convince James why adopting him had been a bad decision and a setback to his recovery. It still caused James’ hackles to rise.

“Look, if you’re here to try to convince me to give up my dog, like that other asshole, I’m telling you right now, you can go fuck yourself. I’m not giving him up.”
“Woah, woah, woah!” Sam said, again holding up his hands in a placating gesture. “I’m not here to tell you to get rid of your dog. I actually think it’s a great thing you adopted a dog. Good, solid companions, and the best friend anyone could ask for. And that’s real important for anyone recovering.” James eyed him, trying to find the lie in the truth. Sam seemed sincere enough, but that didn’t mean anything. He was part of the Avengers, part of SHIELD, and that meant he was a liar. And he was also sure anything he said was going to be reported back to McAdams, to give more fuel to his fires. This was a game they were all playing, and he needed to figure out the rules before he was checked and then cast from the board into whatever future they all had planned for him. So, he needed to play nice…Somewhat.

“Sorry,” he muttered and went back to his roll. It was suddenly a lot less appetizing, but he needed the food, so he forced himself to continue.

“It’s all right,” Sam agreed easily enough. “And he really is a beautiful dog. Would it be okay if I pet him?” James wanted to refuse, he really did, but this was a critical period of socialization for Sarge, and James knew he needed to be exposed to as many people and situations as possible to help with his development. So, once again swallowing down his resentment, he nodded. Sam nodded back, and bent over so he could peer under the table, while holding out his hand. “Hey there little guy, how’s it going?” Hearing his voice, Sarge dropped his toy and came close enough to give Sam’s fingers a sniff, before he licked his fingers and rose to his hindlegs, resting his front paws against Sam’s knees. “Well hello, aren’t you a good boy. Handsome too.”

“His name is Sarge.”

“Well hello there Sarge,” Sam went on, as if James wouldn’t notice the slight wrinkling of his forehead, that smoothed itself out a second later, at the mention of the name. James watched him closely as Sam continued to scratch under Sarge’s chin, before turning his attention to his ears, until he finally sat back up, with a smile in James’ direction. “He’s very friendly. And it’s obvious you’re taking very good care of him. He’s crazy about you.” Realizing he no longer had Sam’s attention, Sarge had gone back to his toy, but only so he could pick it up in his mouth and hold it out to James, his signal that he wanted to play.

“He’s a good boy,” James answered truthfully as he took the toy from Sarge’s mouth and placed it upon the floor with the command “down.” He had started to work on training Sarge, simple tasks that would be easy to follow, and now was as good a time as any to reinforce that. When Sarge remained lying on the floor for more than five seconds, James gave his ears a good scratch, and slipped him a treat from his pocket, while saying, “Good boy Sarge, good boy.” Sarge probably wouldn’t stay down for too long, but, well, baby steps. And he had obeyed the command, so the treat was definitely in order.

Sam watched the entire exchange quietly, his head slightly cocked, a smile in his eyes, but an intensity there as well. James decided to ignore it and went back to his food. He needed to get the
“Anyway,” he eventually went on. “I didn’t mean to disturb you, but I just wanted to stop by and check in. See if there’s anything you needed that you aren’t getting.” James found himself looking up at that. “I’m serious.”

“Why?”

At this, Sam sighed. “Look James, I know you don’t believe it, but you do have allies here, people who are looking out for you and only want what’s best for you.”

“Like Captain McAdams?” He knew Sam would hear the challenge in his tone, and he wondered how he was going to try to bullshit his way out of that. But to his surprise, Sam didn’t. Instead he sighed again, this time with an accompanying shake of his head.

“Yeah, look, we all know that guy’s a douche, alright? But sometimes you gotta let the douche and his friends think they’re the ones really calling the shots, so shit can get done in the background, you get me?”

Yeah, James got him. He was to be cannon-fodder, just like always. Shoot the one who could take the damage, put him in cryo when he was no longer needed, and then pull him out and wipe his brain when you once again needed someone else to do your dirty work. Same damn protocol, no matter what country or decade or who claimed to be in charge. And suddenly, no matter how much he knew he needed the free meal, James couldn’t eat another bite.

“Yeah, I don’t blame you man. That stuff’s pretty nasty,” Sam nodded toward his plate. “I’d get the chicken next time if I were you. It’s much better.” James ignored him, and bent over instead so he could pick Sarge up. “Listen James, you haven’t been forgotten, or abandoned, and even though you asked for no contact, Ste-“

“Don’t.”

At the sound of his voice, desperate, bitter, angry, Sarge did something he had never done before; he turned his attention to Sam and actually started to growl. It was a surprisingly deep sound from such a relatively small puppy.
“Woah, woah, woah. Easy, easy, I’m sorry.” Sam was back to holding up his hands. “Look, seriously, I just wanted to check in with you, see how things were going. And to let you know there are people looking out for you, okay?”

“It’s okay Sarge, it’s okay,” James ignored Sam, instead focusing his attention on calming Sarge down. It was so strange, he was usually such an easy-going and curious puppy; James had never seen him react this way. “It’s alright, it’s alright, c’mon, we’re going home now.” It seemed to work, and the growling stopped. A few seconds later, Sarge was back to his normal self; bright eyed and eager to explore the world, and easy to handle as James got him settled in his hoodie. Once that was accomplished, he picked Sarge’s toy from off the floor, straightened and cocked his head, just once, in Sam’s direction.

“Look James, before you go, lemme give you my card,” Sam said as he rose to his feet, reaching into his back pocket. “It’s got my private number on it, and if you need anything, anything at all, just give me a call and I’ll see what I can do.”

When Sam held out the card, James wanted to tell him to shove it up his ass, he really did. But instead he just shook his head, turned around and walked out.

***

Two days later, James was back in the cafeteria, sitting at the same table, Sarge at his feet, chewing on another toy, while once again those around him whispered and stared. But just like Sam, they could all shove it up their asses. If they were using him as cannon-fodder then fine, so be it. But they were damned well going to feed him in the interim.

Thankfully Sam didn’t disturb him this time, or ever again, which was a relief. And of course, the bastard had been right; because the roasted chicken with mashed potatoes ended up being a hell of a lot better than the spaghetti and meatballs.

***

The food issue did not go away, but James found ways to work around that as well. Once again booting up his laptop, he returned to his old stand-by, YouTube, and after a quick search, found there were thousands of channels that provided not only more recipes than he could have ever imagined, but also tips and tricks on how to eat affordably as well as what to do to make the most of the ingredients he could afford. So he learned how to add rice, pastas and beans to his meals to bulk them up, while still increasing his caloric intake. If he made a chili with the chop-meat he purchased, it would last a couple of days. By adding breadcrumbs to the same, he could bake a meatloaf for
dinner, and have enough left over to slice up and make sandwiches out of later. Combining chicken with rice and a cheap packet of frozen mixed vegetables gave him a stew he could then pour into plastic containers and keep in his freezer to eat at a later date. Oatmeal for breakfast was affordable enough, and yes, maybe he splurged a little by using milk, but it filled his belly with warmth and kept him satisfied far longer than cold cereal did. In a pinch, he could even forego meat, which was usually his most expensive item, and with an economical dash of the right seasonings, again by either using rice or some form of pasta, or even cabbage, he could always create something that kept his hunger and the subsequent shakes at bay. He made mistakes, but also had quite a few successes as he continued to try different things and experiment with what he liked. Buying the items he was going to use separately was a lot more affordable that purchasing pre-packaged meals, (although he did still pick up boxes of mac and cheese and ramen noodles; those were good sources of starch, that he could mix with things like hotdogs or even a scrambled egg or two to make a better meal out of them), but it didn’t seem strange to him, purchasing an entire chicken and somehow managing to make enough food to last for two weeks. In fact, it seemed strangely familiar, like this was something he had once done, or known how to do, and was rediscovering out of necessity.

*It was always a necessity. How do you think we survived? Only one source of income and five mouths to feed, little ones to boot. And then later it was medicine, always, always medicine, and that was never cheap.*

It was actually, almost, kind of fun to be faced with this challenge and find ways to overcome it. Granted, it was not as fun as spending time with Sarge, but then few things were. And Sarge spent a lot of his time in the kitchen, curled up in the corner, yipping and barking in response while James explained to him exactly what he was doing.

And then there was Teresa, his neighbor in 3E.

***

She was still his favorite neighbor, the most quiet and unassuming one on the floor. And she continued to smile and nod at him whenever their paths crossed. She had noticed Sarge, of course she had; James never went anywhere without him, and she had started to smile at him too. James wouldn’t have said he liked her, but if pressed he could easily admit that she was pleasant enough.

All of that changed one day in the middle of February, when James came home from his Tuesday session which Captain McAdams, and saw her standing in front of the elevator. There was only one that serviced the entire building, and while it still usually smelled of puke, piss and marijuana, it was also, quite often, out of service. That never mattered to him; he always took the stairs instead. But as he made his way inside, brushing away the few flakes of snow that had gathered in Sage’s fur, he saw her, four large bags of groceries resting at her feet, cursing as she repeatedly pushed the call button, in spite of the Out of Order sign clearly taped to the door.
“It’s not working,” she said, turning at the sound of the door closing behind James to roll her eyes at him. James glanced at the sign and then back at her, because it seemed pretty obvious to him that it wasn’t. “Yes, I know,” she huffed. “But I have all these groceries I have to get into the refrigerator before they go bad, and how the hell am I supposed to get them up all those stupid stairs before they spoil if this stupid elevator isn’t working.” Her words were clipped, and she had a slight accent, with a pleasant lilt that lifted the end of each word. Spanish, he thought, or some variation of it. And James certainly understood the importance of not letting any food go to waste. So without it even having to nudge him, he stepped forward, his hand outstretched.

“I can carry them for you, if you like,” he offered in a quiet voice. “If you think you can make it up the stairs on your own if I do.”

“Oh look, he talks,” she said, but she wasn’t being mean about it. If anything, she seemed more surprised than anything else. “And yes, I can make it up the stairs on my own. I’m not that old, you know. They’re just heavy.”

“I never said you were,” James made sure to clarify, already bending over to take three of the bags into his left hand, and the remaining one in his right.

“Be careful,” she warned him. “There are eggs in that one.”

“Okay,” he agreed. And then because he knew it would tell him to say it if he didn’t, he tilted his head toward the stairs and said, “Ladies first.”

It took a lot longer than it would if it had just been him and Sarge on their own. But his puppy was patient, happiest as he always was when cradled between the warmth of James’ hoodie and chest, and eventually they made it all the way up three flights of stairs and to her door.

“Thank you,” she said, as she reached into her purse, a big purple thing she had to dig through for several moments before she located her keys. Once she found them, she turned to give both him and Sarge her by-now familiar smile. But instead of her usual nod, this time she reached out with her free hand to scratch at Sarge’s ear, without asking his permission. That was a big no-no, at least from what James had come to understand, but Sarge didn’t seem to mind, his tongue lolling out as he panted happily at her.

“Such a nice little perrito,” she went on, as she continued to scratch. “It’s good to see you finally have some company.”
James didn’t quite know how to respond to that, so instead he said the first thing that came to his mind.

“You cook a lot.”

“What?” she asked, lowering her hand to peer up at him.

“You cook a lot,” he repeated. “I smell it sometimes. It’s nice. I like it.”

“Oh do you?” She was grinning again. He liked the way it made her look.

“But you live alone, and you’re always cooking.” He glanced down at the bags at their feet. “And you buy a lot of groceries.”

Her smile didn’t exactly fade, but it grew heavy, weighted, as if something were pulling it down.

“I do it for my husband,” she eventually said.

“You’re married?”

“Yes, forty-two years.”

“I’ve never seen your husband.” This was now officially the longest conversation he’d had with anyone aside from Sarge or Tara.

“He doesn’t live here anymore,” she said with a heavy sigh. “He lives at Right at Home over on Broad Street. He has dementia, and it got so bad I couldn’t take care of him by myself anymore. He doesn’t remember much, but he still loves to eat my food, so I cook for him, and try to bring him something to eat almost every day.”

“Oh.” Was all James could say. How was he supposed to respond to something like that? “I’m
“It’s not your fault,” she told him gently. “And I manage. Sometimes that’s all we can do, right?”

“Yes.” He certainly knew how sometimes just managing was all you could do.

“Anyway, do you have a name, young man?” she asked.

“James.”

“It’s very nice to finally meet you James. My name is Teresa. Thank you for all of your help today.” She nodded at the bags of groceries. “And if you like the way my cooking smells, I’ll make you something a little special to thank you for carrying my groceries up all those stairs.”

“You don’t have to.” He hadn’t done what he did expecting anything in exchange. It had just seemed like the right thing to do at the time.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she scolded, but her voice was again gentle. “A good deed deserves a reward. And I like to cook, and you look like you could use a little fattening up.”

“I’m not *that* skinny,” he grumbled, digging into his pocket for his own keys.

“Not anymore you’re not,” she laughed at him. “But every woman likes a man with a little meat on his bones.” Then she unlocked her own door, picked up her groceries and walked inside, just as Sarge yipped in agreement.

The traitor.

***

The next afternoon, just as James returned from his third walk of the day with Sarge (potty-training, it was still a thing they were working on), there was a knock on his door. James jerked in surprise, because no one had ever, not once since he had started living here, knocked on his door. That didn’t
seem to matter to Sarge though, because he dashed back to the door and started barking.

“Sarge, heel,” James said. This time Sarge complied, and as soon as he sat, James clicked the clicker he had started carrying to reinforce the behavior he wanted, slipping Sarge a treat and giving him a pat on the head and a “Good boy” (because some aspects of their training were definitely going better than convincing Sarge he needed to “go” outside, and he knew he had to encourage the results he wanted with positive reinforcement) when the knock came again. “Stay,” James urged this time, giving another click and a second treat, before he peered through the murky peephole to see Teresa standing in the hallway, a tinfoil covered bowl held in her hands.

“Hello Teresa,” he said as he opened the door, and then quickly dropped down to grab Sarge’s collar before he escaped into the hallway. When he looked up, she was laughing at the two of them.

“He’s definitely a handful that one, isn’t he?”

“She’s still a puppy,” James admitted. “And I just started on his training.” But even he could admit there was something a little bit like fondness in his voice.

“Yes well, these things take time after all,” Teresa agreed. “And it’s obvious he’s just as crazy about you.” When James looked down, Sarge was indeed looking up at him, panting happily, even if he had planted his butt on the top of James’ foot.

“Silly dog,” he murmured. Sarge yipped in response. “Is there something I can help you with Teresa?” James turned his attention back to her.

“No,” she shook her head. “I just wanted to give you this, as thanks for yesterday.” She held out the bowl.

“I told you that was not necessary.”

“I know you did. But I told you I was going to do it anyway. Now hurry up and eat it while it’s still hot and let me know what you think.” She shoved the bowl at him, forcing him to catch it in his hands, and then turned around and went back into her apartment, leaving James standing there, holding onto a warm bowl of soup, while a twenty-five-pound dog sat on his foot.

***
Fifteen minutes later, after he had licked his bowl clean, it was now James’ turn to knock on Teresa’s door, Sarge under one arm, and her washed dish in his free hand.

“What was that?” he asked as soon as she opened her door.

“Did you like it?” she returned with a smile.

“It was the best thing I’ve ever eaten,” he admitted.

“I’m glad.” She was back to laughing at him. “And it’s called pozole.”

“Pozole?” he repeated the word carefully, trying to match her pronunciation.

“Yes. It’s a pork and hominy stew. Very popular in Mexico.”

“Can you teach me how to make it?” he asked.

“James.” Her voice, along with her eyes, were suddenly very sharp. “You’re a very nice young man, and a good, quiet neighbor. But you don’t simply ask someone to give you their family’s secret recipe.”

Oh. James couldn’t hide his disappointment. He supposed she was correct, and if he searched he was certain he could find the recipe on YouTube somewhere. What he wasn’t so certain about was whether it would be as good.

“Oh,” he said it aloud this time. “I apologize.” He took a step back, and turned towards his apartment.

“Now just you wait a minute,” she told him. When he looked back, she had cocked her hip and was leaning against the doorframe. “How about I make you a deal?”
“Yes?”

“If you help me carry my groceries up all those stairs, because that stupid elevator never seems to be working anymore, in exchange I’ll make you something to eat. How does that sound?”

“Delicious,” James blurted before he could stop himself. This caused her to laugh.

“Good,” she nodded and then stepped away from the door. “Now come inside, I have a little extra left, and you’re still too skinny. And the next episode of Alma de la Tigra is about to come on. We can watch it together while you eat.”

“Alma de la Tigra?” he asked, feeling his brow furrow.

“My telenovela,” she told him, with a wave of her hand.

“Telenovela?” He knew what the word meant, or thought he did. But it just a word in his brain at this point, and he could not understand why she seemed so passionate about it.

“It comes on every day at nine-thirty. And today, we’re finally supposed to find out which of those bastard twins is the real father of Amelia’s baby,” she continued explaining as she guided him into her living room.

“And this is important?”

“It is very important. We have been waiting weeks to find out who the father is!” she insisted, pointing at her couch.

“Okay…”

“Don’t worry, you’ll see,” she told him as she turned toward her kitchen. “Let me just get you another bowl of pozole, and then I’ll explain everything to you while we watch.”

Deciding to take her word for it, James sat. Because no matter what Captain McAdams, or even It
seemed to think, he was not *that* stupid.

***

Later that night, as he lay in bed curled around Sarge, his belly warm and full of pork and hominy, and curious about what Filipe would do next since he was *not* the father of Amelia’s baby, once his eyes finally closed, there came the subtle waft that always tickled his nose, cigarette smoke and now something else, something he hadn’t smelt before, a little bit like vetiver and a little bit like musk, before he heard Its voice.

*Told ya she was a nice old lady.*

***

And so began a new pattern in his life. Once or twice a week, he would help Teresa carry her groceries up the stairs, and once or twice a week she would reward his efforts with food, as long as he agreed to watch her telenovelas with her. Delicious, filling, home-cooked meals that were unlike anything he had ever tried, and so much better than his own efforts, even though those were getting better.

But James also had to admit that the telenovelas were just as good. There was always someone coming up with a crazy scheme to take over a ranch, steal the family’s fortune, or hide the true identity of the parentage of an always secret baby. They were over the top, but also strangely addicting, and James found himself looking forward to every episode, as well as Teresa’s sharp commentary in regards to the actions of everyone on screen.

She was a bit demanding, but not annoyingly so, and he’d certainly dealt with much worst in the past. And besides, none of his previous handlers had ever fed him after he’d performed whatever tasks they demanded of him, while clicking her teeth as whatever it was Umberto had gotten up to on that day’s episode.

After that first time, she never delivered another bowl of food to him again. Instead, she insisted he follow her into her apartment, and sit down on her couch in front of the television so they could eat together and watch her shows. Her apartment was larger than his, a one bedroom instead of just a studio, but it was more cluttered, filled with lots of little knick-knacks and the bric-a-bracs gathered over the course of a life. But he thought it suited her, and she never complained that he always brought Sarge along with him when he joined her. In fact, she seemed to find their dynamic amusing, always smiling indulgently every time James tried to reinforce whatever new command he had introduced into their repertoire. She even had a pet of her own, a turtle she’d named Chico, who had
free run of the apartment. James thought it was the strangest thing to keep as a pet, but Sarge was fascinated by him, following him from room to room whenever they were there. (Or at least he did until one day he got too close, or was too annoying, and in retaliation, Chico bit his nose. Sarge had squealed in pain, shaking his head from side to side, while Chico held on. Thankfully no blood had been drawn, even if James did want to fling that damned turtle out the nearest window, while Teresa laughed as if it was the funniest thing she’d ever seen. After that, whenever they were in her apartment, Sarge remained curled up beneath James’ legs, and Chico looked very smug.)

But overall, Teresa was pleasant enough company, he supposed, even if he did have very little to base his comparison on. And she never pressed too hard or tried to invade his privacy.

At one point, when she asked if he had any family, and all James had been able to do was respond with a quiet, “No,” she left it at that. But she didn’t seem to want to talk about her own history either, aside from occasionally mentioning something about her husband Pedro. James supposed she had secrets of her own, mistakes or burdens she was unwilling to reveal. That was fine; he could certainly understand that, and thus the desire each of them had for their own privacy was something they could share.

Instead, they talked about other things during the commercials, while sharing meals; usually about the comings and goings of their neighbors. She may have been relatively quiet, but that did not mean she was unobservant or hadn’t drawn conclusions of her own.

“They were fighting in 3B again last night.”

“Barry and Lucinda, those two are always fighting,” she said as she returned from the kitchen, where she had deposited their bowls in the sink.

“He was drunk again.”

“He’s an alcoholic.”

“I don’t know why she doesn’t just move in with her sister out in Long Island.”

“That because she’s no better off than Lucinda. Divorced, I think, but with three kids of her own, in an even smaller apartment. It wouldn’t work.”
“She could move somewhere else.”

“Where? She doesn’t have a job, and rent in this city is already too high as it is. She couldn’t afford it.” There was nothing James could say about that; he had discovered the truth of that himself.

“Do you think he hits her?” he wondered aloud, remembering somehow, from somewhere, that sometimes there were things everybody knew, but no one, or well, almost no one, ever said anything about.

“I don’t think so,” Teresa shook her head as she pulled a pillow onto her lap. “I haven’t heard anything like that. But it doesn’t take a fist for it to be abuse.”

That too was also true, and he could not help but wonder which was worse, and if he would even be able to tell anymore.

It wasn’t all depressing though. Teresa liked to ask questions about Sarge, which he was always more than happy to answer. And she did love to chat about her telenovelas.

It got to the point where they even exchanged cell phone numbers, hers one of the few now stored in his non-SHIELD issued phone, so she could text him whenever she was returning from the store with a bag of groceries in order for him to meet her in the lobby.

She was happy to share the occasional meal with him, as long as he agreed to sit with her and watch television, and James was more than happy to let her. It was certainly a fair exchange in his opinion. Plus, he discovered a few weeks after it had all started, the company was actually pleasant. Even if it was only twice a week, there was something comforting in knowing there was someone he was going to have a conversation with. It felt…familiar. Not like a memory, per se, but more like an old coat or a favorite sweater, rediscovered after far too long, but still just as comfortable as it had ever been. It had been right; Teresa was a nice lady.

Yet he couldn’t help but sometimes wonder if he needed to start worrying. Because there was company and conversation now, and he was doing his best to eat as regularly as possible (even if he still did need the reminders on his phone from time to time). And of course there was Sarge, the catalyst for it all, the most vital and important thing in his life now.

But sometimes, every now and then, especially late at night when things were quiet and Sarge was sleeping with his paws and head draped across James’ chest, if he lay very, very still, and turned his
attention inward, he thought the shadows where It usually lay in wait had somehow found a way to slink into his body, all the way to his heart, where they nested and curled and slithered and slid, weighing it down and slowing his pulse. Heavy and thick, and growing more so every day.

And Its voice, always Its voice, never as far away as it once had been, as it still should be, patiently waiting for the exact instant when his eyes could no longer remain open, before It whispered hot and heavy and ever-so-greedy in his ear.

*It won't be too much longer now honey. Not quite yet, but soon. Very, very soon.* *The pause of a trigger being cocked, a round being loaded into a chamber, target acquired, time to terminate.* *And I can hardly wait.*

Chapter End Notes

As an FYI, in the comments in response to yesterday's chapter, I received a few questions asking me what type of dog Sarge is. I'm not saying anything, because it is a bit of a plot point, that does actually get revealed in tomorrow's chapter. (My artist had a GREAT idea for that.) But once I do post tomorrow's chapter, I'll include a bunch of links to my blog so anyone who is curious can see exactly what type of dog Sarge is.

Teeny tiny spoiler - Bucky is VERY pleased when he finds out. =)

And as always, thank you everyone for the wonderful comments. You are all the ABSOLUTE BEST.
And through it all, always there was Sarge. Sarge, Sarge, Sarge, Sarge.

While there were definitely other things now demanding James’ time and attention, most of James’ focus was on Sarge. Sarge not only needed, but demanded it. And in reality, he was not a burden. A complication and monetary cost, certainly, but somewhere, somewhere, where both the shadows lay, and his own heart creaked, there was the resounding agreement that Sarge was absolutely worth it.

He seemed to be doing well, thriving from what James was able to determine. Walking now, and comfortable, if somewhat clumsy with his leash. Curious about the world around him, and eager to explore. And James, who understood confinement, perhaps more than anyone else ever could, was more than happy to allow him as many opportunities as possible to explore the world, while finding he was rediscovering it himself.

That did not mean he grew careless about it. He kept up his research, finding more and more things to learn, signs that were indicators of a healthy, happy puppy, and signals that would let him know there was a problem requiring his attention. Proper training would mitigate most of those, and he had already started doing that, based on the recommendations he found online. So simple, direct commands, easy to follow, and always rewarded when complied with. Patience, when Sarge initially resisted his leash, and plenty of treats and praise when he started to follow along. “Good boy, Sarge,” and a firm, but not harsh, “No,” always followed by a pause or a cessation of whatever they were doing, were probably the most common words he said during those early weeks. He was not supposed to frighten or hurt, but redirect, and then reward the good. An effective means of obtaining the desired behavior, and James couldn’t help but wonder why people didn’t do this more with each other, instead of turning to violence, pain, punishment.

Then again, people were stupid, and nowhere near as smart as dogs.

James found he truly enjoyed the role of being Sarge’s mother, caretaker, littermate and companion. Time consuming yes, but late at night, or during the afternoon, while James sat and read, with Sarge curled up in his lap, or nudging at his hand because he wanted to play, definitely, definitely worth it.

But he was still growing at a remarkable rate, so much so James could actually note the difference with each passing day. And if he noticed it, in such small yet steady increments, then others certainly could, especially when they hadn’t seen him in a while.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Barnes. It’s nice to see you again,” Dr. Patni said, five weeks after their initial encounter, when James brought Sarge back for a check-up and his first round of shots. She looked
“Yes,” James said, straightening with Sarge in his arms.

“She paused, with her hand raised but not within reach of Sarge. “Is he good with people?”

“Yes,” James was proud to admit.

“So you’ve been working on getting him socialized?” She held her hand out so Sarge could sniff her fingers, before she started to scratch his ears. He yipped happily at her attentions, his tongue lolling out in pleasure as he panted agreeably.

“Yes,” James said yet again, nodding this time. “I’ve read that it’s crucial to expose him to a variety of stimulus during this stage of his development, including other people, so we have been working on that.”

“Well, from what I can see so far, and what Judy said from her initial assessment, it looks like you’ve been doing a good job. But let’s get a better look, just to be sure.”

The next twenty minutes were spent with Dr. Patni giving Sarge a very gentle, but thorough examination. She checked his gums, and his fur, complementing James on its condition, double checked to make sure he was properly hydrated, looked at his ears and the state of his eyes, palpated his abdomen and limbs, and even put him on the floor to watch him walk so she could observe his gait, all while asking pertinent questions.

“He’s been weaned?”

“Yes. He’s still eating the gruel, but he seems to have taken to it easily enough.”
“And you’ve been feeding him a high quality brand like we discussed at your first visit?”

“He eats better than me.” She laughed at his response.

“Peeing and pooping on his own?”

“Yes.”

“Any diarrhea?” This she asked while collecting a stool sample.

“No.”

“Have you started training him to go outside yet?”

“Yes.”

“And…”

“We’re working on it.”

“It takes time and patience,” another laugh, “he’ll figure it out eventually as long as you’re consistent.”

“Enzymatic cleaner helps.”

“It most certainly does.”

By and large, once the exam was concluded, she was pleased with what she had seen. And Sarge bore it well enough, not even complaining when she injected him with his first round of vaccinations, smiling again when James rewarded Sarge’s patience with a “Good Boy, Sarge,” and a small treat.
“You’ve already started training him,” she nodded her approval. “Good.”

“He’s very smart,” James admitted. But then, as if to prove him wrong, Sarge rose to his feet and tried to jump from the table, James managing to catch him just in time. “But, uh, we’re still working on it,” he added as Sarge started to lick his beard. *Bleh.*

“It’s a life-long practice,” she agreed. Her demeanor shifted then, not becoming unpleasant, but definitely more serious than it had been previously. “So, just a few more things, and then we’ll get you checked out and on your way.

“First off Mr. Barnes, Sarge is in excellent condition for a puppy his age. You really have done an amazing job with his care.”

“Thank you.” James watched her warily, because he was certain he could hear a *but* coming.

“But he’s seven weeks old now and since he’s been properly weaned, that means he is old enough that if you’ve decided you don’t want to keep him, he could be adopted out to someone else.”

“You want me to give up my dog?” She was suddenly a lot less likeable than she’d been five minutes ago.

“No, no, no Mr. Barnes,” she made sure to assure him. “I just wanted to make sure you were sure, that’s all. When we first met, you told me you didn’t have any experience with dogs, so I just wanted to make sure you no longer had any doubts.”

“He’s my dog.” James may have lifted Sarge up to cradle him against his chest by that point.

“Yes, he most certainly is,” Dr. Patni was back to smiling. “So now comes the next thing we need to discuss. From everything I can see, it looks as if Sarge is going to be a very big dog. And they can a little bit harder to handle sometimes, not because they’re bad dogs – *there is no such thing as a bad dog, Mr. Barnes, just bad owners* – but because of their size. So you need to make sure you get him the proper training. He’s a bit young for it, but there are puppy training classes I can recommend. What also might be helpful-“
“Yes?”

“Is if we do a DNA test.”

“Why?”

“It’ll tell us what his breed is. He may just be a mutt, or maybe not. Certain breeds have been bred for specific traits. It’ll not only give you a better idea of what to expect in terms of his size, but what behaviors he’ll be prone to, so you’ll know what you need to work on. It’ll also give us a better idea if there are any conditions we have to keep an eye out for.”

“Will it hurt him?” James had been through tests, lots and lots and lots of tests, and by and large, they were all painful, agonizing, if truth be told. Sometimes, when It was feeling generous, and whispering all of Its opinions and veiled hints of knowledge, he thought his entire life may have been nothing more than one long agonizing test.

Or at least he had, until he had found Sarge.

Or Sarge found him.

But it might help to know, if everything Dr. Patni had told him so far was true.

“No, not at all,” she assured him. “It’s just a cheek swab, and we’ll have the results back by the time you bring him in for his next round of vaccinations.”

“All right,” he agreed. She nodded her approval.

“Give me just a second then. I’ll go get a kit and be right back, so we can find out just how big your Sarge is going to get.”

***

“Seventy-five percent Caucasian Shepherd and twenty-five percent Labrador Retriever,” he was told
two weeks later when he brought Sarge back for his next round of shots.

“What does that mean?”

“That means, Mr. Barnes, that Sarge is going to be a very, very, very big dog. Have you given any more thought to those training classes we discussed?”

***

She was not wrong. Later that night, after Sarge had been walked and was settled at his feet, gnawing on his current favorite chew toy, James booted up his computer, forewent YouTube this time, and instead typed Caucasian Shepherd into the Google search bar.

The results surprised him.

After their discussion two weeks prior, James had done research on different dog breeds. Given his coloring, he thought it possible Sarge was part German Shepherd, or even St. Bernard from the denseness of his coat. Perhaps Border Collie, given how strong Sarge was at his age.

He had never once thought Caucasian Shepherd, or even heard of the breed before. But apparently, that’s what his dog was, as well as part Lab. And they were big dogs. Big, big, BIG dogs.

From what he read, when fully grown, Sarge could easily reach over two and a half feet at his withers, and end up weighing more than two-hundred pounds. A working dog from the Russian mountains, they had been bred to protect flocks against wolves, and holy shit, bears. Extremely intelligent, they could be a bit on aggressive side, but Dr. Patni had assured him that was not always the case.

“I don’t have much, if any, experience with them really, they’re not very common here in America. But don’t forget he’s also part Lab, and from what I’ve seen, he seems to mostly have inherited their temperament. Both breeds are known for being smart, but Labs are very friendly dogs, curious and eager to please. But he’s a working dog, on both sides, so you’re definitely going to want to start working with a good trainer to help you learn how to handle him. Because he’s going to need to be kept busy, or else he could start developing some destructive behaviors, and with a dog his size, believe me, you’re not going to want that.”
As he re-ran Dr. Patni’s words over and over in his head, James once again looked down at Sarge, still happily gnawing at his toy. Larger, larger than almost any other dog, extremely intelligent, extremely protective of its pack and people, dangerous if provoked, fiercely protective if it sensed a threat to one of its own. But curious, gentle when content, and absolutely devoted to the ones it loved.

*Huh. Remind you of anybody you know?*

James ignored It. He ignored all of it. Because the only thing he could focus on was the smile he felt spreading across his own face. Sharp and wide, and oh so very pleased.

“You’re gonna be a big-assed mother-fucker Sarge!” he crowed. And then he laughed and laughed and laughed while Sarge, deciding the sound needed to be explored, climbed on top of his chest and started to lick his beard.

Bleh.

***

He still needed to find a trainer though, and one with methods he approved. Over the course of his research, he discovered there were some that considered things like choke collars, whaps, forcefully exerting dominance, and using a locked-cage as an acceptable punishment, and just no.

No, no, nonoNO.

He would never make Sarge experience any of that. He was just a puppy after all, a dog who had needed a home, that James had been lucky enough to find. But he was going to get big, and no matter how much research he conducted, James knew this was not something he could achieve without assistance.

He said as much to Tara, the next time he was at Petco to purchase yet another bag of food, more chew toys, and an even larger collar (still pink).

“Caucasian Shepherd?” she asked, after she had finally given Sarge back to him.
“Caucasian Shepherd,” he nodded.

“Them’s big dogs,” she said as she looked up from her phone, where she had apparently conducted her own quick search. “But beautiful.”

“He already is.”

“Of course he is,” she laughed. He had no idea why all the women he knew seemed to laugh at him when he spoke about his dog. James resisted the urge to roll his eyes at her. The laughter was nice after all, and so much better than the way Captain McAdams constantly snapped and berated him and all his life’s decisions.

“I need to enroll him in a puppy training class though,” he sighed. “I haven’t found one yet. At least, not a good one.” When he glanced back at her, she had stopped laughing, but was grinning at him instead.

“Well, Sarge’s person, once again you have come to just the right place. We offer training classes of our own, right downstairs, and Andy’s a great trainer. In fact, he should be just wrapping up one of his adult dog training classes right now. Let me introduce the two of you. He’s great, you’ll like him. Now follow me.” With that, Tara turned on her heel, and walked away, motioning with her hand for him to follow.

***

“Is that a Caucasian Shepherd?” was the first thing Andrew Taylor asked him, after the class he’d been instructing wrapped up and Tara introduced him as “Sarge and Sarge’s person, he’s interested in your puppy training classes,” before an announcement over the store intercom informed all employees there was a clean-up in aisle six that needed to be taken care of right away.

“Yes,” James said as he stood there in the large circular area, whose floor was covered in green astro-turf. “Mostly. He’s part Lab too, at least from what the test said.”

Andy continued to stare at Sarge for a second, before he looked up to meet James’ gaze. He was a Caucasian male, five-foot-eleven, greying light brown hair, approximate age somewhere between fifty-two and fifty-eight. Physically fit, experience unknown. Threat level, negligible, James could eliminate him in less than –
“Anyway,” Andy continued, holding out his hand for James to shake. “My name is Andrew Taylor, but you can call me Andy. Tara said you’re interested in enrolling Sarge in a training class?” James didn’t reach for his hand; he was using both of them to keep Sarge against his chest. Even if he hadn’t, he wouldn’t have returned the gesture anyway. He did not like personal contact with anyone he didn’t know. But Andy didn’t seem to be offended by it. He merely lowered his hand and took a step back, his posture open and relaxed, but confident.

“Yes, but,” James straightened his shoulders, because he needed to be absolutely clear on this point. “Sarge is a good dog, and I am not interested in any class that thinks I need to hurt or punish him to make him do what I want.”

“Of course he’s a good dog,” Andy agreed immediately, before straightening his own shoulders. “All dogs are good dogs. If they aren’t, that’s not their fault, it’s their owners. And let me make one thing perfectly clear before we go any further, Sarge’s person – Look, do you have a name?”

“James.”

“James,” Andy nodded. “I want to make one thing perfectly clear. I don’t use those kind of techniques in my class, although I know there are others out there that do. If you do, what you end up with is a dog that’s afraid, and that’s not something anyone wants. You want your dog to want to work with you, not be afraid of the repercussions if he doesn’t understand what he’s done wrong. Positive reinforcement of good behavior, and ignoring, not punishing Sarge if he does something wrong. It’s not easy, and it’s going to take a lot of time and patience, but do you think that’s something that would work for the two of you?”

“Yes,” James breathed out, feeling any tension in his shoulders slowly start to slip away.

“Good,” Andy nodded. “So, let’s talk for a bit, to get to know each other a little better and you can ask me any questions you like.”

The next fifteen minutes were spent in a mutual interview. James really didn’t have many questions at that point, but Andy seemed to have plenty for him.

“How old is Sarge?”
“Nine weeks.”

“And he’s up to date on his vaccinations?”

“He had his second round yesterday.”

While Andy asked his questions, he requested James put Sarge on the floor so he could observe his behavior, watching as James let Sarge explore the area, while James held on to his lead.

“He’s already used to a leash, that’s good,” Andy commented.

“I started him a few weeks ago,” James nodded. “He’s mostly cooperative, but, well-“ Sarge had started pulling on his lead, drawn to the brightly colored balls he had just noticed in the corner. “He’s curious, and he likes to play.”

“He’s a puppy, that’s what they do.”

“Sarge, heel,” James said instead of turning back to Andy, clicking the clicker in his pocket when Sarge complied, and then stepping forward to scratch his ear and slip him a treat. “Good boy, Sarge.”

“You’ve already started to train him with a clicker,” Andy sounded impressed.

“The research I read said it was a good idea to get him started as young as possible,” James admitted, giving Sarge one last pat.

“And how’s he taken to it?”

“So far, so good, but we’re working on it,” James said as Sarge once again started to tug on his lead.

“Do it again. And don’t go up to him. Show him the treat and let him come to you,” Andy instructed, so James did. Once Sarge realized he needed to go to James for the treat, he ambled back over, sat on his haunches, and pawed at James’ knee. “What else does he respond to?”
“Sit, stop and stay.”

“You’ve done a good job so far, considering his age,” Andy knelt down and held out his hand so Sarge could sniff it. “And he seems very, very friendly.”

“He’s a good dog,” James said yet again, watching as Sarge and Andy got to know each other. Once that was done, Sarge did what he usually did when they were out and about and James wasn’t walking anywhere. “But he likes to sit on my foot.” This time Andy laughed, giving Sarge’s scruff one last ruffle before he rose to his feet.

“So, James,” he said as he dusted his hands off on his pants. “I definitely like what I’ve seen so far. Sarge seems alert and curious, not fearful, and you handle him well. It’s obvious he trusts you, which is a very good start. But, like you said, he’s going to be a big dog, so you’re definitely going to want to make sure he’s well-trained. In case you were wondering, I’m a certified trainer, who has over twenty-five years of experience, and while I’ve never worked with a Caucasian Shepherd, I have worked with plenty of big, working breed dogs, including Rottweilers, German Shepherds, Newfoundlands, Dobermans and Pitbulls, so I can definitely help you with Sarge. I run a puppy training class twice a week in the evenings. It’s going to be a lot of work, but in the end it’s definitely worth it. What do you think? Is it something you and Sarge would be interested in?”

***

It was a lot of work, and an additional expense. But every Monday and Wednesday evening, without fail, that was where James and Sarge spent an hour of their night. It wasn’t just the classes; there were handouts and charts, and progress reports James needed to fill out, as well as noticing and commenting on any issues that might develop. And the learning didn’t just stop because he and Sarge were not in class. It was constant positive reinforcement James needed to be consistent with, but since he had already started to train Sarge long before their first class, James found that easy enough to do.

And, well, James may have been biased, but not only was Sarge a very good dog, but he was also the smartest in the class. He took to the commands readily enough, and was always quick to figure out what it was James wanted him to do. That wasn’t to say he was perfect; he was still a puppy after all and he definitely enjoyed the chance to play with his other puppy friends once the class was over. But he was by far the most well-behaved dog in the class.

Especially when compared to Franklin, an annoying little Chihuahua that barked and yipped and bit at the ankles of anyone foolish enough to get too close, that James was sorely tempted to boot across the floor every time he attempted to come near Sarge. Or, more accurately, his owner.
“Lisa,” Andy called out for what must have been the fifth time that class alone. “I get that whatever your friend just texted you is probably a lot more interesting than what’s going on right now, but you need to keep an eye on Franklin and pay attention to what he’s doing.” Franklin had just approached Sarge yet again, teeth bared, lunging forward for a bite. And it seemed as if even Sarge had had enough, because this time he retaliated.

“Jesus! Watch your dog!” Lisa snapped at him, snatching Franklin up from the floor.

“Actually Lisa, it was Franklin who was the aggressor,” Andy corrected, “which you would have noticed if you had actually been paying attention.”

“He tried to bite Frankie!”

“Actually, Sarge warned him to back off, and when Franklin didn’t listen, he nipped him, which is an appropriate response for a dog. You need to take Franklin and give him a two-minute time out, until he calms down. Once he does, tell him he’s a good boy and then bring him back to the group. And you’re lucky it was Sarge, and not one of the other dogs. Even though he’s big, he’s got good mouth control. If Franklin ever does that to another big dog, it’ll be a lot worse.” It was something Andy had been specifically helping James work on. Given his size, and what Sarge’s breed was known for, it was imperative Sarge learn how to control himself. It wouldn’t matter if Sarge bit James; his left arm was made of metal, and the rest of his body modified by a serum that would heal almost any wound, so he could easily brush it off. But someone else wouldn’t be able to. And James had read that bites from large dogs was often cause enough for them to be removed from their owners and actually put down. James had nearly panicked when he read that, and approached Andy about it prior to the start of their next training class. But to James’ surprise (and approval), Andy had actually done research on Caucasian Shepherds on his own, and was prepared to provide assistance to help James and Sarge work on the issue, before it actually became a problem. Andy had instructed James to start holding a treat in his closed fist, which he was to release only if Sarge mouthed gently at his hand with no pressure from his teeth. It had taken a little bit of time for Sarge to grasp what he was being asked to do, but then again Sarge was a very smart dog, and quickly figured it out and was slowly, but steadily, learning to be very gentle with his mouth.

“Show off,” Lisa hissed over her shoulder as she carried Franklin over to the area in the corner set aside for when a dog had become over-stimulated.

“How’s Sarge doing, James? He all right?” Andy asked, coming over.

“He’s fine,” James said, as he ruffled Sarge’s ruff. James had seen what was happening, and as soon as Sarge lunged, he’d called out “Sarge, heel,” and clicked his clicker. Sarge, unlike Franklin,
immediately obeyed, even if he didn’t seem too happy about it, so now James was rewarding him with the praise he deserved. “I don’t think he likes Franklin though.”

“Yeah well, Franklin’s not the problem.” Andy bent forward to give Sarge a scratch of his own. “Good boy, Sarge. Now, c’mon, let’s continue.”

So training, lots and lots and lots of it. But Sarge took to it well, and seemed to enjoy it. It got to the point where James was confident enough in their abilities, and after Sarge’s latest round of vaccinations, with Andy’s agreement, James decided it was time to increase the level of Sarge’s socialization, and started bringing him to the various dog runs in the parks throughout the city.

Except, for some reason, none of the other owners were willing to let their dogs play with Sarge. James couldn’t understand it. Yes, he was big for a puppy of his age, but he was very friendly, and even Andy had to admit, exceptionally well behaved. Yet whenever he showed up, the other owners cast suspicious glances in their direction, called to their dogs, and led them away. And even though Sarge was happy to run through the grass and stretch his ever-growing legs, while James tossed his ball or a frisbee for him to play with, he seemed sad that none of the other doggies wanted to play with him.

It bothered and perplexed him, because James didn’t know what he was doing wrong. Even Google and YouTube failed him when he searched for reasons why. Why wouldn’t they let their dogs play with Sarge? It made so sense.

Until one day, he got his answer, with all the brutality of a slap to his face.

***

He was sitting on a bench in Gramercy Park, Sarge gnawing on a stick James found for him, when a woman in a white coat, carrying her white dog in an even whiter purse, came up to him and cleared her throat.

“You know, I get that companion animals are important,” she said to him in a nasally voice when he looked up at her. “And sometimes the only thing a person has. But you need to stop being so selfish.”

“Excuse me?”
“If you can’t even afford a place to live, then you shouldn’t have a dog. You need to bring him to a shelter so he can have a good home, and work on getting your life together before you ruin that dog’s. You’re disgusting and should probably be arrested for animal cruelty.”

“Excuse me?” he asked again, even louder this time. But she had already turned and was stomping away, her head held high, and her little white dog, in its little white purse, bouncing at her side.

*Told ya you looked like a bum.*

***

“Do I look like a homeless person?”

“What?” Tara looked surprised by the question when he approached her.

“Do I look like a homeless person?” he repeated, just as Sarge, recognizing he was close to one of his favorite people, started to wiggle against James’ chest. But this time, she didn’t reach for him immediately like she always did. She actually took half a step back, before she caught herself and stopped.

“Please…” he implored her, gentling his tone. “I need to know the truth, and you’ve always been very helpful. Do I look like I’m homeless?”

“Um.” She scrunched up her face, causing both her nose and eyes to crinkle. But the expression didn’t look comfortable. “Maybe? Kinda?”

“Is that why you thought I was trying to give Sarge away the first time I came in here? Because you thought I was homeless?”

Her shoulders started to rise, as if she was attempting to hide herself, and now she was biting her lip as well. But she did eventually nod, before she took a deep breath and lowered her shoulders.

“I mean I know you’re not, now,” she went on quickly. “And you’re a really nice person, and you take great care of Sarge. Nobody loves their dog as much as you do. But maybe at first…I did?” And
now her voice was squeaking.

“Why?”

“What do you mean why?”

“Why did you think I was homeless?”

“Oh god,” she muttered to herself.

“Please,” he begged again, clutching Sarge tighter against his chest. Sarge, seeming to sense something was wrong, that James was upset, immediately began to lick his chin.

“Because…because with the beard and the hair…and your clothes,” she waved a nervous hand in his general direction, “You’re, you’re kinda…Scruffy?”

*Told you.*

“Oh,” James said with a blink.

“I’m sorry?” She seemed sincere, even if it did sound like she was asking a question.

“Your hair,” he said, nodding at her head. “It’s very nice. What do you do?”

“I wash it?” Another answer that sounded like a question.

“With soap?”

“No, not with soap.” This seemed to rouse her to her more normal state. “With shampoo and conditioner. And then I use a leave-in conditioner on top of that.”
“Right.” James nodded. “Shampoo, conditioner, and then even more conditioner after that.” He nodded again. “Thank you for your honesty Tara. You have again been very helpful.”

And then he turned around, walked out of Petco and into the nearest drug-store he could find.

***

Of course, James knew about shampoo and conditioner. They had just never been a necessary part of his mission protocols. But if he wanted to prevent Sarge from becoming the pariah of all dogs, that needed to change. He washed and brushed and then dried Sarge’s hair regularly; he supposed it made sense he perform the same grooming rituals on himself.

Except there were so many choices, an endless array of them on shelf after shelf, and no Tara to assist him this time. But well, he had his phone, and he had Google, so he supposed it would have to do.

*Don’t forget razors and some shaving cream.*

Three hours later, after Sarge had been played with, fed and taken outside for a walk (he was getting better at recognizing that outside was the appropriate place for him to go to the bathroom…mostly), James began the process of working on his hair. It took a long time, a very, very long time, and he broke the tines on two of the combs he had purchased, before he applied the de-tangler Clara’s Curls had insisted was an absolute must for unruly hair, and set to it with a will.

And then there was his beard, even coarser and almost as long as the hair on his head. He needed to use one of his knives to hack away at most of it, before he applied the shaving cream, and then used his razor to remove the rest.

But two hours later, it was done.

James blinked in surprise at the face staring back at him from the cloudy and spotted mirror. It was not what he had been expecting. Although as he stared at himself, he could not remember the last time he’d actually seen himself. Perhaps sometime back in Bucharest? But prior to that, there had never been any need. His handlers always managed his appearance, outfitting him in the required clothes, with the appropriate weaponry, and styling his hair so he would be as unremarkable as possible. He sometimes caught his reflection in either a car or store window, but he never lingered
over it as it was irrelevant to his day to day functioning. But now, here he was, face to face with his appearance, and even if there had been someone for him to talk to, aside from Sarge, he had no idea what he would have said.

His eyes were a pale grey-blue, bright and clear, staring back at him from an even paler face. He had thick eyebrows, with a natural arch to each of them. Long eye-lashes, a high forehead, sharp cheekbones and a straight nose. He had full, if chapped, lips that were pink, revealing slightly crooked teeth when he pulled them back. A strong jaw-line, and, most surprising of all, a divot in his chin, that he explored with the fingers of both his right and left hands. All of it surrounded by a long curtain of hair that reached his shoulders, a bit ragged at the ends, but otherwise smooth, of dark brown hair, with tones that rippled beneath the light as he turned his head from side to side.

As he continued his study, still shocked at what had been revealed, he came to the conclusion that it wasn’t a bad face. Kind of…nice, actually. Possibly handsome, from what he could tell from the pictures he had seen online. It certainly wasn’t bad. And it was his. This was what he looked like when there was nothing else in the way. This was the face he had been born with, had grown into, before the all of who he was had been taken away and he’d been forced to wear a mask. Maybe it was time for him to let go of this last one, even if it was one he had chosen to wear himself. He was James now after all, and not the Soldier. Perhaps it was time to let the rest of the world see that as well.

*Now that’s what I’m talking about. Looking good there handsome.*

“Shut up,” he grumbled at It, but he still hadn’t stopped staring at himself. It cackled at him.

*Now don’t forget to set your alarm so we can get up early tomorrow.*

“What? Why?”

*Because we’re gonna head out and get you some new threads.*

***

James didn’t know why It was so insistent he go out and purchase more clothing –

*Was I or was I not right about the eating?*
“Yes.”

*And about Teresa?*

“Yes.”

*And about looking like a bum?*

“So?”

*So, clothes maketh the man. It wasn’t just your hair or that thing on your face that made people think you were homeless. Now chop-chop, time’s a-wastin’.*

“Fine.”

-but It was insistent. And he really did not want to spend all day arguing with It. So after a hearty breakfast, he dug into his cache of cash –

*Add a coupla more hundreds to that, you’re gonna need it.*

-and using something called Yelp this time, another valuable resource, he took the subway to the East Village, where it said there would be several second-hand shops that should have everything he’d need. His current wardrobe was perfectly serviceable –

*You own two pairs of jeans, three shirts, and six hoodies, all of it held together by spit and will.*

-but if he was going to have to purchase new clothes, he wasn’t going to waste any more money than he had to. He had expenses now, a budget he needed to follow if he was going to make it to the end of his probationary period without drawing too much attention to himself, so second-hand clothes it was.
The first two stores he visited were a bust; even he could tell that the items available weren’t any better than what he currently owned (and they smelled bad). But the third shop, a medium sized establishment on East Eleventh Street had a lot more selection. He had set out early, so the shop was mostly empty, except for a young woman near the cash register, staring down at her phone.

*Don’t do that thing.*

“What thing?”

*You know, the whole, female, five-foot-two, one-hundred-and-eighteen-pounds, age between twenty-two and twenty-six, epicanthal fold indicating Asian descent thing you do.*

“That shut it up, and it left him with the freedom to peruse the options available to him in peace. Or at least he was able to for the first eight minutes, before the young woman grew bored with whatever it was she had been looking at on her phone, and decided she needed something else to do.

She was –

*Don’t even.*

She had black hair, streaked with green, and piercings in her face; one in her lip, two in her eyebrow, and one in her nasal septum. She was wearing a pink and orange dress, with a high waistline, that flared out around the middle of her thighs, stockings with holes in them, and neon-orange combat boots, that matched the dress. A strange outfit, to be certain, but not an ugly one. And he had certainly seen people wearing much stranger things. But she was smiling at him, her expression open as she glanced at the dungarees he held in his hands, and asked, “Looking for anything in particular?”

Since he’d had luck with the women of this century so far, except for the one in the park, James decided to take a chance, and be honest with her.

“I was informed that I look like a homeless person, and I need to purchase new clothes.”
Her smile grew even wider, and somewhat predatory, as she took another step closer and said, “Well, I can definitely help you with that.”

***

Her name was Yuna, and she was certainly helpful as over the next two and a half hours, she assisted James in acquiring the required clothing for a fully functional wardrobe. She even knew James’ size, which he hadn’t known, with just a glance. (“I’m studying fashion over at FIT, and working here in the meantime.”) She was a bit disappointed when he refused the more dramatic items she held up for him, but absolutely insistent about the fit. (“You’ve got a nice set of shoulders, a slim waist, and killer thighs. You need to show those off.”) But most importantly, she was kind to Sarge, laughing as he followed them around, and stuck his nose into everything, so he could explore all the very new things.

In the end, he purchased six pairs of jeans, seven Henleys (which he remembered wearing while in Bucharest, because he had liked their softness against his skin), five additional long-sleeved shirts, with various images silk-screened on their front, four more zip up hoodies, two belts, and a new pea-coat.

He was standing at the counter, while she rang up his purchases (he was certainly glad he had listened to It, because he ended up spending more money than originally intended, and he still needed to purchase underwear and socks. But he was going to go to the K-Mart on Astor Place for that. Even he knew those were not the types of things to be purchased in a second-hand store), when he saw them. On a shelf right behind the cash register, looking to be in his size. As he stared at them, he felt a sudden urge, a want that would not be denied, and he knew he had to have them.

Ten minutes later, when he finally left, there were a pair of relatively new Converse in the top of one of his bags, that perfectly matched the pink of Sarge’s collar.

***

“Well that’s certainly different,” Teresa said, when James entered the lobby of their building after she had texted him, Sarge at his feet. James paused at the foot of the stairwell, and glanced down at the fitted jeans and one of the long-sleeved tees he had decided to put on as a test run.

“Bad?” he asked.
“No, not at all,” she said with another one of her smiles. “In fact, if I was thirty years younger, I’d’ve said fuck Pedro and tried to figure out a way to climb you like a tree.”

“Teresa!”

“Who knew there was so much chorizo underneath all that hair.”

“Teresa!”

“Oh knock it off, you’re gorgeous. Now come on, grab these bags and bring them upstairs. You look as good as Ricardo did when he and Eliza were trapped together on that deserted island. If it had been me trapped there with you, I would have never signaled for that boat to come rescue us.”

“Teresa!”

***

“Sarge’s person?”

“What do you think? Do I still look homeless?”

“Sarge’s person?”

James hated to admit it, but it had been right again. Because this time when he walked into Petco, a little bit earlier than usual for Sarge’s Monday training class, instead of ignoring him, or pretending like they hadn’t seen him, three of the store’s employees had rapidly approached him, asking if he needed any assistance, sighing in disappointment when he shook his head. There was only one person who had been kind to him that first time when he had been desperate, and apparently very disheveled. Her opinion was the only one that mattered to him.

“Aren’t you going to say hello to Sarge? He’s missed you, you know,” James said, as she stood there, blinking at him. But she still reached out, if somewhat distractedly, to take James’ puppy into her arms to give him a scratch.
“Better?” he asked, all the teasing gone from his voice. Because she had been kind, and shared her opinion honestly with him when he asked her for it.

“You better stay away from my girlfriend,” she grumbled before she finally started to give Sarge’s ear the scratch he was eagerly expecting. “Because I’m as gay as they come, but she’s bi, and you look like that, and have the best dog in the world.”

“Then she’d be a fool, because I may have the best dog in the world, but you’re one of the most beautiful people I’ve ever met.”

As Tara stood there, sputtering and blushing, he felt It reach out, long and lazy, like a cat stretching in the sun.

*And that’s how you do it.*

***

Of course, thirty minutes later, if James could have figured out a way to strangle It, he would have. Because while Andy may have done a double-take, before he merely nodded in approval, Lisa had decided to finally put her phone away. But only so she could spend the rest of the class making sure to stand as close to him as possible, no matter how many times he stepped away, ignoring both Andy and Franklin as she tried to engage him in conversation, while her little dog kept nipping at Sarge’s tail.

He really was going to punt the both of them across the floor one day.

CHAPTER NOTES:
In case anyone was curious about Caucasian Shepherds and what they look like, I've created a post on my Tumblr blog so you can see for yourself. They really are beautiful dogs, that yes, grow into BIG motherfuckers.


If you don't want to click, here's a pic of what Sarge looked like in my head as I was writing this (just imagine his left foreleg being completely black.) But as you can see, James's found himself one hell of a beautiful dog. =)

Please free feel to let James know what you think of his dog, as well as his new fashion sense, in the comments. =)
Chapter 5

“Well, I have to admit Sergeant Barnes, I am very pleased by this development,” Captain McAdams declared the following Tuesday. “It looks like you’ve finally started to take your recovery seriously, and have begun to implement some of the strategies we discussed to further your self-improvement.” James didn’t bother to respond. He knew a response was not expected from him and that McAdams would continue whether he provided one or not. And he was proven correct less than a second later.

“Now while I am pleased that you have decided to take your personal grooming seriously, and this is an improvement from our previous session, I am still concerned about your choice of attire.”

James turned his attention from Sarge, lying content in his lap, chewing on the elk bone James had provided him as a distraction, to stare at McAdams. He didn’t see what was wrong with his outfit. Teresa and Tara thought it acceptable, and their opinions mattered much more to James than this Captain’s. Even Andy had commented on how he was looking better these days. And if the way Lisa still attempted to stand next to him during all of Sarge’s training classes, while Franklin kept trying to use Sarge’s tail as a chew toy, there was certainly nothing wrong with what he was wearing; dark jeans, with a matching long-sleeved Henley, over which had pulled on a short sleeve t-shirt, followed by a zip-up hoodie. All of it was clean and fitted, except for the hoodie, which needed to be baggie enough so he could make sure Sarge was warm when James carried him outside. He was still growing, but James was determined to continue carrying him nestled against his chest for as long as possible; even beyond that if he could find a way. His hair was brushed, (even if the ends still a bit on the ragged side. He had read about something called silkening lotion, which he was going to the nearby drug-store to purchase once his session was over), his face was clean-shaven, (It insisted he shave at least once every two-days, and while he hated to admit It was right, it was certainly less itchy). He remembered to eat a full breakfast that morning, without even needing the alarms on his phone to remind him, so his energy levels were acceptable, and he had taken Sarge for a vigorous walk in Bryant Park prior to their arrival, so his puppy was calm and content from his perch on James’ lap. He could not imagine what it was Captain McAdams had to complain about this time.

“Remember Sergeant, while personal appearance is a crucial part of any upstanding citizen’s daily life, a SHIELD agent needs to take even further care to make sure his clothing is always both professional and an accurate reflection of our commitment to our community and country.”

Oh. That again. James decided to tune him out. McAdams could go on for hours once he started on that diatribe. Besides, Sarge had grown tired of his elk-bone and jumped down from his lap to play with his latest obsession, James’ shoelaces. James was smiling at him when he realized McAdams had not said anything for the past several seconds, which was always an indicator he expected a response.
“What?” James asked, pulling his attention from Sarge to meet McAdams’ gaze.

“I said, Sergeant Barnes,” Captain McAdams said with a definite arch to his voice, that matched the one in his eyebrows, and was always an indication of displeasure. “What are those?” James followed McAdams’ gaze to his feet.

“Um,” James was confused. Did McAdams not know what footwear was? James could not recall ever seeing him walk into one of their appointments barefoot. “Sneakers?”

“I can see that, Sergeant.” McAdams was starting to growl again. It startled James to realize he sounded a little bit like Franklin when he did, and fought to hold back a snicker. “But why are they pink?”

*Here we go,* It finally decided to make Its presence known, using Its usual refrain whenever McAdams was being particular stupid. Even more so than usual.

“Because it matches.”

“It matches?”

“Yes.” James extended his leg, and rotated his ankle so the pink of his Converses could more easily be seen. As expected, Sarge yipped happily and started to chase it back and forth. “Sarge’s collar and my sneaker. See?”

“It matches - *Wait a minute.* Are you telling me that you named that thing Sarge, and then put it in a pink collar so it would match your sneakers?”

“No.”

When Captain McAdams said nothing, obviously waiting for James to proceed, James withheld another sigh. It was apparent McAdams was not having a good day, and James would need to use very small and simple words to make sure he understood everything James was trying to express.

*Not that that’s ever worked in the past.*
“I am wearing the pink sneakers because they match his collar.” James pointed first to Sarge’s collar and then his own footwear.

“What?”

“I am wearing the pink sneakers because—“

“Yes, Sergeant. I heard you quite clearly the first time.” McAdams’ teeth were back to doing that grinding thing. James wondered if anyone else could hear it, or if it was just him due to his enhanced hearing. “What I want to know is…Why?”

Oh. That. Wasn’t it obvious?

“Because we look fabulous.” And for the first time, both James and It were in one-hundred percent agreement. “And he’s not a thing. His name is Sarge.”

***

Once James endured the remaining forty-five minutes of his session, while Captain McAdams ranted and raved and again expressed his disappointment in James’ progress and complete lack of social awareness, James took the elevator to the cafeteria level, Sarge being very well behaved as he sat on James’s foot, the lead clipped to his harness. At Andy’s recommendation, they had started using a harness instead of attaching Sarge’s leash to his collar. It put less stress on Sarge’s neck and made him easier to control. Like most things, after a bit of confusion, Sarge adapted to it well enough.

As the door opened, and James stepped into the food court, he took a survey of the by-now familiar surroundings as he tried to make up his mind about which station he should try. Deciding on Chinese food, (they had a beef and broccoli platter that came with a generous portion of meat as well large sides of both fried rice and a salad), James again looked down at Sarge and wondered if maybe, just maybe, he should try interacting with some of the other workers who were also there for a late lunch. It was an important period in Sarge’s socialization, and while it may be uncomfortable for him, he thought it might be a good strategy to expose Sarge to different people in different circumstances, while encouraging his already out-going nature.

Except, apparently Captain McAdams wasn’t the only who noticed the change in James’ appearance. Nor was he the only one who had opinions about it, and mostly negative ones at that.
There was hush at first, when he initially walked in, and he could feel their eyes, heavy and intrusive, as he picked up a tray and made his way over to get his food.

And then came the voices, spoken in whispers, but easy, so easy, for him to pick up over the heavy quiet.

“Is that him?”

“I think so. What the hell happened?”

“Nah, can’t be. No way in hell is that the Winter Soldier!”

“It has to be. Look, he’s got that dog with him.”

“Seriously? That’s what he really looks like? No wonder Cap was so intent on dragging him back.”

“Yeah well, doesn’t make a difference. According to McAdams, he’s still a fuck up who can barely string two words together. You don’t wanna get too close. I hear he’s super-violent, and doesn’t even know how to respond to his own name.”

As James took his plate from the server, he glanced down at Sarge. Never mind that then; Sarge deserved better than to be even in the same building as those assholes.

*So do you.* It was said softly, quietly, and James found it strangely comforting as the whispers and stares continued to feel like a mountain pressing down on his chest. *So do you.*

Thankfully, they left him alone as he approached his usual table in the corner, sat down and started to eat. He would have left, but he was hungry and the food filling. Eventually, the conversation around him returned to its usual levels, even if he was still that afternoon’s favorite topic. At one point, he even noticed Sam Wilson in the doorway. He was only there for a second, and it was obvious he was trying to be discrete as he took a quick look around, unable to hide the jerk of his head when his eyes fell upon James before he disappeared from view. But well, as they all continued to whisper, he had been the Winter Soldier, and there was no one better, except for…for…
And before that, he had been…he had been…

Anyway, none of that mattered. They left him alone, and allowed him to finish his meal in peace. He had Sarge now, and that made it all bearable, the food palatable, as James swallowed bite after flavorless bite, Sarge’s head a warm and comforting weight on this thigh.

***

Near the end of his next session, before finally dismissing James, Captain McAdams made a pronouncement.

“I’ll see you next Tuesday, Sergeant. And this time, make sure to leave your dog at home.”

“Excuse me?” James asked, startled.

“Oh yes,” and there was definitely a note of satisfaction in McAdams’ voice as he went on. “I’ve gone over the files of our last several sessions, and done some research of my own. Your dog is nearly three months old at this point, and perfectly capable of maintaining his own body temperature. Since that was the excuse you were using to bring him along, and as he is obviously proving to be a distraction from the work we’re trying to accomplish, then it’s long past time for you to start leaving him at home.”

“That is not possible,” James said, while in his chest his heart began to stutter and shake and ache, ache, ache. He went everywhere with Sarge, everywhere.

“Oh really? And why is that Sergeant Barnes?” McAdams crossed his arms, but he was still smirking as he took in James’ expression. And here, once again, James’ research served him well.

“He’s at a key point in his socialization. He needs to be exposed to as many new situations and experiences as possible. It is vital to his development so that he continues to grow into a happy and healthy adult dog.” James spoke, while in his chest the stuttering, shaking and aching grew worse and worse, threatening to overwhelm him.

“Yes well, at this stage of his development, he also needs to spend time away from his owner, which
will inevitably be unavoidable in the future, so that he doesn’t develop separation anxiety.” McAdams ran a very deliberate and slow study not only over Sarge but James as well. “And, to be quite honest, I don’t think he’s the only one.” There were no words, no amount of research or data compiled that James could pull from to help him. And even It was being unusually quiet.

“And I have to be honest with you Sergeant, I think you’ve become way too dependent on that animal over the course of the past few months. Yes, there’s been some progress, but it’s been minimal at best, and those fall far short of all the setbacks—“

It was at that point that something happened that had never occurred during one of their sessions previously, and the intercom on Captain McAdams’ desk beeped briefly, before a voice cut off his diatribe.

“Captain McAdams?” the female voice said.

“Private Turner, I’m in the middle of a session right now, and not to be disturbed.”

“Yes, Sir, sorry Sir, but you have a call from the Command Floor.” Private Turner sounded very apologetic as she went on. She was a nasty piece of work herself, always sneering sharply at James whenever he arrived.

“Tell them I’ll get back to them in three minutes,” McAdams ordered, his gaze still locked on James.

“I’m very sorry Sir, but they said it’s imperative you take this call immediately, and that it was an order.”

McAdams sighed, and unfolded his arms as he made his way back behind his desk.

“You’re dismissed, Sergeant,” he said, with a smug little nod. “I’ll see you on Tuesday. Without your dog.”

James was already at the elevator bank, Sarge clutched to his chest, by the time McAdams picked up his phone.
Less than two hours later, James was back in his apartment, trembling as he lay curled around Sarge, who was licking his chin over and over again, whimpering, but not trying to pull away from the tight embrace of James’ arms, when his SHIELD-issued phone dinged with an incoming message.

James was tempted to crush it in his hands and throw the remains out the window, but they were already trying to find a way to take his dog away, and if he ignored the message, he was sure they would use that as an excuse to finally do it. So he unlocked the screen and hit the flashing envelope, blinking and then blinking again as he read the reminder.

1:30 pm appointment with Captain McAdams, Tuesday, March 5. Sarge is permitted to accompany you to this and all future remaining sessions. Please confirm receipt. Y/N.

Once James replied with hands that were still shaking, he thought the phone would go to sleep as it normally did. So he almost dropped it when less than a second later, he received an additional alert, that when he looked contained only a single, brief message.

=)

The following two weeks proceeded in much the same manner. James had his biweekly sessions with McAdams, who was obviously upset Sarge was still present, but pretended that their previous conversation never happened. James was happy to let him, and spent those sessions doing what he usually did, listening to the Captain prattle on and on with half an ear so he would always know when an automatic response was required, while really making sure his puppy got the vigorous ear and ruff scratching he was so obviously entitled to.

The rest of his time was spent as it had been; making sure Sarge was getting everything he needed to continue growing up safe, healthy and happy. Monday and Wednesday evenings were spent at Petco, where Sarge continued to play with all of his other puppy friends (except for Franklin, who was still a bitey little bastard), while James did his best to avoid Lisa (who James had the feeling wanted to bite him as well). The class was an eight-week course, and would be wrapping up soon, but James had already enrolled Sarge in the next level, which would focus on additional training and more advanced commands, so Sarge would still get to see his friends. James always made sure to arrive early on those nights anyway, so they could say hello to Tara, and she could shower his dog with all of the praise and affection everyone knew Sarge deserved. At his last check-up, Sarge had weighed in at forty-eight pounds, so he was a bit hard for her to hold. They compromised by her
kneeling on the floor, and Sarge standing on his hind legs so she could wrap her arms around him while he licked her face and she laughed and laughed and laughed, James doing something that may have resembled a smile while he watched them. (But only for the first five minutes, because seriously, Sarge was still his dog.)

There were Sarge’s daily walks through the park, multiple times throughout the day, and the continued potty training. Sarge had gotten a lot better, but he was still a puppy, and puppies did have accidents. They were working on it. James also made sure to bring Sarge to all the dog runs in the various parks around Manhattan, where of course Sarge continued to make friends with all the other dogs. (He really was the best dog in the world.) There were also his continued visits to Dr. Patni so Sarge’s health and growth could be monitored and James could ask any questions he had. (At their second to last visit, Sarge had been neutered which had not been a happy day for either of them. But a necessity, and one Sarge recovered from quickly enough.)

And then there were all of the other things in James’ life, as the temperatures slowly increased and it became obvious spring was on its way. He had his meals and easy discussions with Teresa, who commented on Sarge’s growth every time she saw him. James also made sure to keep up his own cooking lessons. He seldom, if ever, forgot to eat now, but he still needed to keep an eye on his budget. But as his catalogue of personal recipes increased, he found his own skills improved as well, and he could now prepare an even greater variety of meals that were not just filling, but interesting as well. (And okay, so he had set the smoke alarm off once, but that was only the one time, and just like Sarge and his potty training, he was getting better at it.)

He also made sure to keep his apartment clean, as well as his new clothes. He had spent a lot of money on those, and he somehow knew he’d never been wasteful. He got into the habit of doing that for himself as well, washing and shaving every day, while he experimented with his hair. He could do so much more with it, now that it was no longer tangled and hung past his shoulders. He could part it on one side or the other, or even in the middle. Pull it back into a pony-tail, or pin it up in a bun atop his head. He could braid it or twist it, and there were even clips and bands he could use to help him hold it in place. (He hadn’t tried any of that yet, but still the option was there, and he wondered why more men didn’t let their hair grow out longer, because really, there was just so much more you could do with hair when you had more of it to experiment with.)

But really, it was mostly just him and Sarge. Together they spent most of their time outside; Sarge had a thick coat so the cold was no longer an issue for him, and James’ apartment really was small, with not much to entertain either of them. It was even more cluttered now with all of the necessary materiel he needed for Sarge’s upkeep. Yes, James still loved to read, but he could do that just as easily while sitting outside on a park bench, Sarge contentedly chewing on a stick or other toy, calm and relaxed after his latest play session, and it made for a pleasant way to spend an afternoon.

And all of the while, It was still there. But It was different now. It had gone back to being mostly quiet, except for the occasional comment or observation. Yet James knew It was never far away. He could feel It, closer and closer than It had ever been, always lingering, but still out of sight. Except sometimes, James would get the sense of someone over his shoulder, or the feeling of a breath on the
back of his next, look up from the book he had been reading, and see no one there. But he knew, he knew. It was close, close, so close, always confirmed by the laughter he started to hear whenever something It had done caused him to jerk and take notice. It seemed to be in a holding pattern, content for now, but waiting for something. Except James had no idea what that could possibly be, and then Sarge would do something that demanded his attention, and It would slip away from him, but not too far, while James’ attention returned to his dog.

A heaviness in his chest, a weight upon his shoulders, an unfamiliar thickness in his blood. But James had lived through worse, so much worse, so as long as things kept as they were, James supposed it was acceptable.

So it was inevitable that was when things all changed. The beginning of his end, and the end of his beginning. And of course, of course, it was all McAdams’ fault.

***

“So, I’ve been doing some research since our last session,” McAdams immediately began at the start of that March’s third Thursday’s meeting, “And I think I’ve found some viable ways we can incorporate Sarge, which is a fine name for an animal, into our program for your recovery.”

*Okay, so this is new. Wonder what the old fart-bag has up his sleeve this time.*

It was the first time James heard Its voice in quite a while, but he decided to ignore It, or at least the last half of what It had said. Because this was new, and James needed to focus, especially as it appeared McAdams was once again directing his attention to his dog.

“Now correct me if I’m wrong, but Sarge is a Caucasian Shepherd, yes?” James wondered how he knew that; most people had never even heard of the breed, and stared at him blankly when he told them. Then again, McAdams did have access to all of SHIELD’s resources, and James wouldn’t put it past any of them to have somehow gained access to Dr. Patni’s files and the results of Sarge’s DNA test.

“And twenty-five percent Labrador Retriever,” he felt necessary to add. If anything, that information made McAdams’ grin grow even wider.

“Excellent, a working breed on both sides,” he nodded, as if both James and Sarge had any need for his approval. “And from what you’ve said in our previous sessions, you’ve already enrolled Sarge in
a training class, correct?”

“Yes.”

“So you’ve already started to develop the skills necessary for becoming an experienced handler—”

James’s brain glitched at the word handler, (handler…handler…handler), but just for a second, because he swore he felt It flicking at his ear, reminding him to pay attention.

“Why are you asking me this?”

“Because you see, Sergeant Barnes, like I just noted, Sarge is a working dog. And working dogs need to be kept busy, and make excellent service dogs. And with the proper training, which you have already started, I’m certain we can find a way both you and Sarge can work together as a team here at SHIELD to continue our mutual goals of making the world a safer place.”

“Doing what?” There was an edge to James’ voice now, and he reminded himself that he needed to maintain his control, that any display of weakness would just reveal where the cracks were so McAdams could dig into them with his fingers.

“Well, you see, we have plenty of options available to us.” McAdams leaned back in his chair with a smug smile.

“Such as?”

“Now remember, all of these options would require further training, under the proper supervision of course, but once completed, you and Sarge would be a perfect addition to either a search and rescue team, drug or even bomb sniffing—”

“You want to expose Sarge to explosives?” James could not believe what he was hearing.

“It’s a very important task, one that could save thousands of lives,” McAdams countered. When James’ only response was a glare, McAdams merely shrugged, and went on. “There are other options of course. Given his potential size, with some agility training, he could be used to help
apprehend suspects. There’s also the option of training Sarge to be a corpse searching dog. A difficult job, but most certainly a very valuable one.”

“You want me to use Sarge to dig up dead bodies?”

“It’s a valuable skill Sergeant Barnes, and one that unfortunately in this day and age we could use, more than ever before…”

McAdams’ voice faded, only to be replaced by the thumping thunder of James’s own heartbeat, his mind trapped in the Pandora’s box of the word corpse. They want him to dig up corpses. Corpses. Corpses. They wanted him to use his dog to dig up corpses. Dead bodies. Happy, healthy, easy-going and carefree Sarge, who loved to sit on his foot and lick his chin, digging up dead bodies.

It would kill him, and take away all of his joy. Because James knew, knew what it was like to be surrounded by corpses. At his feet. By his own hand. Trenches filled with them, some no older than boys, who had been laughing less than five minutes ago. Compounds they had entered, where the bodies of men, women and children had been stacked, like…like books on a shelf, an endless labyrinth of bloodied spines and empty eyes. So much death, too much death, endless, endless, endless…

And it would kill him. It would kill him to go back there, this time with his dog, that he had sworn to keep safe.

James had no idea how long he spent trapped in that library of death, his own face reflected back at him by the otherwise sightless eyes of the dead, while McAdams went on and on in the background, saying something about how, “that would have been such a vital service immediately after the Chitauri attacked New York a few years ago.”

“Yeah well, I’ll tell you something right now pal. If another bunch of aliens decide to attack New York, I’m grabbing my dog and getting the hell outta Dodge.”

That brought the both of them up short. Because James knew he hadn’t spoken those words, but it had sounded exactly like something It would have said.

“Excuse me?” McAdams reared back in his chair, looking affronted. “What did you just say to me, Sergeant?”
“No,” James shook his head, coming to, and realizing his fingers were clenched in Sarge’s fur. Sarge had perched himself in James’ lap and was licking his chin. And he may not have been the one to say the words, but that didn’t mean he disagreed with them. If New York City was once again attacked by aliens, he was going to grab Sarge, (and okay, definitely Teresa too. And maybe Tara if he could find a way to get to her on time), and definitely get the hell outta Dodge.

“No?” McAdams repeated.

“No. I won’ do it,” James reaffirmed. “And I won’t expose Sarge to that kind of risk either.”

“Listen Sergeant,” McAdams leaned forward once again, resting his folded hands in front of him on his desk. James had long ago noticed how McAdams liked to use his desk as a tool to exert his power. A large mahogany monstrosity, he never once moved from behind the presumptuous shield he believed it provided him during any of their sessions. It also kept him higher than James, who was forced to sit in the single, solitary, uncomfortable chair directly in front of it, as if that guaranteed him instant obedience from all who were forced to meet with him. “You need to reconsider the options I just provided you with. Because you don’t have very many of those left to you at this point.” When James said nothing, he went on, “and you need to mind the tone you take with me. Remember that I outrank you Sergeant, and you will address me with all of the respect that entails. Have I made myself clear?”

Even though his heart was still thundering, and his hands shaking as they clung to Sarge’s fur, who was still licking his chin, James somehow managed to keep his voice calm and steady, as he met McAdams’s gaze, and said,

“Be that as it may Captain, my answer is still no.”

*And you can go fuck yourself, you maggot brained pig-fucker.*

Somehow, James managed to keep that sentiment to himself.

***

Even though James would never be able to remember how, he somehow managed to get home once his session with McAdams was over. There were no accidents he had to clean up, so he must have taken Sarge for a walk, and Sarge wasn’t nudging at his bowl, so James had to have fed him. Yet James could not recall doing any of that. His mind was still trapped, swirling in the vortex of
McAdams’ words, and all the ways he thought they could use Sarge, make him a weapon, with James the one responsible for it all as his handler. They wanted to turn his puppy into a dog of war, a tool, a weapon of destruction and death, and they wanted James to be the one to do it. Be the one to shape and mold him, trained so he could not resist and would aid them in their campaigns of death. And then there would be no more training classes with Andy, where Sarge got to play with all of his other puppy friends. Or visits with Tara, who always smiled at the both of them and called him Sarge’s person. No more telenovela marathons with Teresa, while during the commercials she told him how her husband had been having a good day today, and recognized her when she walked in. There would be no more walks in the park, while James searched for just the perfect stick for Sarge to chew, which ended with him sitting on a bench, feeling the sharp but clean bite of wind on his face, while he finished his latest book, and Sarge lay contentedly at his feet. How could he ever look Sarge in the face again, with his tongue lolling out as he panted happily back up at James, like he was doing just now, and know he had done all of that, only to take it away from him. He knew what that was like, to have, even if it was a small thing, and private, just as precious and miraculous as a butterfly perched upon a finger, and then to have nothing, nothing at all. To not remember you had even had it, but only know something was missing, had always been missing, even as they tried, with lighting and pain and straps that held you down no matter how hard you fought, to take even that away.

The ache in his chest was practically unbearable now, matched only by the pain in his head, endless, merciless, too much in too little space, and not something anyone could bear, not even the Soldier.

So that must have been the reason why, when Sarge nudged at his fingers and dropped his favorite ball into James’ hand, James, distracted and responding on automatic, tossed it away, where it landed on the bookshelf. And why, when Sarge dashed after it, he jumped up, and with his sizeable and supposedly healthy weight, caused it to crack and them come tumbling to the floor, a cascade of books and wood paneling crashing down all around him.

“Sarge!” Everything else was suddenly forgotten as he scrambled across the room and to the pile beneath which he heard Sarge whimpering. Oh god, oh god, please let him be okay, was James’ only thought as he easily tossed the books and shelving aside, heedless of the mess as he searched for his dog. It took less than a second, but felt like an eternity, before James was able to scoop Sarge up into his arms, his left hand already feeling, petting, palpating as he searched for wounds. But Sarge was unhurt; a little shocked and a little scared, but somehow, through some miracle, absolutely fine, and yipping his quiet little yips against James’ neck as James held him close.

But James was not fine. In his own stupidity, his own carelessness, he had once again failed, like he had so many times before. The one thing he had promised, the only right thing he had ever done in his life, to keep Sarge safe, and he had failed, he had failed, he had yet again failed.

And suddenly it was too much. All of it, too much. Watching television with Teresa, Tara’s happy face whenever they walked in, Andy’s infinite patience for his endless questions, while smiling at not only Sarge, but him as well. Wind in his hair, that now blew loose and free, and sunshine on his cheeks that he could finally feel. The crisp bite of winter, and the endless, endless warmth of Sarge.
It was not meant for things like him. Scarecrows were the perch from where ravens sat, waiting to pluck out the eyes of those who died in their fields. And ghosts, ghosts were never meant to have names. The seasons came and they went, and but the ghosts never changed, merely grew paler and paler as they faded away, until no one even remembered they were there at all.

It was too much. Too much for him to bear, and he had not been built for this, these lies, this life. And it broke him. Smashed his skull and ripped apart his heart, leaving nothing more than one of the corpses McAdams wanted him to find, shivering and shaking on the floor, while the lights around him began to fade away.

And then…

And then…

The lengthening of a shadow. The whisper of a footstep. Drawing closer and closer and ever closer while he could do nothing but lie there and await his fate.

*So,* Its voice was quiet in the dark, a ripple that was not a ripple, the susurrus of a spider’s web. *It’s finally time.*

And then everything went black.

***

It was time for termination. An extended period of consciousness. Which led to a sense of awareness. Which allowed for the breakdown of all preinstalled protocols. Which led to the complete collapse of all system functionality. Which allowed for HYDRA’s final failsafe to engage, and ensure the return of their Asset.

“Is that what you think?”

As James lay there, unable to move, he stared into the darkness that was no longer a darkness, but an endless, endless plane of immutable greys and slowly shifting twilights. And in the distance, coming ever closer and closer, a figure steadily making his way toward him.
A light tread as it gracefully put one foot in front of the other.

Long, lean legs, with an easy going but determined stride, as it continued its steady approach.

A dark blue jacket, military in cut, with straps and buttons and a high collar, perfectly fitted over a strong chest and broad shoulders.

A pause in its steps, when the figure finally stopped, less than a foot away.

And when James finally looked up to stare into its face…

No, no…It - it couldn’t be.

“You really had no idea, did you?”

But it was. Because there, standing directly above him, with shorter hair and younger eyes, but no less world weary than the ones he saw staring back at him now every time he looked into the mirror, was his own face, staring back at him.

“I am you,” James’ reflection said as it slowly knelt down so it was even closer, “and you are me.”

“H-how?” he somehow managed to whisper in response.

“I’m the best parts of you,” it said with a small smile. “And you’ve always been the best parts of me.”

“I don’t – I don’t understand.”

“I know you don’t. And you won’t, not until this is finished. But we’re running out of time, and you’re finally ready.”
“What – what do you mean?”

His reflection, or he himself, he could no longer tell them apart, sighed, and shook his head, but his eyes, James’ own eyes, never left his face.

“When I fell,” It – no, he, began to explain, “when HYDRA captured me, they tried to destroy me. There was nothing I could do to stop it. They were too strong, and nothing was going to stop them from getting what they wanted. The only thing I could do was break us apart, into two. You and me. I kept us safe, while you kept us alive. But I had to hide to do it, while you never got the chance. And I’m so sorry for that, but it was the only thing I could think of. But I’ve finally been able to grow strong enough, and it’s time for me to start bearing my share of the weight again.”

“You’ve been trying to take me over, take away everything, all of it!”

“Is that what you’ve believed all this time?” His reflection, that was no longer his reflection, smiled at him. But it was a small thing, easily plucked from the air, like the lights that had started to appear in the starless sky, pinpricks of incandescence showering the both of them like snowflakes, flickering in this nothing where the two of him had finally come face to face. “I’ve been trying to help you James, help you find your way.”

“Why?” he breathed, not able to believe, but not able not to.

“Because together we are each more than the sum of our parts. And it’s time for me to come home. It’s time for the both of us to come home. But we can only do that together. Will you let me help you?”

Home. Home. Home. Such a long-forgotten word, hidden, lost, forgotten. Just like he had been. Just like they both had.

And suddenly James wanted it. Wanted to go there, to find it again, more than he had ever wanted anything else. And this time, he would not be alone.

So he asked, “Will it hurt?”
“A little bit,” he admitted. “But only at first. And it’ll be worth it, I promise you. But you have to be willing, and you have to let me in.” And then he fell silent, as he knelt there by James, waiting for James to make his choice.

“What do I have to do?” And he was crying. He could feel them, the tears, making their way down his cheeks, the only heat in this place that was cold and desolate and empty of all life and promise. How long had he been there, this other part of him, waiting for James to find him.

And then James, the other James, his other half, all of his missing pieces, smiled a grin that was sharp, yet somehow still gentle, filled with mischief and cunning, and a love of life that James was just starting to come to know.

“That’s the easy part,” he said, lifting his up his arm and holding out his left hand. It was flesh and blood, not metal like his own.

James hesitated, for one final second, before together, in a voice that was theirs, they both said…

“You just have to take my hand.” / “You just have to take my hand.”

And then James reached out, and…

And…

And…

***

A hand, reaching out for an infant, as he held his baby sister for the first time.

A hand, held out to shake another, feeling very mature and adult, even if it was cut up and bruised from the bullies he had just stopped from beating up that poor kid. “My name’s Bucky. What’s yours?”
A hand, reaching out to run his fingers through blond hair, wanting to muss up all that pretty gold.

A hand, reaching for the jar of liniment they kept by their bedside table, so he could rub it over a skinny chest of pale skin and peaked bones, constricted and tight from the cold of their apartment.

A hand, cocking the trigger of his rifle, the gesture now long familiar to him, followed by a perfect shot less than a second later.

A hand, using the knife it now held to slit its first throat, coming away tacky with blood.

A hand, slapping a shoulder, or tending to the wounds of one of their men, hoping the lessons he had been taught held true and did not fail him now.

And a hand, reaching out as he fell from the train, while it grew smaller and smaller, and farther and farther, and no one reaching back.

Except this time, this time, another hand reached out and caught him. It was made of metal, but its grip was true, and it brought him against his chest, and kept him safe, promising to never let him go, ever again…

***

…and clasped his back.

And just as he did, the stars that were not stars, but memories, their life, the symphony of them, exploded in a super-nova of heat and light and joy, and a final reconciliation, while around him the world burned.

***

A few hours later, when James Bucky Barnes finally opened his eyes, the world had not in fact burned. But he was the phoenix that rose from its ashes.
Or he would have, if not for the fact that there was a fifty-pound dog sitting on his chest, desperately licking his chin.

“Easy there Sarge, easy there,” he said, lifting his hand to soothe his dog that was frantic as he whimpered and moaned, and licked and licked and licked. “It’s alright, it’s alright, I’m okay, I’m okay.”

Even as he said the words, he was both startled and amazed to find it was true. He was a bit stiff, but not by much. The floor was cold, but Sarge’s closeness had kept him warm while he had been away. And his heart no longer ached. Instead it beat steady and true just beneath his breastbone, filling him with a warmth he could not remember feeling in far too long. He was himself now; not just the Bucky of his past, nor the James he had struggled to become, but the both of them together, each with the other’s weaknesses, but also willing to share their strengths, so that the whole of them was stronger than either had ever thought possible.

He was giddy with it, energized, vital and alive.

And he knew that everything, everything had just changed.

“Oh, you wanna fuck with me?” he heard himself say, in a voice that had an accent he knew was born from his childhood running wild through the streets of Brooklyn. “You SHIELD bastards wanna play? You have no idea who you’re dealing with. I’m gonna make you choke on it.”

Or at least he would. But first, he really needed a fucking cigarette.

Chapter End Notes

So, just to let you know, this is the end of the Winter. Spring starts with the next chapter, and everything is about to change. =)
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

SPRING

“Sergeant Barnes! What the hell are you wearing?” McAdams roared when Bucky arrived at one-thirty on the dot for his scheduled appointment the following Tuesday.

He looked down at himself as he unzipped his hoodie and settled in his usual spot on the chair. McAdams eyes were doing their bulging thing again, but that was to be expected at this point.

_Here we go_, he thought to himself. For a second, just a second, he almost missed Its voice. But it had really been his own voice all along, thinking all the things he hadn’t been able to put into words just yet, instinct and knowledge and an understanding of human nature. It really wasn’t gone; he’d just finally reclaimed it.

“Clothes,” he answered calmly. Wait for it… _Wait for it_…

“Are those pineapples?” came the expected question less than two seconds later.

“Yes,” he agreed. “Dancing ones.” Just in case McAdams hadn’t notice that particular detail yet.

“And please explain to me why, Sergeant, are you wearing a shirt with _dancing,_” McAdams nearly choked on the word, “_pineapples_ on it.”

“Because I look damned good in it,” Bucky said. And because Teresa had been more than happy to lend him one of her husband’s old bowling shirts when he asked. She had heard the strange noises from his apartment that night, and been frantic with worry. The relief on her face was instantaneous when he knocked on her door in response to the note she had left taped to his own. He spent half an hour apologizing to her, explaining it had just been a bad dream, and he was sorry for worrying her. He ended up spending the day with her, to assure her he really was fine, and the next one he used cleaning up the mess he had made, getting rid of that goddamned bookshelf, and rearranging all of his books. After that, he needed some time to get used this feeling, this synchronicity of his self and his
body, that was better and much more balanced, but still new. That hadn’t given him much time to put his own plans into action, but Teresa had been kind enough to lend him the shirt when he again knocked on her door and asked if she had any clothes he could borrow. He’d been thinking more in terms of a brightly colored scarf, and was surprised when she told him to take a look at her husband’s things. He wouldn’t be wearing any of them anymore, and it would make her happy to see them being put to use, instead of just hanging there, almost forgotten, in her bedroom closet. So a green bowling shirt with yellow dancing pineapples it was. It was a bit tight on his shoulders, but it would definitely do for today. Besides, it was already annoying Captain McAdams, so part one of today’s mission was definitely successful. Time to initiate stage two.

“Up, Sarge.” Bucky patted his lap, and his dog immediately complied, settling himself comfortably for what was guaranteed to be a long session. That was okay, Bucky had plenty of treats for him in his pocket. Now to wait, and see if McAdams launched into his usual diatribe about his appearance or chose a different tactic.

“I see you’ve at least kept up Sarge’s training.” Ah, so it was option two then. This was going to be fun. “Have you decided which avenue of training you would like to pursue?”

“Yeah, I have,” Bucky nodded. “And the answer’s none.”

“Excuse me?”

“None. I’ve decided not to enroll Sarge in any training courses, aside from the one he’s already in.”

“Sergeant Barnes, I thought I made it clear in our last session—”

“Yeah, see, ‘bout that,” Bucky cut him off. “I double-checked the list. And just like there are no rules stating I can’t have a dog, there are no rules saying that if I did adopt a dog I had to enroll him in any of your suggested training classes. And I know my dog, better than you do. It’s not something that’d be good for him. And as his parent, it’s my responsibility to look out for him. So, Captain McAdams, bearing all that in mind, the answer’s no.” Now to sit back, relax, and see how long it took the old windbag to run out of breath.

***

Apparently Captain McAdams could spend an entire hour yelling, but Bucky’d been through worse, much, much worse, so blah-blah-blah, and he still refused to change his mind. Besides, once he
finished his lunch (and oh look, they had beef brisket today, he was definitely going to give that a try), he still had additional materiel he needed to acquire if Operation-Give-That-Old-Fucker-A-Stroke was to succeed.

***

“Hey there Sarge, and Sarge’s person. What can I help you with today?” Tara asked as she approached them in the leash aisle.

“Heya Tara, how’s it going?” Bucky asked her. Tara didn’t hide her surprise at his greeting, nor the smile he shot in her direction. He could understand that; he was still getting use to the ease of it himself. But one of the things he’d always liked about her was her adaptability and easy-going nature, which she displayed now as she knelt down to give his dog the attention he deserved. He still wasn’t too crazy about that aspect of her personality (Sarge was still his dog, after-all), but it made Sarge happy, and ultimately that was the important thing.

“I’m doing well, thanks for asking,” she laughed while Sarge licked her face. “Now what are you guys doing here? Sarge doesn’t have a class today, and you usually pick up whatever you’re running low on when you’re here for those. Is there something you need?”

“Actually, yes there is,” Bucky said once he had her full attention and Sarge was back at his side (of course, sitting on his foot). “You know I love all the pink you’ve helped me find, ‘cos let’s be real, Sarge looks fabulous in it.” Bucky nodded toward Sarge’s halter. “But I’m thinking maybe it’s time I got him something else, switch it up a bit, so it doesn’t get too predictable?”

“I can certainly help you with that, Sarge’s person.” She smiled her full smile at him, the one that crinkled both her eyes and nose, his favorite one, making her face even prettier. “You came on the perfect day. We just got some new stock in. Lemme show it to you.”

***

“Hey, you came back,” Yuna said when Bucky walked into Second Chances over on Eleventh Street. “And you brought your dog too.” It was later in the afternoon, and there were more people there today than there had been previously. But there were also more employees, so it didn’t appear as if it would be too busy for Yuna to assist him. “Is there anything I can help you with today?”

“Actually, since you gave me such great advice last time, I was wondering if I could get your expert
opinion on a few things,” Bucky said, reaching into the bag hanging from his wrist.

“Yeah?” she asked, her eyes already glittering in excitement.

“Do you have anything I could wear that would match this?” Bucky held up one of the halters he had just purchased. “And this?” He held up a second one. “Or this?” A third one. “Or this?” And one more. “And this one too?”

“Oh,” she said, reaching out to take the leashes in her hand so she could study them. “You have definitely come to the right place.”

***

“What the hell is this?”

Bucky had always been a big believer in if you were going to go, then go big. So for his opening riposte that Thursday, that’s exactly what he did.

Today’s outfit was a tight-fitting black Henley, with a matching pair of slim fitting jeans and a leather belt. But what really pulled it all together was the neon orange jacket Yuna found for him, an extremely fluffy and fuzzy thing, both soft and unbelievably warm, that he’d paired with a matching set of Converse sneakers, that most importantly of all, matched the orange halter he’d found at Petco. It could have easily been too bright or garish, but the black toned it down, while the orange brought out the creamy undertones of his skin, or at least according to Yuna they did, and he found himself agreeing with her. Because as he’d stared at himself in the full-length mirror he purchased to hang inside his solitary closet’s door, he had to admit he did look fabulous.

“It’s my new jacket. Do you like it?” Bucky held out his arms, and then in a burst of inspiration, actually spun around so McAdams could view the entire effect.

“You look ridiculous, and I know we’ve discussed how important personal appearance is, and the role it plays in your re-integration into society.” McAdams was back to growling. And oh look, his eyeballs were doing that throbbing thing again.

“Yeah well, see, here’s the thing,” Bucky went on cheerfully, as if McAdams hadn’t spoken. “I got three wolf whistles on my walk over here from the train, one of them from a guy even. So, you
know, I think I’m integrating just fine.”

*Round one motherfucker, round one.*

***

“What the hell are you wearing this time, Sergeant?”

“Well, you know, since you spent the entire hour last time complaining about my sneakers, I thought I’d try something different today.” And oh boy, had he. Today he had decided to don a pair of faded blue jeans, that he matched with a snug fitting black button up shirt. (He did love a bit of black in his outfits, no matter how many times Yuna rolled her eyes at him about it.) Another leather belt, this time one with a large buckle, that yes, dug into his abdomen a bit, but the overall effect was definitely worth it. But, to tie it all together, he had worn the ruby red suede jacket Yuna had shown him that had fucking tassels of all things, which he absolutely loved, since they swished with his body with every step he took. Even better, the red was a perfect match for the cowboy boots he was wearing, which even Bucky had to admit added a bit more strut to his walk. But the piece-de-resistance, the absolute crowning glory of it all, was the black cowboy hat with the red piping that made him look stunning, especially with the way his hair hung from beneath it. It was an exact duplicate of the one he had clipped to Sarge’s halter, albeit slightly smaller, that Sarge was wearing with pride, along with the red bandana Bucky wrapped around his neck.

“And did you get any wolf-whistles this time Sergeant Barnes, or were the people you passed on the street too busy laughing at your attire?”

“Actually, I didn’t,” Bucky shrugged, watching as McAdams’ scowl slowly began to transform into a look of smug satisfaction. “It was six yee-haws instead. And two of those were followed up by offers of money, if I would give them a ride.”

*Round two, you bloated asshole.*

***

“Are you deliberately attempting to make a mockery of everything we are trying to accomplish here, Sergeant?”
“Nah see, I actually listened to you the last time when you said I needed to show more respect to the red, white and blue,” Bucky said with an easy-going shrug.

“That is not the America flag, Sergeant Barnes,” and McAdams’ teeth were back to making that grinding noise again. “That is the Union Jack.”

“Yeah well, you never said which red, white and blue.” Bucky glanced down at his shirt. He was feeling a bit punk today, so this outfit was a black leather jacket, black jeans (again), and a very tight long-sleeved tee-shirt with the British flag emblazoned on the front. He’d also donned his old combat boots, always a solid stand-by, and a spiked belt this time, that matched the spiked collar he had put on Sarge that morning, along with another bandana that matched his shirt. “Since I’ve been making myself more familiar with modern culture, I thought this would be a good way to acknowledge the British invasion.”

“The United States and Great Britain have been steadfast allies for over a hundred years. I can assure you, there is no British invasion, nor has there been for centuries. If you are unable to recognize this simple fact then perhaps we need to re-evaluate your current cognitive abilities,” was McAdams’ latest attempt to gain control of their conversation.

“No British Invasion? Hello, where have you been?” Bucky parried. “The Beatles, Led Zeppelin, The Rolling Stones? And let’s not even get into punk, because holy shit, The Sex Pistols were amazing. But really, really, absolutely no one tops Bowie. That man was a genius.” It was true; Bucky had spent time listening to the different types of music that had evolved over the past century, steadily making his way through decade after decade. He wasn’t the biggest fan of The Beatles, although he could absolutely see why they were considered ground-breaking. Zeppelin and the Stones were definitely more his speed, but he had been telling the truth about David Bowie. The man had been brilliant. He was now making his way through the eighties, with mixed results. He liked Depeche Mode, they were pretty enjoyable. And he could easily listen to the Eurythmics all day. But there was no way anyone in the world was ever going to convince him Duran Duran deserved more than a single listen.

McAdams’ skin now matched the red on Bucky’s shirt, he couldn’t help but notice.

“Do you not like music, Captain McAdams? Maybe you should give it a try. I’ve heard it’s very helpful to listen to some when you need to relax.”

Round three, Bucky Barnes.

***
“Why is your dog wearing a cape?”

“Because he’s Batman.”

“He’s…Bat…Man?”

“Yep.”

“Why is your dog dressed like Batman, Sergeant Barnes?”

“Well, see, I’ve been acquainting myself with modern cultural norms, like you suggested. And since I liked comics way back when, I thought those would be as good a place to start as any. And one of the kids who works over at Forbidden Planet – It’s a great shop, by-the-way, you should totally check it out when you get a chance - recommended the Dark Knight. And as I was reading it, he kinda reminded me of Sarge, just a bit. I mean that guy is totally fucked up, and someone should just sit him down and buy him a couple of shots and let him cry it all out, you know, but he does have that awesome mask that covers his eyes, just like Sarge. So I thought hey, why not.” Bucky paused, waiting for just the right moment when Captain McAdams took a deep breath. “Plus, he likes it.”

“He likes what, Sergeant Barnes?”

“Wearing a cape, see, look at his tail, it’s really wagging.”

“And are you a comics super-hero as well, Sergeant?”

“Oh no, not me,” Bucky shook his head.

“Well, at least there’s that.”

“I’m his side-kick.”
“Excuse me?”

“Yeah see, he’s Batman, and there’s only one of those. But every good super-hero needs a side-kick to back him up. So I’m Robin.” With that, Bucky carefully unzipped his hoodie and pulled the flaps aside, to reveal the tee-shirt whose colors were a combination of red, yellow and green, a perfect match to Batman’s Robin.

Are you ready to tap out now, you constipated pig?

***

And sometimes, just sometimes, you just had to go back to the classics.

“So I see we are back to the pink today, Sergeant Barnes.”

It wasn’t just the pink Converse this time. This Tuesday he had paired it with a bright pink satin bomber jacket, with black cuffs and a zipper. To accessorize (something which was extremely important according to Yuna), he had wrapped a matching bandana around his throat, also pink but with black stripes that mimicked the patterns of a zebra; it perfectly matched Sarge’s brand new halter. Yuna had told him pink was a very flattering color, and men should wear it more, as it brought out the peaches and cream undertones in one’s skin. Bucky agreed with her, as it really did make his skin look nice, and his eyes even bluer. He told McAdams as much while the man’s own eyeballs resumed their throbbing thing, as he sat there speechless.

“And what is that in your hand?” the Captain asked, when he finally regained his powers of speech.

“What? This?”

“Yes. That.” The words were spoken through gritted teeth this time.

“It’s a frappuccino.”

“A…frapp---uccino, you said?”
“Yep.”

“And why is it pink as well?”

“Because it’s strawberry flavored.”

“And from where exactly, did you procure this strawberry frappuccino?”

“Starbucks.” And holy shit, in all the lectures he received about the modern world, why hadn’t anybody thought to tell him about Starbucks? Bucky loved a good cup of joe as much as the next person, but man, they could do a hell of a lot more things with coffee these days than they could back in the thirties. Not only were there frappuccinos, but cappuccinos and espressos as well. Caramel venti lattes, and half-caf, soy milk grandes with extra whip. He could get them with syrups and creams, sugar and something called agave. Frozen, blended, hot with a sprinkle of cinnamon on top, the variations were endless. These were the kinds of things he wished people had told him about, and he said as much to McAdams as he listed all his favorites and the benefits of each one.

By the time he finished, which had taken him a good thirty minutes, McAdams was still silent, but he was looking upward, as if praying to a higher power for patience.

“Do you not like Starbucks, Captain McAdams?” Bucky asked him after a few more seconds of that silence passed.

“I like Starbucks well enough, Sergeant Barnes.” Another look heavenward; Bucky wondered if the powers that be had put him on hold, and if there was any of that annoying elevator muzak playing while he waited. “But I prefer it the way nature intended. Strong and black, and most certainly not pink.”

“Oh, well,” Bucky shrugged, “that’s probably because you just haven’t found the right one yet. If you don’t like Starbucks, there’s also this place called Dunkin Donuts, and not only do they sell doughnuts, but they have tons of coffee as well. They have this thing called a Coolatta…” And Bucky was off again.

Of course that old blowhard tried to interrupt, but just who the hell did he think he was dealing with? Bucky had always had the gift of gab, and even more importantly, he knew how to turn on the charm when needed. It was how he managed to talk old Mr. Rourke into extending his credit and
giving him extra groceries when food had been scarce. Or extra rations for his unit when those had been worth more than their weight in gold. Or how…or how he had always managed to find a way to get the medicines they needed, because the cough was bad this time, and if he didn’t get his hands on them, then…then…then…

A smile, and a wink, and the promise of a future favor, that he always delivered upon, because times had been tight, and everybody was just doing what they had to in order to survive. And if a cheerful conversation with a dash of flare and a juicy bit of gossip left them smiling when it was done, well, then Bucky had done his job.

Unfortunately, it seemed as if McAdams had never understood that important facet of human nature, even though Sarge apparently did; his eyes were bright and his ears perked as he listened to Bucky go on and on about all the different types of coffee in the world now.

But that was okay. Bucky could do this for hours. Or at least for the remaining twenty-two minutes of his session. Which he did.

*Still think you can fuck with me? Oh honey, I haven’t even gotten started.*

***

And then every once in a while, Fortune could be kind, and when you looked down, there was a shiny silver half-dollar at your feet, an extra clip of ammo when you were sure you had just used your last one. Or a puppy, waiting for you find him in a box and bring him home. Or…

Or…

“Yeah, I thought you’d react that way.” Yuna said as she watched his eyes grow wide and bright. “That’s why I put it aside for you. I’ve had three people ask about it already, but I told them someone had put a deposit on it. We’re not supposed to do that, but you’re one of our best customers, and my personal favorite, and I knew you’d love it.”

“Can I – Can I try it on?” Bucky was already reaching out.

“Of course, c’mon, changing room three is open.” She was already leading the way. “And I think we have a pair of shoes that would match. Just your size too.”
“I’d have to get Sarge a new halter.” He was breathless, rapt, as he followed Yuna.

“Absolutely,” Yuna nodded. “But I’m sure your friend Tara can help you both with that.”

***

She did.

***

Some days, some days, even Bucky knew he had outdone himself. And today, today was definitely one of those days.

Unfortunately, as of yet, old Captain Fart-Breath hadn’t developed a sense of style. Well, Bucky sighed with a mental shrug, he supposed some people just couldn’t be helped.

Because he knew, he just knew, that today he looked fabulous.

A tight-fitting pair of black jeans, the tightest he owned in fact, paired with another tight black t-shirt. But that wasn’t what made him look so good. No, that was the leopard print velvet trench coat he wore, with a belt he had cinched, that hung to his mid-thigh. And then there were the shoes, a pair of pointy-toed slip on loafers, with the same exact print, that somehow highlighted the shapeliness of his calves and made his legs look even longer. And if that were not enough, perched on the top of his head, the crowning glory of it all, were the cat-eyed sunglasses, with rhinestones in the corner, with a matching pattern, he had used to pull his hair back from his face.

McAdams didn’t say anything for the entire session. Just sat there, staring, blinking over and over again, while Sarge sat at his feet, proudly showing off his brand-new matching halter.

Cat got your tongue, Captain?

***
Life wasn’t all just fucking with McAdams, although that was certainly one of the best parts. And of course, McAdams was not the only one who was aware of the change in Bucky’s appearance. Bucky couldn’t help but notice how, over the past couple of weeks, there were more and more people in the cafeteria level when he showed up for his free meal. There was a sense of a breath being held in wait, that released whenever he finally walked in, and the resumption of murmurs and whispers and their various commentary as he took a moment to make up his mind about what he wanted to eat that day.

Let ‘em look, let ‘em all look, he thought and then ignored them as he proceeded to eat his meal. He even ignored the Black Widow when she made her appearance, with blonde curly hair, dressed in one of the staff outfits and pretending to clean a table in a corner, while she did her own reconnaissance. Did you think I wouldn’t make you Natalia? I helped train you after all. And you’re one of the best, one of the very best, even I can admit to that. But, well, Brooklyn in the house. She didn’t disturb him, and let him finish his meal in peace. He never saw her again after that.

And there were still all of the other things going on in his life. His television marathons with Teresa; those were spent in an easy companionship, with him joining her on her couch, so they could watch the latest episode of whatever telenovela they were both currently obsessed with, eager to find out what trouble the characters on screen were going to get into next. There was his own continued research, not just on dog training and health, but so Bucky could begin to try to catch up on all the cultural changes he had missed. He could take or leave most television (except for the telenovelas), but books had always been one of his greatest sources of pleasure, and once he obtained a library card, even more worlds opened up to him. Terry Pratchett was amazing, as was Neil Gaiman and Tanith Lee, and he could lose himself for hours in the worlds they created.

He still saw Tara several times a week, but now whenever she saw him, once she was done trying to steal his dog, she would insist he give her a little twirl. While Bucky usually saved his most dramatic outfits for the days he was seeing McAdams, he still liked to dress up, experimenting with cuts and color-combinations, and she always gave him her honest opinion.

As those weeks passed, and she continued to greet him and Sarge with bright smiles, Bucky found he didn’t just consider her an ally, but a friend as well, one with whom conversation was now a pleasure, and the time spent with looked forward to. It puzzled him at first, like a sore tooth he couldn’t help but probe with his tongue, because something still felt a bit off. It took him a while to figure out why, and once he did, he asked her about it.

“Why do you always call me Sarge’s person, and not by my name?” he commented as he handed over the caramel mocha frappuccino he had gotten into the habit of bringing her on Mondays and Wednesdays when he came in fifteen minutes early for Sarge’s training classes, just so they could
chat, (she was the one who had pointed out Starbucks to him after all; he thought it only fair).

“‘Cos you are,” she laughed, after she had slurped from her drink.

“Yes, but…I do have a name you know,” he eventually said. “And we are…friends? Aren’t we? Friends call each other by their names.”

She paused then, lowering her drink to stare at him. “Are we?” she finally asked. Bucky swallowed, suddenly very nervous.

“I’d like to think so, yes.”

Her smile this time was very small, but no less sincere. And then, for some strange reason, it grew sad.

“I don’t even know your name,” she shrugged and then laughed, as if at herself. “You’ve been coming here all these months, and you’ve always just been Sarge and Sarge’s person to me.”

Bucky took a moment; to take a breath, to gather his courage, because this, this was important.

“My name is Bucky,” he whispered. “And I’d really appreciate it if you called me that.”

“Well Bucky,” she said, and her smile was very sincere this time. “It’s very nice to finally meet you. My name is Tara, but you already knew that.”

“I did,” Bucky nodded, returning her grin.

“And we may be friends now,” she went on, but there was a look in her eye, a warning in the way she held her head, “but you still need to stay away from Meghan. Because I love my girlfriend, and I spent three years chasing her before she finally agreed to go out with me.”

“Was she worth it?” Bucky asked.
“Oh yeah,” and Tara’s entire face was alight with a look of love and adoration. Bucky wondered if anyone had ever looked at him that way. He thought someone (someone) may have once, but a lot of his memories were still foggy, still confused, so he couldn’t be sure.

Tara took another small sip from her drink, and then held her hands out in front of her. “And she’s got tits out to here.”

Okaaaay…Bucky still wasn’t quite used to how open and frank everyone was about their sex lives in the twenty-first century.

“Good for you?” He squinted at her.

“And they’re pierced.” Tara cackled at the way Bucky started to choke on his own frappuccino. “What? It’s not a big deal. So’s my clit.”

“Wha? Wh-why would you do that to yourself?” Bucky had metal attached to his body, a construct of circuitry and technology fused to his spine and shoulder. An improvement, he had been told, the final necessity in their quest for the perfect weapon. That was what they believed, but it had done nothing but cause Bucky pain. It still caused him nothing but pain, a constant ache that could at times be ignored, but never truly forgotten. He could not understand why anyone would willingly subject themselves to that.

“Cos it’s pretty. And it feels great when Meghan uses her tongue to-“

And this friendship idea was suddenly overrated; he was definitely starting to miss the days when it had just been him and Sarge. Bucky turned, and quickly started to walk away, his dog at his side. But Tara, scenting blood in the water, followed, laughing the entire time.

“Aw c’mon Bucky, we’re friends now,” she persisted. “Friends talk about these kinds of things with each other. It’s not like I’m gonna start going on about my period.” That last bit was added with yet another cackle, and Bucky knew she was fucking with him. For an instant, just an instant, he had a brief flash of sympathy for Captain McAdams. But only for an instant.

And then just as suddenly, Bucky stopped and turned back around to face her. Because he’d had sisters once, three of them, he thought. They were vague impressions, blurry memories in his mind, but he knew he’d had them. A mother too. And there had been times, he was certain of it, when
there was pain, and complaints, and things that needed to be done, supplies gathered, to help them get through it.

“Do you need me to acquire necessities for you, to help you?” he asked. That brought her up short, and she stopped suddenly, her mouth open as she blinked up at him.

“Bucky…” She paused to swallow and take another blink. “Bucky, are you saying if I asked you to, you’d go out and get me tampons?”

“If you provided me with a list, I am certain I could procure the correct items at the drug store,” he tried to assure her. She stood there, staring at him with her mouth still open, until she finally closed it, shook her head, and took another step forward into his space.

“You really are a sweetheart, you know that don’t you?” she asked, and then reached for his jacket. But only to pull him down, just a little bit, so she could press a kiss, soft and sweet and smelling like a frappuccino, to his cheek. “Sarge is really, really lucky you were the one that found him. And I’m glad we’re friends.”

“Thank you,” Bucky whispered as he pulled back, but only so he could smile at her. “And me too.”

“Good, now c’mon.” This time instead of stepping away, she slid her arm through his and began to lead him to the stairway that would bring him to the basement level where the training classes were held. “Sarge’s class is about to start, and I know how much you both enjoy those, so you’re not gonna wanna be late for that.”

***

Bucky really did enjoy the training classes, as did Sarge, and no, he most certainly did not want to be late. It was an intermediate class, and they were learning increasingly complicated commands, as well as more leash control. Sarge was once again the quickest learner (and no, Bucky wasn’t biased, no matter what anyone may have said), but he also enjoyed coming to the place where he could play with all of his puppy friends, his favorite being Crystal, a small white terrier, who was a bit, just a bit, on the yappy side, and had a tendency to nip a little too hard every once in a while, but overall a very sweet dog, who loved to play with her big friend. But her person, Cathy, a lovely woman with long blonde hair, was kind and friendly, and a watchful owner, aware of the problem, and working on it, (unlike Lisa, who had thankfully not signed up for this second round of classes.) They often stood side by side, as they ran through the various exercises, while she chatted amicably with Bucky about the latest book on dog behavior she had read, or dry shampoo she had started to use on Crystal, which left her coat gleaming and soft. Bucky always listened to her; Crystal was her second dog, so
she had plenty of tips and tricks she was willing to share with him. And she had been the one to tell him about the attachment Bucky could clip to Sarge’s lead, where he could store the small plastic bags and hand sanitizer he always needed after Sarge had done his business. So her advice was solid and sound, and she was generous with it. Bucky thought it only fair he repay her in kind, especially when he noticed she was struggling with getting Crystal to walk easily by her side, instead of pulling on the lead.

“You’re holding the leash too tight,” he told her, nodding down at her hand. “Give Crystal a little more length, and then slow down a bit. She’s a tiny dog, and your pace shifts a bit when you walk. Slow down, give her a little more room, and let her figure it out for herself. And encourage her. She likes the praise.”

“Like this?” Cathy asked, doing as Bucky instructed. It took a few circles around the astro-turf, but eventually they figured it out and found their rhythm, Crystal walking proudly by Cathy’s side. “Good girl, Crystal.” Cathy smiled at him. “Thanks for that. I got that New York walk, and I forget she’s so small sometimes. I need to work on remembering that.”

“You’re welcome,” Bucky nodded, giving Sarge his own pat, because he’d been doing very well this class. “And she’s a good dog.”

“Yeah well, our two – Oh no, wait. Gotta go! Be right back.” Cathy suddenly bent forward, scooped Crystal up and bolted toward the stairs. Because she was observant (unlike Lisa), and Crystal had started to circle and sniff at the ground, the universal sign that an animal was looking for a spot to relieve themselves. It was one of the few times Andy allowed someone to leave the class, without question, as potty training was also something else they were all still working on.

“That was helpful,” Andy acknowledged as he approached Bucky.

“Sorry,” Bucky apologized. “I know I should have waited for you to come over, but you were busy with Tanya and Corky,” (another nice owner, with a very nice dog), “and I just thought I could help.”

“Don’t be,” Andy shook his head. “You’re very, very good at this James. Patient and observant, and you’ve got a very good eye. In fact, I was wondering—”

Bucky never got to hear the rest of what Andy was going to say. Because at that very moment, Sarge began to do his own circling, and Bucky knew that meant he had a very limited amount of time to get him outside.
“Um, sorry,” he said, as he bent down to scoop up his now one-hundred-and-twenty-pound dog so they wouldn’t have an accident. It had been three weeks since their last one, and Bucky had no desire to end that streak. “Gotta go!”

“Not a problem,” he heard Andy laugh, just as he reached the stairs.

***

It was good that he was so busy, and had so many things to occupy his time these days. The classes, his walks with Sarge, dinners with Teresa, and shared cups of coffee with Tara all proved to be necessary distractions. Because as much as he enjoyed using his clothes and bravado to mess with Captain McAdams, as he attended the last few of his therapy sessions, and the date of his probationary hearing drew closer and closer, he knew he was playing a very dangerous game. As fun as it was, it was still stressful. Sometimes after he left those biweekly sessions he would walk a few blocks, needing to find a quiet corner, so he could take a few deep breaths, and run a shaking hand through his hair, and Sarge, sensing his distress, rose up on his hind legs so he could prop his paws on Bucky’s shoulders and lick his chin. Bucky had always had a very good poker face, but he knew, he knew, men like McAdams always played with their cards held close to their chest, and an ace hidden up their sleeves. He’d been making a fool of the man for the past several months, and he knew the price he paid for that was going to be a heavy one when it finally came.

He just hoped that somehow, he could find a way to pay it, and that when they came to blows, and it was inevitable that they would, Sarge wouldn’t be caught in the crossfire.

Chapter End Notes

OK, so, I once again have to take just a second here to thank my AMAZING beta Merry_rf. I throw words at her, and then she throws them back at me, except they MAKE SENSE now. And with this story, I threw a hell of a lot of words her way, a hell of a lot. So, you know, she deserves all of the kudos and good things for not only being an amazing beta, but kind and generous with her time too. =) **leaves comment and tries to sneakily sneak into a new bush**
“So, last session today,” Bucky smiled, as he sat himself down in that gods-forsaken uncomfortable chair and crossed his legs, the second Thursday of June. Today he had gone all out, deciding on a pair of black and red plaid fatigue pants, with straps and buckles (a tribute to his old Winter Soldier gear, but updated for the modern man), a tight-fitting long sleeve shirt, over which he pulled an old Ramones tee. He had replaced his old combat boots with a newer, even higher pair, with more buckles and straps (another tribute), a leather cuff around his right wrist and a studded belt. It matched the studs on Sarge’s halter, as did the red and black bandana tied around his neck. Over the past few months, Bucky discovered clothes were not only a way to express and discover oneself, but could also serve as armor, another weapon in his arsenal. And he wanted to be as prepared as possible when he stepped onto this battlefield. “Gonna miss me? Cos I can’t say the same about you.”

McAdams said nothing, just stared and stared and stared at him, his pale blue eyes narrowed and flinty. He was waiting for James to break, but they had been playing this game for months now, and he really should have known better. Until finally, finally, he leaned back in his chair, steepled his fingers together, and rested his chin upon their tips.

“Is that what you think, Sergeant Barnes?” His voice was low, measured, the growl of a wolf preparing to attack its prey.

“Well yeah,” Bucky shrugged with a fake nonchalance. “It’s the last session, at least per all those agreements you made me sign. I double-checked. There’s just today, and then the probationary hearing on Monday.”

“Is that what you think?” McAdams repeated, his voice even flatter, his eyes even sharper, as if he were staring down at a piece of shit he was trying to scrape off his shoe.

“Like I said,” Bucky shrugged again, “It’s part of the agreement you all forced me to sign.”

“Yes, I suppose it is,” Captain McAdams remained perfectly still as he spoke, not a hair or button out of place. “But I’m sure you’re also aware, if you actually did reread the agreement, that your release is contingent upon my final approval, which you do not have, and I can assure you, you are certainly not going to get.”
And here it was, the first slap to the face, the call to challenge. Bucky could do nothing but accept.

“And why not? I’ve done everything requested of me, and haven’t missed a single one of these sessions.”

“And yet somehow, you still failed to meet any of the goals we set when we began.”

“We didn’t set any goals,” Bucky countered, his voice still calm, cool, collected, even though his palm had started to sweat, and there were icy pinpricks running up and down his spine, demon’s kisses reminding him that the devil would have his due. “You did. And those weren’t any of my goals when this whole thing started. They never were.”

“Did you actually think you had any choice in the matter?” McAdams sneered. While on the surface, McAdams appeared exactly the same as he had when the session began, both Bucky and the Soldier, whose lives had depended on their being able to notice even the slightest of changes, (a hitch in a breath, the twitch of a finger on a trigger), could see the man was furious, and preparing to release all his pent up fury and frustration on what he thought was the source.

“That’s what I was told, when I first agreed to come in—“

“When you were captured and brought in for rehabilitation.”

“-that if I did everything that was asked of me, that if I provided everything I knew about what was left of HYDRA, and let your scientists use my body as a guinea pig, after a year, one year, of mandatory counselling, I would be free to go. I was promised that. It’s the only reason I agreed to any of it. And I did it, I did all of that, so now it’s time for you and the rest of SHIELD to hold up your end of the bargain.”

“What you seem to have forgotten, Sergeant Barnes, once again, was that was contingent upon your successful reintegration into the world, proving you were no longer a threat, and instead a contributing member of society.”

“And I’ve done that, everything you’ve asked of me, I’ve done it.”

“Bullshit!” It was the first time Bucky ever heard McAdams curse. He always seemed to pride himself on his iron control, and ability to not lower himself to the level of mere humans. But, Bucky
was now more convinced than ever, he had never been human, just a bloated, rot filled pig, who had
to scavenge on the weaknesses of other people in order to make himself feel superior.

“You want to be honest Sergeant Barnes, then let’s be honest,” he went on, rising from his desk,
stepping around the mahogany shield of its protection for the first time. “You were assigned to me,
by Nicholas J. Fury himself, because I am the head of the department of SHIELD’s psychological
development and treatment, with the hope that we could make something useful out of the mess you
made of your life. And while I have been as patient and helpful as could possibly be expected,
offering techniques and guidelines with a proven track-record of success, you have blatantly ignored
all of them. You’ve spent the past year, and especially the past six months, making me look like a
fool!”

“Because they were bullshit!” Bucky had risen to his own feet, and the two of them now stood less
than a foot away from each other, because if this fucker thought Bucky was going to allow him to try
to intimidate him with his size, make Bucky cowed and afraid, he had no idea who he was dealing
with. Bucky had survived that fucking chair. And Bucky, Bucky had stood in front of a man who
was the sun, even brighter than the sun, and laughed and laughed and laughed. And while he may
have been burnt, time and time again, he was still standing. This regurgitated ape was nothing,
nothing compared to any of that. “You never wanted to help me. You just wanted another super-
soldier to add to your collection.”

“That’s what you are, what you will always be Sergeant Barnes, and the sooner you accept that-“

“My names is James!” It was Bucky’s turn now, for his own fires to blaze and burn. Because
Captain McAdams wasn’t the only one who was furious and so goddamned tired of being played
with. “Not Sergeant, or Sergeant Barnes, or even the fucking Winter Soldier. My name is James
Buchanan Barnes and I’ve been asking you to call me that since the very beginning. If you can’t
even respect that, respect a man when he asks you to call him by his name, then why the hell would I
listen anything else you would have said, Greg.”

“What you decide to call yourself is irrelevant.” McAdams face was red, pulsing with anger as he
stepped even closer into Bucky’s space, so close Bucky could see the capillaries in his eyes and the
flecks of spittle at the corners of his mouth. “In here, you’re a Sergeant, and I’m a Captain and your
commanding officer. And you may not like that, but I really couldn’t give a shit. I earned each and
every one of my commissions, and wear them with pride. Unlike you, who is only here because-“

McAdams was cut off when once again, for only the second time during their sessions, the buzzer on
his phone went off. This time McAdams ignored it, turning to slam his hand on the base, before he
returned all his attention back to Bucky.

“Because what?” Bucky growled. And he wasn’t the only one, because at his feet, Sarge has risen as
well, and was growling, his hackles raised and teeth bared, something Bucky had never seen him do before.

“Because of the friends he used to have, who haven’t realized that times have changed, and this is the world we live in now.” McAdams glanced down at Sarge and sneered. “And get control of that fucking animal right now, or I’ll call animal control and tell them there’s a vicious dog that needs to be put down for the public’s safety.”

Bucky almost hit him. Almost pulled back his left arm, the gears shifting and tightening, preparing themselves for battle, engaging his ultimate line of defense, before, just in time, he took another look at McAdams’ contemptuous and self-satisfied face, and stopped himself.

Because this was a trap. Perfectly laid by McAdams, with all the right snares and hooks to catch him, and Bucky had almost walked right into it. If he raised his hands, if he attacked, then anything McAdams said about him would be proven right; he was useless, wild, unsalvageable and unfit for society, and the only viable option, for the safety of everyone else, was his return to custody.

In his anger and frustration, Bucky had almost fallen for it. Just like he had so many times in the past. Never stopping to think, to consider the consequences of his actions, because he thought there were no other options and all the alternatives were worse. The chair, the cryo-tank, being left behind again, just do what they said, what was expected, because the alternative was worse, always, always worse.

But this time, Bucky did stop. And Bucky did think, and instead he unclenched his fist and lowered his arm to his side.

“Sarge, heel,” he said instead. For the first time, Sarge didn’t listen. His hackles remained raised, and his lips pulled back. “Sarge,” Bucky said again, this time firmer, his voice lower, but still filled with all that was in his heart whenever he looked at his silly, fluffy and absolutely devoted to him puppy. “Heel.” And then Bucky reached out, and very gently laid his hand on top of Sarge’s head.

Sarge immediately looked up at him, obviously confused. Because they were pack, and one of their own was in danger, and that’s what pack did. Pack protected each other. But they had also spent months together; months where Bucky spent all his time taking care of Sarge, making sure he was warm and well fed and loved. Bucky guiding them on their way, and Sarge following not because he was forced or being pulled against his will, but because Bucky had never steered him wrong, had proven he was someone who could be trusted, that his decisions were always made out of concern and a desire to protect, and as a result was worthy of the endless, endless love and devotion in Sarge’s huge heart.
And so, as their gazes met, with Bucky’s hand still resting on top of Sarge’s head, Sarge listened to his alpha, and heeled.

“Good boy,” Bucky whispered, smiling down at him, and giving his ear a scratch. Sarge was still tense, quivering with the desire to attack, but he sat and he stayed, heeled at Bucky’s feet.

“Do you think that proves anything, Sergeant?” The moment was over, and the more pressing concern, the more immediate threat still needed to be dealt with. Bucky turned his attention back to McAdams, who was standing way too close, his own fists clenched, his words his warning instead of a dog’s growl. “Because I am telling you right now, you traitorous piece of shit—”

“Captain McAdams, I am sorry to disturb you, but—“

“Not now, Private Turner!” McAdams hissed at her as the woman herself burst through his door.

“Yessir, sorry Sir,” she stammered as she quickly took in the tableau she had walked in on. “I’m sorry to interrupt Sir, but it’s the Command Floor again, and they said your presence was required.”

“Please let them know that I’m in the middle of a critical meeting and will join them as soon as possible.”

“Yes Sir, I already told them that Sir,” Private Turner apologized. “But they told me to inform you that you do not have that option, and are to report to the ninety-eighth floor immediately.”

McAdams glanced at Turner, who looked humiliated and ashamed at having to deliver this news herself, and then back at Bucky before he shook himself slightly, and finally took a step back.

“Right,” he nodded. “Tell them I will be there shortly, Private.”

“I am to escort you myself, or else someone from that floor will arrive to escort you themselves, Sir,” Turner winced.

“Right,” McAdams repeated, reaching down to straighten his jacket, as he cast one last sneer of derision at Bucky. “You are dismissed, Sergeant. I will see you again at nine a.m. on Monday.
morning. Do not be late. In the interim, I suggest you return home and start packing whatever meager possessions you have managed to gather, as well as that dog’s. This experiment has obviously failed, and it will be my official recommendation that you return to living at the Tower, where we can monitor your progress twenty-four hours a day, and your dog be given to someone else so he can receive the proper care and training. Do not be late Sergeant. You’re already in enough trouble as it is. Try to get at least this one thing right.”

And with that Captain McAdams turned and walked away, following Private Turner to the elevator banks.

***

The elevator ride down to the lobby passed in a blur. One minute Bucky was stepping inside, and then the next, he was making his way across the glass and marble tiled floors, Sarge’s paws draped over his shoulder as Bucky carried him, instead of allowing him to walk by his side as they usually did. It was over; because of McAdams, they were going to take away his freedom, his life, his choices…his dog, and Bucky didn’t know what he was going to do. He could run, he supposed, but they had found him before. And he couldn’t abandon Sarge, he couldn’t. But Sarge’s distinctive size and coloring would make him stand out even more, no matter where he ran. Maybe Teresa would be willing to take him in, or even Tara. At least that way he might be able to see Sarge from time to time, if they allowed him any visitors.

*Oh god, they were going to take away his dog. What would he do without Sarge?*

Bucky was almost to the doors, which were already opening, when he heard a noise; the sound of a throat clearing, sharp and intent but deliberately pitched so his super-soldier hearing would catch it. When he looked up to locate the source, there, not too far away, stood Sam Wilson at the reception desk. Bucky knew he was snarling, could feel all of his anger and fury written upon his face, there for the world to see.

But Sam Wilson merely remained where he was, patiently waiting for Bucky to see him. Once he had, and their gazes locked, his expression didn’t change. But he did nod, just once, before he turned and continued his conversation with the receptionist.

*Yeah, I heard you motherfucker. Loud and clear,* Bucky thought back at him with a razor’s sharpness as he turned and stormed through the doors and out into the street. *Check and mate, and I’m your fucking cannon fodder. Thanks for nothing, you motherfucking sons of bitches.*

***
“James, James, what’s wrong? What’s the matter James? Are you okay?”

It was a warm voice in his ear, and a soft shadow falling across his face, blocking out the sunlight that called Bucky from the buzzing and swarming honeycombs of his mind and back into the present. Blinking, he looked up to see Teresa kneeling in front of him, close but not touching him, her hand scratching Sarge’s ear.

Bucky blinked again, and realized he was sitting on one of the iron benches in the courtyard in front of their building. It may have been the projects, but it was obvious that at some point in the past, there had been attempts to disguise the poverty they held with cosmetic modifications. So the four buildings that made up their complex were linked together by several pathways. There was an old playground on one end children used during the day, and where others gathered to engage in different games much later at night. There were small patches of straggly grass, lined by a few stray benches that had no groundskeeper to tend them, where during the warmer weather many of Bucky’s neighbors gathered to sit and chat. The area may have been poor, but the residents tried their best, and there were what appeared to be a few carefully tended shrines, and even a garden patch or two on the grass that Bucky imagined in the summer would add a much-needed bit of color. He’d been looking forward to seeing them, although he supposed now he never would. He would regret that, just like he would regret so many other things.

He took another blink, and realized Teresa was still waiting for a response.

“Oh, hey Teresa,” he finally managed to say, his voice coming out dry and raspy, sounding more like the leaves that the winds scattered across the concrete when had first moved in.

“James, what’s the matter? Are you all right?” she asked again.

“I’m fine.”

“Don’t lie to me James,” she said, her voice turning sharp. But it was the sharpness of concern, of care, and not the cruelty a bully’s voice held when he knew their victim had no escape. “I’ve been calling your name for the past ten minutes, and you didn’t even notice me.”

“Sorry.” Bucky shook his head. “Was I supposed to meet you? Do you have groceries?” Had she texted him? Was he supposed to have met her? He couldn’t remember.
“No, I don’t have any groceries,” she told him, rising to her feet and straightening her shoulders. “What I do have is a neighbor who’s been sitting here for who knows how long, looking like he just discovered his life is over.”

She had no idea how right she was. He had just two and a half more days of freedom, of this life he had built, first as what was left of the Soldier, then James, and then finally as Bucky. With its pleasures, and bits of sunlight, and nights spent curled around a warm dog, who licked his face to wake him up and taught him how to laugh again, after over seventy years of forgetting what that felt like.

When he didn’t correct her assumption, Teresa stepped forward, bending close enough he could smell the rose perfume she always wore, which she claimed had always been her husband’s favorite.

“James, what’s the matter?” As she spoke, she reached out and gently laid her hand upon his shoulder. Bucky was still mostly uncomfortable with touch. Touch always came with pain; a slap to the face, the prick of a needle injecting fire into his veins, hands behind his head, tightening his mask so it dug into his checks, leaving cuts he’d been trained to ignore because he’d been assigned a mission and that always took priority. But ever since Sarge, there were a few people he could bear touching him, whose hands had always been gentle; Tara, when she pulled him in so she could kiss his cheek. Yuna, who would reach up to straighten his collar or adjust the fit of his shirt, quick and efficient, but kind, the nails of her slender fingers always a different color. And Teresa, whose hands were old and covered in age spots, but strong and certain of themselves as she dug through her purse for her keys, or changed the channel with her remote control. It was okay when these women touched him. He never flinched or felt the need to strike out, strike back, prevent another hit. And they loved his dog, were kind to Sarge as well whenever they saw him. How could he not be willing to trust them after that.

Maybe he could trust her with this as well.

“Teresa,” he said, looking into her eyes, a deep dark brown, nearly black, that saw everything going on around them with the experience and wisdom of a life long lived. “I don’t know what I’m going to do. They’re going to lock me up again, and take Sarge away, and I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

She stood there, staring at him, her eyes unfathomable for just a second, before she nodded, and the hand on his shoulder started pulling him, urging him to his feet.

“All right,” she said once she was sure Bucky was listening. “This sounds like a very long story, so you’re going to have to start from the beginning. But we’re going to go upstairs for that, where I’ll make us both a cup of coffee, and you’ll tell me everything.”
And because she was the only one, because Bucky had no one else with whom he could talk to, and the noise in his head was too much, too loud, he nodded and followed her into their building.

***

Much like her personality, Teresa’s coffee was sharp and strong, but bracing and helpful as he sat at her kitchen table, drinking cup after cup, while he told her as much as he could about his life.

“I was a soldier, in the war, but I was part of a mission that went bad, and got captured,” he explained over his third cup, when he finally gathered enough of himself together to find the words that were the dossier of his life. “They had me for a long time, and they tortured and brainwashed me, and made me do all these horrible things. And I did them, I was damned good at it too. But then one day they sent me on a mission, and I failed, and it made me realize they’d been lying to me, and who I thought I was, who they made me believe I was, wasn’t the truth. It was all just a bunch of lies they forced me to believe. So I ran, and tried to get away. But eventually one of the members of my old unit found me,” and here Bucky had to swallow, to take a breath and another sip of his cooling coffee, before he could go on, “and brought me to SHIELD headquarters. Given the circumstances, they gave me a plea bargain. If I told them everything I knew about my captors and their plans, and let them run all these tests on me to make sure I was no longer loyal to them, then I would be put on probation for a year, while I went to these mandatory therapy sessions, and if I did everything they said, and didn’t cause any more trouble, I would be free to go.” It was such a sanitized version of everything that had happened, but it was the only way he could say it, could verbalize what the past seventy years of his life had been like. And even that much was nearly too much for him to say.

“And have you?” Teresa asked, interrupting him for the first time.

Bucky nodded.

“Then what’s the problem then? You’ve done everything they’ve asked of you. Why are you so worried?”

“Because the therapist they assigned me, this asshole McAdams, pretty much told me that they won’t end my probationary period. He said that during my hearing on Monday, he’s going to tell them I haven’t made any progress, just spent the past year making a fool out a him when all I really wanted was to just be able to live my life. But he’s the one who gets the final say, and he’s not going to approve my release, he’s going to recommend I go back into custody and that…and that…They’re going to take Sarge away from me.”
“Why?” She was horrified, as horrified as he had been, still was, for the past however many hours it had been since he left The Tower and somehow made his way home. “They’d have to be blind not to see how well you’re doing.”

“Because it doesn’t make a difference. They never intended to let me go. They just want to use me, just like those other bastards did, but working for them this time.” His hands, both of them, were shaking, so badly the coffee had spilled over the edge of his mug and onto the table top. Before he could even reach for a napkin with trembling fingers, Sarge, who had been sitting in his lap, all one-hundred and twenty pounds of him, whimpered and started to lick Bucky’s chin. “And I can’t do that again Teresa, I can’t. It’ll kill me for real this time, and there won’t be any more dinners with you, or talking to Tara at Petco, or-or Sarge, and I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

She reached out, ignoring the spilled coffee and all of Sarge’s fur, that somehow managed to get everywhere, and took his hands into her own, where she held them, warm and steady, a safe harbor, however brief, in the present storms of Bucky’s life.

“We’ll pray,” she told him, her hands never once loosening their hold on his. And where he was shaking and weak, she was steady and calm, confident in her belief. It was her mountain, her faith; the keep she had built herself to help her withstand all the trials of her own life. He wondered, briefly, if that was why she could spend day after day visiting the man she still loved who barely ever remembered her anymore, and still smile at the world, at him, whenever she saw him.

“I dunno Teresa,” Bucky shook his head. “I don’t believe in God anymore. I don’t know that I ever did. He’s never been very kind to me.”

“You don’t have to believe. I believe enough for both of us. And He gave you that dog, made sure you were the one to find him, so I think He may be looking out for you after all.”

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Teresa did much more than just pray for him. Over the next two days, she became his guide, his constant companion, his guardian angel with her sword raised, as loyal and steadfast as Sarge. That Friday night, she made him a full dinner and then insist he stay so they could watch the first episode of a new telenovela she had heard about. By the time he left, it was late, and Bucky was actually tired enough to be able to sleep for a few hours, before it was time to get out of bed and take Sarge for his usual morning walk.
By the time he returned, Teresa was waiting for him at the top of the steps, where she ushered him back into her apartment, fixed him a big breakfast, and laid out all her plans for the day. First there was grocery shopping that needed to be done, where Teresa served as both guide and teacher, explaining why she preferred this brand over that, as they battled their way through the weekend crowds. Then it was back to Bucky’s apartment, where Teresa invited herself inside, so she could help Bucky select an outfit for his hearing on Monday. While she complimented his ever-growing collection of clothes, it quickly became apparent there was nothing suitable for a probationary hearing. So then it was back outside, and into a cab, Bucky taking Teresa to Second Chances, where thankfully Yuna was working that day, smiling brightly as soon as she saw Bucky enter, Sarge and Teresa in tow.

“I’m so glad you’re here today!” she crowed as Bucky made his way toward her, “because we just got some new stock in, from an estate sale, and there’s this jacket that I just know you’re going to love! I’ve already put it aside for you.”

“That was very kind of you, Senorita, but that’s not why we’re here today,” Teresa interrupted firmly, but her tone was gentle, making it obvious she meant no offense, as she ran her eyes over the black velvet jacket with red embroidery Yuna was already lifting from a box.

“Oh?” Yuna met Teresa’s gaze with an arched eyebrow of her own, and if Bucky hadn’t been so wrapped up in his own concerns and fears, he would have been worried at the idea of introducing them. They were both headstrong women, fierce in their own ways, and he didn’t want to have to come between them if their personalities clashed. “Then why are you here? Are you looking for something for yourself?”

“No,” Teresa shook her head. “We’re here today because James has a very important meeting on Monday. And while we’re all very grateful for the clothes you’ve helped him pick out, because seriously every woman in the world is thankful for those jeans you got him into that show off his ass, James needs to make a very good impression, and we need something a little more…” Teresa waved her hand in the air while she searched for the perfect word, before finally settling upon, “Formal.”

Yuna turned to look at Bucky, taking in his serious expression and subdued manner, and nodded.

“And you’re thinking?” she asked.

“A suit,” Teresa answered for him.

Bucky needed to remember that for all of her flair and passion for color, Yuna was studying fashion at FIT, and understood not only the basics, but the way clothing could be used to achieve a desired
effect. It took her less than a second to shift gears, before she put the jacket down, and led Bucky to a part of the shop he never paid much attention to before.

“The classics are a classic for a reason,” Yuna said as she began to sort through the various jackets and pants on the rack. “The black cocktail dress, your standard pump, a well fitted pair of capri pants with a white button-up, and of course, there’s nothing more classic than a suit. It’s a mainstay for a reason.”

A few hours later, after multiple attempts at finding just the perfect outfit, they all agreed on a single-breasted double-button black jacket, with matching trousers, a crisp white shirt, and slender black tie. It had a slimmer cut than anything Bucky remembered from his past, but according to Yuna that gave it a more modern touch, while still pulling on all the elements of the classic suit. She had tried to insist on a pink pocket square, since pink was one of Bucky’s favorite colors and the addition would add a bit of pop to the overall effect. But Teresa kindly rejected the idea, while praising Yuna for her opinion, saying Bucky needed to appear as serious as possible.

Instead, when they left that afternoon, Bucky’s semi-new suit carefully folded in the red and gold bag with the store’s logo on it, around his wrist there was a slender pink and black woven band, that Yuna had slipped off her own, and tied to his, before she had pulled him down (much like Tara did), to kiss his cheek and quietly whisper, “Good luck. I’ll hold onto that other jacket for you, so you can pick it up whenever you’re ready.”

“She’s a very nice young lady,” Teresa remarked as they made their way to the corner of First Avenue so Bucky could hail a cab home. She was carrying her own bag, that held a gossamer shawl of turquoise and gold Bucky noticed her fingering after Yuna had shown it to her, and Bucky decided to purchase for her as a gift for all she had done and was still doing for him. “She has a good eye, and is very honest. I can see why you like her.”

“Yeah,” Bucky said as he opened the door of the taxi that had just pulled up, motioning her to get in before him. “Seems like I have a type.” It was the closest he had come to making a joke in the last twenty-four hours, even if it did feel like he had to force it out past all of the nails lodged in his heart. Teresa tched at him, but she was smiling, just a little bit, as she climbed into the cab.

There was another dinner that night, and then Teresa spent most of the evening ironing Bucky suit, and fixing a few of the buttons that were a bit loose before she left him to his own devices. But she was back, bright and early the next day, waiting for Bucky when he came back from walking Sarge, pulling him into her apartment, where she assigned Bucky a list of tasks that needed to be completed she swore she would never be able to do by herself. So Bucky removed all the cans and jars from her kitchen cabinets, cleaned and relined the shelves with paper, before returning the items to their original position, all under Teresa’s watchful eye. She had Bucky remove and wipe down the light fixtures, sort through her old clothes to help her determine which ones could go either to Second Chances or Goodwill, dust the curtain rods, and even wash the windows, with Sarge hovering at his
feet, all while casting Chico a wary eye. (Bucky would have sworn the damn turtle was laughing at them, but Teresa told him to knock it off and go back to what he was doing.) Until eventually, it was nearly eleven, and there were no tasks left for Bucky to complete, except for one final walk with Sarge, where he took longer than usual so the two of them could share that evening’s moonlight in quiet companionship, a good memory for Sarge, for the both of them, in case Bucky never came back.

He was such a good companion, steadfast and warm, quiet and easy going, but always, always eager to explore the world around him. Bucky had no idea what he was going to do without him, couldn’t even begin to fathom what his life would be like without his dog, and hoped that maybe, maybe, just this once, God or whoever it was that oversaw the fates of men, would not be an asshole and at least let him keep this.

***

The next morning, after a sleepless night, a little after six, Teresa again knocked on his door, with a steaming plate of huevos rancheros and a hot mug of coffee in hand, which she made sure he ate, before she helped him prepare for his hearing.

She nodded in obvious approval when she saw him come out of the bathroom in his suit, except for when her eyes landed on his hair.

“No, no, that won’t do at all,” she informed him.

“What?” Bucky asked, not understanding why she was upset. “It’s clean, I washed it.”

“You’re hiding behind it,” was her answer as she pointed to the hair he had left loose to hang around his face and over his shoulders. “You have nothing to be ashamed of James, don’t let them think that you do. And if they’re not going to hold up to their end of the bargain, make sure they have to look into the eyes of the man they’re fucking over.” With that, she ordered him sit on the couch while she stood behind it, and with hands that were steady and calm, brushed his hair before pulling it back into a ponytail.

As she did, Bucky gathered all his courage, because there was one last thing he had to do. One of the most difficult things he had ever had to ask anyone for, but still, he needed to ask it.

“Can I leave Sarge with you today?”
“Why are you not bringing your perrito with you? You go everywhere with that dog. I even saw you
the two of you go to the bathroom together last night.”

“I don’t know what’s going to happen,” although he did know, he did. “And I don’t want him to
have to be a part of whatever ends up happening.” Teresa stopped brushing his hair, apparently
satisfied with it, and slowly stepped around the couch so she could stand in front of him. She cupped
his cheeks in her warm palms and lifted his face so he was forced to meet her gaze.

“Listen to me James,” she said, quietly, softly, so much a mother, that Bucky’s heart ached with
longing and lost memories. “I have known you for quite some time now. And when you first moved
in next door, I’ll admit, I was a little worried. You looked like a drug addict, and I was sure you were
nothing but trouble. But I was wrong. Yes, you were skinny and pale, and a bit messy, but you were
a quiet and good neighbor, and always nodded at me when I smiled at you. And then one day I see
you, and you’ve got this little perrito in your arms, that you saved from the streets. And then not too
long after that, you cleaned yourself up, put on some weight and started to leave your house every
day, when I know there were times when you wouldn’t leave it for days. And one day, out of the
blue, you offered to help me carry my groceries up the stairs when the elevator wasn’t working, and
then started coming over to my house to watch television with me. That’s when I realized how
wrong about you I really was. Because you’re funny and kind, and very, very intelligent. You like to
spend time with your old neighbor, and let that young woman at that store dress you up like a doll.
And you spoil that perrito rotten, because I know there are days when he eats better than you do, and
I’ve never once heard you yell at him. You’re a good man James, who lost his way there for a little
while, but who among us hasn’t? And it was your Sarge that helped you find your way back. Your
love for him and his love for you has made you strong. You need that today, more than ever. So
bring your little perrito with you, and let him stand by your side and lend you his strength. It’s his
job, let him do it. Let them see that, and then try to convince you that you don’t deserve your
freedom.”

“You have so much faith,” Bucky whispered back, closing his eyes. “I don’t think I can believe like
you do.”

“It’s all right.” She leaned forward to press a kiss upon his forehead. “I have more than enough faith
for the both of us.”

There were no more words, nothing left to be said between the two of them, so they said nothing.
Teresa finished helping him get ready, and then walked him downstairs to wait for the Uber Bucky
had ordered. Just as it pulled up, before he stepped away, she took his hand into hers, and carefully
placed a small, golden cross in his palm.

“For good luck,” she told him as she closed his fingers around it. “It belonged to my mother, and it’s
always brought me luck. Take it with you, it’ll keep you safe.”

“I can’t,” Bucky tried to refuse, shaking his head.

“You can and you will,” she insisted. “If you don’t want to keep it, you can give it back to me tonight when you get home. Call me as soon as you know anything. I’ll be making tamales for dinner tonight, and I need to know when to start warming them up.”

“Tamales?” Bucky asked, because after so long doing research on the internet to improve his culinary skills, Bucky knew what a big deal those were. They were a lot of work, a lot, and not something to ever be taken for granted when offered.

“Oh yes, and you’re not going to miss those. Now go, I’ll see you later.” She rose onto her tiptoes, and kissed his cheek one last time, laughing in surprise when Bucky bent down to wrap her in a hug. “Go,” she was still laughing when he finally released her. But she stood there, by the curb, a single, solitary figure waving at him, until the cab turned the corner and she was out of sight.

***

At nine a.m. on the dot, Bucky walked into the large conference room dressed in his new suit, his hair pulled back to reveal his clean-shaven face, and his head held high, Sarge at his side, to take a seat in the single, solitary chair placed strategically in front of the rounded conference table, where seven men and women had gathered to announce their decision on his fate. Captain McAdams was there, at the very end, in full uniform, his expression unreadable. At the opposite end, to Bucky’s surprise, also sat Nicholas J. Fury, in his leather trench coat and customary eye-patch, his face just as stony as McAdams’. And Bucky knew then that his fate was sealed. The both of them would not be there if they were not about to get exactly what it was they wanted, and were determined to rub that fact in his face.

At exactly nine-oh-one, the door to the conference room was closed, the purpose of the gathering announced, and Bucky’s hearing began.

He was asked several questions, but not too many, mostly if he understood why he was there, how he had found the past year, had anyone from HYDRA attempted to contact him, and were there any issues he was dealing with now that he was living on his own. Bucky answered as honestly as possible, with a voice he knew would have been much weaker, and trembled and shook if not for Sarge’s weight pressing against his shins.
At nine-seventeen, after Bucky had answered his final question, the woman who had been leading the hearing, a Colonel from the epaulettes on her uniform, looked around at everyone else, and asked, “Does anyone have any other questions for Mr. Barnes?” When no one said anything, she nodded, as if this were the expected answer, and turned her attention back to Bucky.

“Mr. Barnes, we thank you for your time and patience in answering all of our questions today. We know the past few years have not been easy for you. With that said, the members of this council have reviewed all of the documents in regards to your case, and by a five to two majority, have agreed that you have been extremely cooperative in regards to everything asked of you, have shown a remarkable improvement and more than held up your end of the agreement. So we are happy to inform you that this council agrees you have successfully completed your probationary period, and are now a free man with all of the rights that includes. Your identity will be restored, your records sealed, and you will no longer be required to attend any ongoing therapy sessions. Congratulations Mr. Barnes. You have worked hard, and proven why history regards you as a hero. We are only sorry it took so long for that to be recognized, but we had to make certain you no longer posed a threat to society, which you have.”

“You know I object to this decision, Colonel Finley.” Captain McAdams spoke up for the first time, the anger in his voice enough to scald the paint from the walls.

“As do I.” It was Nicholas Fury who spoke next, as he rose from his seat. But where McAdams voice was the screech of an air raid siren, Fury’s bore the icy kiss of frost creeping over a windowpane. “Sergeant Barnes possesses the types of skills that are desperately needed in this day and age.”

“This council is aware of both of your objections,” Colonel Finley said. “We have reviewed all your case notes regarding this matter Captain McAdams, and based on our own observations, as well as the opinions and recommendations to us by several others also closely involved in this case, found them based on assumptions and not facts. And Nick, I’m sorry to be the one who has to remind you of this, but based on recent events, particularly the ones in DC from several years ago, it’s quite obvious that your own judgement can be called into question. It was why this council was formed after all, to prevent another disaster like Project Insight from ever happening again. When only one person is allowed to make the decisions, it becomes obvious that ego often replaces common sense and too many things get overlooked as a result. And as Mr. Barnes has stated, several times in fact, that he has no desire to return to active duty – Unless that has changed, Mr. Barnes?”

“No, it hasn’t,” Bucky answered, shaking his head, amazed it hadn’t fallen off his neck by this point with the way his entire body was shaking. They were letting him go. He was free. Finally, finally, after over seventy years of being classified as property, a weapon, something to belong to someone else, he was a free man.

“Then this meeting is adjourned,” Colonel Finley announced, picking up the gavel in front of her,
and slamming it down on the table’s top. “Now, if you would follow Captain Bergman, Mr. Barnes, there is some final paperwork you need to fill out, and then you can go home.”

***

Free.

He was free.

It was such a small word, but had been such a distant hope, an unbelievable dream and encompassing so many things, Bucky found himself struggling to wrap his head around it, as he sat at a table in the Starbucks two blocks away from the Tower, a strawberry frappuccino in front of him and Sarge’s head a warm and comforting familiarity in his lap.

No more wars. No more battles. No more being forced to kill people. No more doctor’s visits where they drew blood, and poked and prodded at his arm and shoulder, claiming they were trying to help him when really what they wanted to do was see if Zola’s version of the serum or the arm could be replicated. No more biweekly sessions with McAdams. No more having to survive on a monthly stipend of less than minimum wage, while they monitored every penny he spent.

He. Was. Free.

And apparently, also rich.

It had taken a little under two hours to review and complete the paperwork, while Captain Bergman explained all the documentation he was being provided. There were only two stipulations Bucky now had to follow. The first being he needed to immediately let them know if the remnants of HYDRA ever tried to contact him. The second, that any maintenance he needed on his arm be performed by the doctors and technicians at SHIELD. That one was redundant; he knew SHIELD had several designers and engineers who could be considered brilliant. And there was no one who lived in the modern world who hadn’t heard of Tony Stark’s genius. But Zola had also been a genius, without any conscience to hold him back, and the arm was an absolute perfect design. Full integration with his nervous system, indestructible, and self-repairing. Constructed of materials stronger than just about anything else out there, and able to adapt to any environment Bucky might have encountered. All of SHIELD’s probing had been more out of desire to investigate and see if it could be replicated, but it was far beyond anything they could understand, much less duplicate. Of course they wanted more chances to study and dissect it, him. But Bucky was free, and he no longer had to sit there and let them test him or his reflexes if he didn’t want to. And he most certainly didn’t.
Once he signed all the paperwork, he was provided with a leather folder, the same one on the table in front of him, which included a signed and notarized letter, physical proof of his freedom, as well as a driver’s license and passport, with his full name, photograph and current address listed. The only discrepancy was his birthdate, with its year changed from 1917 to 1991. Aside from that, inside the folder were other documents, the majority of which were his banking statements. He had been told there would be money, back pay and an Army pension, along with a compensation package for a search party never being sent out to confirm his death or retrieve his body, allowing for the continued torture he’d endured for the next seventy years as a result. There was a bank account, and bonds, and something called stock options, both in Stark Industries and their most serious competitor. The end result was…

A lot of digits on his bank statement. A *lot* of them. More than Bucky had ever seen, could even imagine what to do with. What did someone do with all that money? How did one begin to even think about spending it? He’d never been rich. Had never thought he’d ever be. When he’d been younger, the most he had dared to dream of was maybe owning a house one day. And…he could do that now. He could move out of his little tenement apartment and find a house, a big one, with a yard for Sarge to play in. And a car, so whenever he went somewhere he didn’t have to deal with disgruntled taxi drivers, or over-stressed New Yorkers on the train. A car and a house, with a yard, for him and his dog.

He was going to have to do some research. But later, later, all of that could come later, because for right now, at this exact moment, the only thing he could do was sit there in that Starbucks, his right hand in Sarge’s fur, and try to come to terms with the fact that he was finally free.

“Hey James. And hello Sarge. Damn, he’s gotten big. What the hell are you feeding him?” a voice said from not too far away. It was a testament to how lost Bucky had been in his own thoughts that he hadn’t heard Sam Wilson’s approach. But given that he had his own cup of coffee in his hand, he must been there for a while, conducting his own study of Bucky, while Bucky’s mind tried to wrap itself around everything that had happened today. “Do you mind if I take a seat? I just wanna talk to you for a minute. It won’t take up too much of your time, I promise, and then I’ll leave you alone.” Bucky considered him for a second, and then nodded, reaching out to close the portfolio while Sam settled himself across from him.

“So, big day today,” Sam said cheerfully, as he ripped open several packets of sugar and stirred them into his own coffee. “How’re you feeling after all that?”

“Surprised,” Bucky answered him honestly. And then he realized he needed to get back in the game, and not allow himself to be distracted. Because Sam Wilson was still an unknown, and Bucky had no idea why he’d decided to approach him again, today of all days, after all the time since their last encounter. The next thing he noticed was that while he was still in a state of shock, Sam certainly didn’t appear to be surprised by today’s turn of events. “But you certainly don’t seem to be.”
At his words, Sam stopped pretending to be so interested in his coffee, and leaned back in his seat, a knowing smile on his face.

“I’m not,” he readily admitted. “And I told you, back in February that you had allies, people on your side, looking out for you. Even if you didn’t believe me, didn’t make it any less true. They never once doubted you. They weren’t even surprised when it became obvious you were starting to recover, even if the rest of us were. They never, ever stopped believing in you, never once lost faith.”

Bucky had to look away then, closing his eyes and shaking his head. Because he knew who they were; exactly who it was Sam was talking about. But Bucky hadn’t believed, had barely been able to believe in himself, much less anyone else. He’d thought, he’d been so sure he’d been forgotten. And even if he hadn’t, there was only so much even he could do, when everyone had been so determined to plan and plot his future for him.

“They weren’t going to let me go,” he said instead. “Not without a fight.”

“No, they weren’t,” Sam admitted. “You’re one of only two super-soldiers in the world James, and unfortunately that makes you a very valuable asset to a lot of people.”

“I think people would stop thinking of me as a goddamned weapon they can use, and remember that I’m a human being,” Bucky whispered, tired, exhausted by it, this endless, endless argument; because this, this had been the litany of so much of his life.

“I know.” The words were softly said, gentle and compassionate. They still didn’t make any of it any better. “And that’s the second reason why I wanted to talk to you.” Bucky opened his eyes and glared at Sam. Because anytime anyone had ever referenced the word want and Bucky in the same sentence, it never ended well for him. But just like always, when face to face with him, Sam was not afraid. He was a brave man, steady and solid. No wonder he was the one who had been chosen as Bucky’s replacement.

“And this is just between me and you, okay? No one else, I swear it,” Sam promised. Bucky sat and stared, waiting for him to proceed. It didn’t take long. “Believe it or not James, Captain McAdams was supposed to help you in your recovery. He and Fury may have had their own agendas, but he was supposed to help you get back on your feet, and learn how to deal with all the shit that’s happened to you. Because you’ve been through a lot of it, more than anyone alive I’d bet, and that’s not something that just goes away. And you’ve been doing well, real well, but that doesn’t mean it’s not going to come back at some point, and bite you in the ass. Hard. And you’re going to need help.”
“So what do you suggest?” Bucky sneered. “I go back to seeing McAdams?”

“Oh god no, that guy’s an asshole. Someone needs to bar him from practicing anymore, before he does any more damage to anyone else.” Sam was shaking his head. “But that doesn’t mean there aren’t good doctors, great doctors, out there who’ve devoted their lives to helping people overcome what they’ve been through.” Sam had reached into his back pocket while he spoke, pulling out an envelope that he very deliberately laid upon the table top, before slowly sliding it in Bucky’s direction with a tilt of his chin.

“What’s this?” Bucky asked, not moving to take it.

“It’s a reference,” Sam nodded at the envelope, “to Dr. Miriam Callahan. She’s not affiliated with SHIELD or the military in any way, never has been. But she does have a long history of working with vets. And I can tell you, from personal experience, that she’s an excellent therapist, and really knows what she’s doing.”

“Personal experience?”

“Do you think you’re the only one who’s had a bad go of it?” was all Sam said in response, before he nodded at the envelope again. “There’s also a list of a few VA centers in there, that have good resources and meetings you can attend, no questions asked. It might not seem like something you’d be interested in, but you should definitely consider giving them a shot. They do help. And…”

“And?”

“And my card’s in there as well, with my personal cell phone number. If you ever need anything, anything at all, even someone just to shoot the shit with, you can give me a call. Anytime.”

“Why are you doing this?” Bucky asked, when what he really wanted to know was why now? Why not sooner, when I really could have used it, instead of letting me think they were going to drag me back and take my dog away?

“Because you’re a good guy James, and you deserve a chance at a happy life. More than just about anyone I know. And I want to make sure you have an opportunity to get it and not end up a statistic like too many other vets,” was Sam’s answer. Bucky didn’t say anything, because again, why now? Why so much sudden concern when he had already made it this far with no one there to help him?
“Just one last thing, and then I’ll leave you alone, let you get on with your day,” Sam said. When Bucky looked up, Sam was taking a deep breath, in a way that told him he was girding his loins, mentally preparing himself for whatever it was he was about to say next.

And Bucky knew.

“Steve would really love it if you would just give him a call, maybe meet him for a cup of coffee, let him talk to you for five minutes—“

“No.”

“He’s been keeping his promise, respecting your wishes on the matter, but he’s been really worried, and if you could just let him see for himself, let him know you’re doing okay.”

“No.”

It had been one of the few things, the very few things he had requested upon his surrendering without a fight, and the only one he hadn’t had to argue for. To never, not once, have to interact with Steve.

Because Bucky had been shattered, and so confused, everything too bright and too harsh. What little of him that was left, who he had been, was nothing more than fragments, jagged pieces scattered over seventy years of time and space, the wasteland of a soul.

And Steve, Steve was a juggernaut, huge and all-consuming, who pulled everyone into his orbit, bathing them in his brightness, not realizing that brightness scorched and scalded, and left third degree burns and blisters on the hands of anyone who tried to hold onto him too tightly. Bucky had tried. He had burned and burned and burned trying to hold onto Steve, until he had fallen and been turned into nothing more than a shadow who murdered and hunted in the dark.

Steve would have pulled him in, wrapped Bucky in his flames of justice and honor and always fighting for the right thing. But for the first time, for the very first time in his life, since he was six years old and defended that small, scrawny kid being picked on by their school’s bullies, Bucky made the decision to choose himself instead, and not follow blindly into another fight, another battle, another war. He had needed to become who he was going to be on his own, and he never would have been able to do that if he allowed himself to be blinded by Steve yet again.
So he had refused to see him, and Steve, because he was honorable and a man of his word, had let him alone, even if apparently, for some reason he’d still been looking out for Bucky, making sure his well-being and, most importantly, his freedom was taken care of.

“Okay, okay,” Sam was saying with a nod, even if he did look disappointed in Bucky’s answer. “I just hadta ask.”

No, you didn’t, Bucky thought but didn’t say. But that’s Steve for you. That’s the kind of effect he has on people. Believe me, I know.

“Anyway, thanks for letting me have my say,” Sam said as he rose to his feet. “I don’t know if we’re ever gonna see each other again, but best of luck man. You’ve been given a second chance. I hope it all works out for you.” He held his hand out for Bucky to shake, but just like the last time in the cafeteria, Bucky ignored it, nodding at Sam instead. Sam simply shrugged it off, picked up his coffee cup, turned and quickly made his way out of the coffee shop. Bucky followed him with his eyes, watching as Sam pulled his cell out of his pocket, flicking it on with a sigh. Just before he disappeared from Bucky’s view, he saw Sam shake his head, and read the words on his lips as he said, ‘I asked, I did, but I’m sorry Steve. His answer’s still no.’

Best of luck to you too Sam, Bucky thought as he looked down at Sarge, who was contentedly napping at his feet beneath the table. You’re definitely going to need it with that one.

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Teresa was waiting for him at the top of the stairs when he and Sarge finally made it home, less than an hour after his conversation with Sam.

“Well?” she asked, breathless with anticipation. “How did it go? Did you win? Did they clear you? Do you get to keep your perrito?”

Bucky rushed forward, instead of answering her, but only so he could wrap her in a hug, and sweep her up into his arms, spinning her around while he laughed and laughed and laughed, saying only “Yes! Yes! Yes!” while Sarge danced happily at their feet.

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The tamales that night were delicious.

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And the jacket, when he went to pick it up the very next day, a perfect fit.

Chapter End Notes

Summer starts in the next chapter. And with it, a new season in Bucky's life.

Please feel free to let Bucky (and Sarge) how you feel about the results of his hearing in the comments. =)
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Just to let you know, the Summer section focuses on Bucky getting the actual help he's needed all this time. As a result, there will be some difficult issues he deals with. PLEASE NOTE - I will include a warning at the beginning of any chapter where there might be something upsetting, so that you as a reader can always make up your own mind. Your safety and well-being is always the most important thing. And if something needs to be warned for, and I haven't, please do not hesitate to let me know.

Also note - while there are A LOT of issues Bucky has to deal with in this season, sexual abuse / assault is NOT one of them, in case you were worried.

And, of course, OF COURSE, Sarge is always there by Bucky's side to help him get through it. =)

SUMMER

If asked to describe himself, the first word Bucky would have chosen would have been adaptable. As far back as he could remember, even prior to his time serving as HYDRA’s Fist, he’d learned that life could change on a dime; the death of his father, which led to the loss of a steady income, and his family quickly having to learn how to do without, hand-me-downs and skipping meals becoming a necessity and not a choice. Living through the Depression, where steady long-term work was nearly impossible to find, especially when there was always someone who would do more for less, if it meant they had a chance to feed their family that night, even if it left another family to starve. Steve’s health, never predictable even during the best of times, which meant there were times Bucky would spend the entire night awake, watching over him, playing nursemaid, and needing to remain close to ensure someone was always there to make sure he had his medicines, expensive even back then, but another necessity that meant sometimes Bucky once again skipped a meal or two, or three, or four. The only way to be able to survive the war had been by adapting to the ever changing circumstances, always alert and forever keeping watch, because plans changed, maps were wrong, and the enemy could appear out of nowhere without a moment’s notice; if you didn’t know how to adapt to those changes, you died, pure and simple. Even when the only thing anyone had ever called him was Soldier, he still needed to adapt. The target's itinerary could change, enemies could interfere, perfectly laid plans disintegrate due to a change in the weather. So what if he had to shoot through a target’s guardian, the only time he had ever left behind a witness, if it meant the successful completion of an assignment. Assess and adapt, assess and adapt, assess and adapt; it was the only reason why he’d ever been able to make it this long.

So as the temperatures at the end of June transformed from the pleasant heat of late spring and into the overbearing and unescapable humidity of summer, that’s exactly what he did.
As he no longer had his mandatory biweekly sessions with McAdams, Bucky had a lot more free time. It wasn’t just the meetings themselves he no longer had to account for, but also all the preparation and careful selection of his outfits that had been time consuming. He had never been one for idleness, so he did his best to find ways to fill his time.

He went back to Second Chances, and explored the options available to him at other stores, to find clothing more suitable for the warmer temperatures. He usually ended up going back to see Yuna anyway; she had great advice, and Bucky enjoyed chatting with her. She was always full of recommendations and selections she thought he’d like, as well as would look fabulous on him, mostly short sleeves t-shirts with interesting logos on them. When Bucky privately admitted he wasn’t comfortable revealing his arms, only saying he had some horrible scarring on the left one he’d prefer to keep covered, she didn’t wince or even glance at him with pity. She simply changed her strategy, finding him plenty of long-sleeved button up shirts, made of the finest cottons and thinnest linens, which he could wear open or loose on top of something else, saying she enjoyed the challenge of it, and Bucky was always so willing to experiment with his appearance, so it really wasn’t an issue anyway.

Sarge was ready for a new challenge, so Bucky enrolled him in the next level of Andy’s classes. But that wasn’t so bad. By the time they were done, there was only a half hour left before the store closed, and Bucky had taken to walking Tara to her subway station, sometimes stopping to grab either a hotdog or a knish, chatting easily with one another, while he made sure she got to the train safely. There had only been a single issue with that, when Tara bent over to offer Sarge a piece of her hotdog and Bucky told her not to.

“Why not?” She sounded so disappointed, even though she did as Bucky asked and straightened. “Look at that face, he really wants a hotdog. It’s just a bite Bucky.”

“Yeah I know,” Bucky had to admit. “But I don’t want him to get into the habit of begging for people food all the time. He eats enough already.”

“Yeah I know, all high quality and organic – I see what kind of food you always buy for him.”

“He deserves the best,” Bucky shrugged.

“Of course he does. That doesn’t mean it probably doesn’t taste like shit though.”

“Yeah well, doesn’t all healthy food?”
“You’re telling me,” she grumbled. “Meghan’s going through a smoothie phase. I swear to god if I have to drink one more spinach, kale, what the fuck is this green shit - is that actually a broccoli shake for breakfast? - I’m going to go out, find a cow and drag it home myself.” Bucky snorted.

“Bucky,” she eyed him seriously. “Both my piss and my shit are green now. That’s just not natural.”

“Or apparently, it’s very natural,” Bucky countered this time. He was used to her frankness by now, even if it did cause him to still internally wince on occasion. “And I went to McDonalds for breakfast today. Finally tried one of those sausage McGriddles. Two of them. And a hash brown.” So did Sarge, but Bucky didn’t think she needed to know that.

“Thanks for telling me that, you asshole,” she snapped at him.

“You’re welcome. Thanks for telling me your piss and shit are green.”

She pretended to scowl at him, but that didn’t mean she was able to hide her own snort of laughter.

“See you on Thursday?” she asked when they finally reached the entrance to the A train.

“Definitely. Get home safe,” he always told her as he watched her make her way down the stairs.

He had to admit, their conversations were a highlight of his week, and he didn’t mind waiting for her, no matter how many times she asked him if he was sure. He spent the spare time downstairs with Andy, going over that day’s lesson, while helping Andy gather together all the toys and items he used during his classes to help get his lessons across. Andy was teaching them even more complex commands, and how to reinforce proper social behavior now that all of their dogs were growing into the next stage of development. They’d been working on teaching their dogs how to walk without a leash, making sure that they always heeled when called, no matter what the distraction. Sarge, as always, was at the head of his class.

And Bucky liked Andy, just like he liked Tara and Yuna. He was out-going and friendly, easy to talk to, and didn’t seem to mind Bucky’s presence. In fact, he had started to do something different in this series of classes, asking Bucky to illustrate whenever there was something he was trying to teach that his fellow classmates were struggling with. He would ask Bucky to demonstrate, pointing out what he was doing right, (and also sometimes wrong, if Bucky was honest, but he was never cruel or condescending about it, always encouraging instead, much like the techniques he used to get their dogs to obey). So Bucky liked spending time in his class, where he learned new things at every
“You really love dogs, don’t you?” Andy asked him out of the blue one day while Bucky gathered up all the chew toys they had used during that lesson to teach their dogs how to release on command.

“I guess,” Bucky shrugged. “Never had one before Sarge, but I always wanted one.” He couldn’t before; poverty didn’t allow for the expense of a pet, and Steve had been allergic, severely so, so even if they could have afforded one, it would never have been a possibility. He wondered sometimes, as he brushed Sarge’s coat, if Steve was still allergic now, or if his version of the serum had fixed that. He didn’t know, and he supposed he never would. They never really got the chance to find out.

Bucky blinked, only realizing he’d been lost in thought when he came to and realized Sarge was licking at his chin.

“Bleh,” Bucky spat, even as he reached out to give Sarge’s ears a vigorous scratching. “Get down you.” Since he hadn’t framed it as a command, and not used the tone of voice Sarge had learned meant he needed to pay attention, his dog continued to lick at his face while Bucky laughed and laughed. When he glanced over his shoulder, Andy was staring at him, something inscrutable but knowing in his eyes. But then he seemed to shake himself out of it, before he came forward and knelt down, helping Bucky to stack the gathered toys into the plastic crate he used.

“You know, if you like dogs, they’re always looking for volunteers at the shelters,” he said, seemingly out of the blue.

“Volunteers?” Bucky asked, not sure where this was going.

“There are so many stray dogs out there Bucky. Cats too,” Andy said sadly. “And while the shelters take great care of them, and do what they can, they don’t always have the resources to make sure all the dogs get the attention they need. They’re always looking for people willing to donate a few hours to help them out. You know, in case you were interested.”

“What would I have to do?”

“Mostly just spend time with them. Walk with them, play with them, give them a bit of extra attention. Even a little bit of time helps,” Andy informed him. “Just thought I’d mention it, if you were interested.”
“Would I be able to bring Sarge with me?” Bucky was interested; it was almost an immediate response. Time with Sarge, time with other dogs, something new to do, and another reason to get him out of the house.

Andy considered his question for a few seconds, before he nodded. “I don’t see why not. It’d be a good experience for him, exposing him to other animals. In spite of his size, he really is a gentle giant, and you’ve got excellent control over him. He’d be perfect for working with other dogs, seeing how they react to him, or if they need any additional training.”

“How would I even get started, doing something like that?”

“Tell you what,” Andy said, reaching out to give Sarge a scratch of his own. “I don’t just teach classes here. I do most of my work at the ASPCA over on East Ninety-Second Street. Why don’t I give them a call and tell them that both you and Sarge will be dropping by, and are interested in volunteering?”

“I think – I think I’d really like that. Thank you, Andy,” Bucky said.

“Glad to hear it,” Andy smiled at him. “The way you are with animals, I think you’d be a good fit. And I know they’re going to love having you there.”

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The following Friday, Bucky got up early, took Sarge out for a long walk, fixed them both a huge breakfast, and after selecting a red t-shirt with a black falcon emblazoned on the front, that he matched with a pair of red converses and a black and red bandana around Sarge’s neck, Bucky snuck Sarge onto the subway (New Yorkers really were a unique breed, and seemed indifferent to the fact that Bucky rode the train while cradling a 150 pound dog on his lap), and made his way to the Upper East Side. The staff were expecting him, greeting him warmly, and once he provided a copy of Sarge’s medical records, proving he was healthy and up to date on all of his shots, they set him to work.

There was certainly a lot of it. The first day was spent mostly shadowing their volunteer coordinator, where she explained to him what they required, and the procedures he needed to follow. She had a brisk and clipped tone, and was obviously harried by all the tasks she needed to complete, but kind and made it very clear she was happy to have him there. Once that was done, she spent most of the morning following him around, observing how both he and Sarge interacted with the animals. Bucky
spent the four hours of that first shift familiarizing himself with the layout, learning all the protocols he would need to follow; cross-contamination was something that needed to be avoided at all costs, so their sanitary procedures were strict and needed to be followed with extreme care. But then he got to spend time with the actual dogs, and saw the truth of what Andy had been saying for himself; there were so many of them, in all shapes and sizes, ages and breeds, and all of them desperate for a little bit of love and attention. Bucky could easily give them that.

It was dirty, smelly work, seemingly endless, and when Bucky left at the end of that first shift, he was covered in dog hair, spit and drool. But he was energized and came away with a feeling of what he could only describe as usefulness, something he hadn’t felt in far too long, and Sarge certainly seemed to have enjoyed himself, so he immediately signed up for three more shifts.

So that was how Bucky started to spend his Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings. Rain or shine, without fail, he spent the first four hours of his day over on the Upper East Side volunteering his time at the animal shelter. The staff quickly grew familiar with both him and Sarge (they were fascinated by him as many of them had never encountered a Caucasian Shepherd before), and always smiled when they arrived. It seemed Andy had been right, he was a good fit, and everyone there made sure to let Bucky know they appreciated his help and the way he devoted himself to any task they asked of him.

Because Bucky didn’t just walk the dogs; he also cleaned the cages, mopped up any accidents, and changed out their food bowls. If he noticed a problem or change in behavior he immediately let a staff member know, and made sure to heap all the dogs he worked with, with a constant gentle praise as he walked them. He even spent some time with the cats, whenever one of their volunteers failed to come in, luxurious, vainglorious creatures Bucky grew to adore, and Sarge was endlessly fascinated with. He would have considered adopting one or two of them, but his apartment really was too small, and that wouldn’t be fair to them. But maybe one day, when he finally found his house, he’d come back and give one of them a home.

He mostly spent his time with the dogs. Walking and playing with them, and being filled with an unexpected joy whenever he entered the areas where they were kept, and they all started wagging their tales.

But it wasn’t just the happy and easy-going ones he worked with. As the weeks quickly passed, it seemed Andy was right, and Bucky had a bit of a gift. Maybe it was his quiet nature, or how he never shouted or snapped, and was gentle with the leash. Or maybe it was because he had a soft, even tread and a low, steady voice. Or maybe, just maybe it was because he knew what it was like, to be locked in a cage, all alone and forgotten, desperate for a kindness, but snarling out of fear whenever someone dared to come too close. Because Bucky was the only one, out of their entire rota of volunteers that could be trusted with the worst cases. Dog that were victims of horrible abuse, and bore the signs of not only sickness, but physical violence and starvation. Desperate, terrified animals, that once they were given a clean bill of health, were isolated, while several trainers, Andy included, worked on rehabilitation to see if they could ever be fit for adoption. As the alternative was so much worse, Bucky always made sure to dedicate himself to spending extra time with them, seeing if there
was anything he could do to help.

“I swear to god Andy, I have no idea where you found him, but he and his dog are absolute
godsends,” Bucky overheard Bethany, the shift supervisor, say one day as he sat in one of the quiet
rooms, Sarge laying stretched out against the wall, a steady pressure against the small of Bucky’s
back, as for the first time ever, Birmingham, a pitbull whose files said he had been used to train other
fighting dogs, allowed Bucky to gently scratch his ear, all while whispering softly, encouragingly,
“Who’s a good boy? Who’s a beautiful, beautiful good boy?”

“He signed up for one of my training classes over at Petco,” Andy told Bethany. “I’ve been teaching
classes for years, and I’d never seen anyone with a knack for it like he has.”

“We need to get him certified, because he’s good, he’s damned good. I’ve got trainers on the payroll
who aren’t as patient as he is.”

“I’m working on it,” Andy said.

“Well work faster,” Bethany urged, “’Cos I’d hire him in a second if he was one of yours.”

Bucky would have asked him what the hell they were talking about, but he quickly forgot about it,
because his fingers must have found just the right spot and pressure, and Birmingham’s tail lifted and
very slowly, but very steadily started to wag.

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So, classes and walks with Tara on Tuesdays and Thursdays, time spent volunteering at the shelter
on Mondays, Wednesday and Fridays. It was a lot of time spent surrounded by animals, but it was
good time, productive and satisfying, and so much better than anything those assholes at SHIELD
would have had him doing.

But those weren’t the only things Bucky focused on. Bucky still had the huge amount of money in
his bank account, and a debit as well as credit card now, and all of a sudden, things were in his grasp
that had never been possible before.

There was the car Bucky wanted to buy, so it would be easier for him to travel with Sarge, but he
was holding off on that for now, as his neighborhood wasn’t the best, and he didn’t want to risk it
getting damaged or stolen. He still researched though, exploring his options and reading reviews. He had already decided that when he was ready, he would purchase an SUV, with a collapsible back seat, so Sarge could easily stretch out in the back. But that was for later. First, he had to find a house.

It was easier said than done.

There were so many things to consider, so many factors he had to take into consideration. Did he want to purchase an actual house, or a condominium. Two family or one? A rowhouse or separate property? With a garage or without? Lawn or lot? How many bedrooms, bathrooms, floors? All of those factors didn’t even begin to take into account the most important one, that being where exactly did Bucky want to live? New York City now was a very different city from the one he’d grown up in, new streets popping up where buildings had been before, former neighborhoods gone, gentrified, the communities that lived there long since forgotten. Italian neighborhoods replaced by Asian ones, what were once ghettos now prime areas of real estate. Did he want easy access to public transportation or would he rather live in a more private and quiet community. So many things to consider, and while he worked out the details in his head, he spent a lot of time in Queens, Manhattan, the Bronx and Staten Island, exploring all the different areas with Sarge at his side. Until he finally realized that ultimately, what he wanted was to go back to Brooklyn. Not to the old neighborhood where he’d grown up, but someplace different. Brooklyn had always been home to him, the place he’d dreamed about coming back to once the war was over. And it was different now, than how it had been. But so was he. Still, as he wandered and explored the new and various areas and stores this new New York had to offer him, it was Brooklyn that resonated in his blood and his bones, with promise, and a potential for new beginnings, and he thought it would be a good place to settle and lay down his roots, see what would grow.

So he returned to his old stand-by, research, and started looking through listings to see if there was something out there he thought would suit. He had a mental list of things he wanted; someplace bright and airy, with lots of windows (unlike the dark and grimy tenements from his memories). A yard with enough room for Sarge to stretch out and play. Cooking had transformed itself from something he did out of necessity to something he truly enjoyed, so a bigger kitchen. And a bathroom with a big tub, with enough room to bathe Sarge. He had a thick coat, though thankfully it looked as if he was going to end up with the shorter coat his breed could have, and not the longer, denser coat most commonly associated with Caucasian Shepherds. Bucky preferred it that way; it would be less upkeep, and meant Sarge’s ruff would make him look even more majestic, similar to a lion’s mane, instead of a huge teddy bear. But Sarge still shed like a sonovabitch, and Bucky spent a good half hour every evening grooming him. He didn’t mind. It was a nice, quiet time they shared together, that allowed them to deepen their already extraordinary bond, Sarge lying quiet and calm, while Bucky hummed and carefully ran his brush down his spine and side, over his flanks, and ending, always ending, with his belly, while Bucky checked Sarge’s coat for burrs, fleas and ticks. But it was still a thick coat, and Sarge needed to be bathed, at least once every couple of weeks. And that was a huge ordeal, with Bucky spending more time cleaning up the bathroom afterwards than he had actually spent bathing Sarge. So a big bathroom, with a large tub was also on his list. It would be nice, he thought, to have a house of his own. Private and quiet, but not isolated, that he could fill with all his own things.
The only downside was, well, he would have to leave Teresa behind, and he hated that thought.

“Don’t be stupid, James,” she told him when he informed her of his plans, softly, apologetically, because he really, really didn’t want to leave her. But Sarge needed more space; he was still growing and it was unfair of Bucky to keep him in a small, studio apartment. “We live in the projects, and that’s no place for a man with his entire future in front of him, and his perrito, to live. Don’t you think if I could get out of here I would?”

“But… I don’t want to leave you here all by yourself,” Bucky said. “You—you mean a lot to me, and I don’t like the thought of you here all alone.”

“I’m not alone,” she insisted. “I have my Chico and my Pedro to visit every day. And I do have other friends, the women in my church.” When she saw he hadn’t stopped frowning, she shook her head at him. “You do know we have these things called telephones now? I’m sure you know about them, since you texted me that eggs were on sale over at Key Food just this morning?”

“No, I know,” he mumbled. “Still…it won’t be the same though.”

“No, it won’t,” she admitted softly, reaching out to brush a lock of hair behind his ear. “But that’s life James. It’s full of changes, both good and bad. All we can do is adapt. And you, getting a house, that’s a good one. Now,” she lowered her hand and nodded at his phone, “show me the places you’ve been looking at, and I’ll tell you what I think.”

They spent the next five minutes quietly scrolling through all of the images on Bucky’s phone, the only sound the steady thump-thump-thump of Sarge’s tail against her kitchen floor, a peaceful way to pass the time, until it was broken by…

“Ow! Why did you hit me?” Bucky cried out, lifting his hand to the ear she’d just thumped.

“James!” She was glaring at him. “You just spent thirty minutes apologizing to me because you were going to move! With the way you were going on about it, I thought you were going to California or Florida or someplace like that. But all of the houses you’ve shown me are in Brooklyn!”

“Yeah? So?” Bucky was still rubbing his ear. She may have been old, but she hit hard.

“That’s a thirty-minute train ride, you tonto! I may be in my seventies, but I can still take the damned
Bucky stopped rubbing his ear to squint at her. Yes, she was mad, but it was so different from the anger he had come to know from others. This was more like Tara, when she snarked at him. Or Yuna, when she rolled her eyes because he’d added three more black t-shirts to the pile on the counter when her back had been turned. Or the way a mother looked at a child when they were exasperated by their stupidity, but still loved their child anyway, or maybe even because of it. This wasn’t a separation, or even a letting go. This was a momma bird urging their baby out of the nest, because they knew their youngling was finally ready to fly. But they were still going to keep an eye on them, watchful and protective, helping them to find a new nest of their own. And they definitely had plans to come visit.

“You won’t have to take the train,” Bucky said, instead of all that. “Once I get the house, I’m gonna get a car. I’ll come pick you up.”

“Of course you will,” she nodded as if it were obvious. “Tuesdays and Thursday, so we can find out what that loca bruja Carmella is going to try next.”

“Poor Miguel,” Bucky sighed.

“I know,” she agreed. And that would have been that. Except at that exact moment, that little bastard Chico snuck up on them all, and bit Sarge on his nose. Again. Bucky really was going to flush that motherfucker down the toilet one of these days. Once he got Sarge to stop crying.

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There was a two-family house, in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, on the corner of Narrows Avenue and Sixty-Eighth Street. It was bright and it was clean, with plenty of windows, and a large kitchen. It had three bedrooms upstairs, a bathroom on each floor, and a driveway separating it from the next house, that led to a garage. It needed some fixing; a new coat of paint in all of the rooms, updated appliances, and the floors could use some varnishing. It had a small, wrap around lawn on the other side, which, out of all things to make Bucky fall even more in love with it, had a single weeping willow he imagined sitting under with a book and Sarge at his feet. Even more importantly, it was directly across the street from Owls Head Park, a good size park where Bucky could take Sarge to run and play. Two blocks from that was the Sixty-Ninth Street pier, which was the entranceway to a promenade that ran along Shore Road, with a bike path and even more parks, perfect for a jog or a lazy stroll, where Bucky could sit and stare out into the water, Sarge at his side, watching the boats make their way down the Narrows waterway and into the Hudson River.
It wasn’t cheap, but nothing in New York was, and had been on the market for quite some time. But with the housing market being what it was, no one had placed a bid, and the owner, the niece of the previous occupant, who lived in Seattle with her own family, was eager to get rid of the property. So after a third visit, with Teresa by his side so she could offer her own feedback, Bucky turned to the realtor, a nice young woman, eager to make a sale, but who had been patient enough to take Bucky to several different homes throughout various parts of Brooklyn, and made an offer.

Just because Bucky had made the offer didn’t mean the house was his. Bucky quickly discovered that buying a house was a very complicated and time-consuming process. The offer had to actually be accepted, and perhaps countered, an appraisal ordered, visits to the bank and the financing verified. Bucky wanted to pay for the house in full, up-front, and once his finances were confirmed, he was informed that would make the process easier. It could still take months before all the final paperwork was signed, and the keys placed in Bucky’s hand. But his realtor was optimistic it would happen, and Bucky needed to be patient, and wait just a little bit longer.

In any event, it quickly became apparent Bucky would still be living in his piece-of-shit studio apartment down on Water Street for the foreseeable future. But that was all right. He no longer had to go anywhere near The Tower, and his life was busy now, filled with dogs, and dinners with Teresa, classes with Andy, walks with Tara and fashion advice from Yuna. And of course Sarge, the pivot point of all of it, the catharsis that had started everything. It was a good life, better than any he could remembered having lived in the past, and Bucky was grateful. He was.

Which was why he couldn’t understand why he seemed to be getting worse.

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It started only a few days after his hearing, when the truth of his freedom finally started to sink in, becoming a reality and not an impossible dream. A nightmare of screams and blood and corpses (always, always corpses), and flesh being ripped from bones. He woke up panting, terrified, not knowing where or who he was, until Sarge (and it was always Sarge), climbed onto his chest with a whimper and starting licking his chin.

That allowed him to calm down, and he lay there, taking deep, heaving gasps, his hands clenched in Sarge’s fur, until his heart rate finally slowed, and he was able to remember where he was. A horrible, horrible dream, but a dream, just a dream, Bucky reminded himself, and hopefully one he would never have again.

But he did have it again. Not the next night, but the night after that, and then the night after that. Again. And again. And again. Until it got to the point where Bucky was terrified to go to sleep, and spent endless hours walking the streets, Sarge at his side, afraid of the corpses he would see when he closed his eyes (because it was always corpses, always, always corpses) until the sun finally rose,
The dreams were never the same (except for the corpses, always, always corpses), but they always came with pain, and agony, and screams (strangers’, his victims, Teresa’s, Tara’s, Yuna’s, Andy’s, Steve’s, his own, he could never tell), and got so bad that sometimes when he woke up it was all he could do to scramble to the bathroom in time to heave up his guts. Bloodied hands reaching for him. Sightless eyes exploding with puss and blood when he tried to apologize, splashing his cheeks, staining his lips. Armin Zola’s face, with a cruel little smile, singing a lullaby, as he lowered a hacksaw into Bucky’s chest, cutting open his heart. McAdams standing over him, while the SHIELD doctors strapped him down, and injected even more serum into his veins, that wasn’t a serum, but snakes, burrowing deep into his flesh, spilling their venom as they devoured him from within. A Chair, that wasn’t a chair, but every chair, in every room he ran to as he tried to escape, sucking him back, sucking him in, while his own hands, bloodied and useless, clawed on the floor in an attempt to get away. A child crying in the dark, an endless wail that he searched and searched and searched for, but could never find.

Horrors. Endless, endless horrors, which haunted him every time he was weak enough to close his eyes.

And even worse, even worse than those nightmares, was the fact that it started to interfere with his daily life. For the first time in months, ever since he’d adopted Sarge, Bucky found himself forgetting to eat. He would feed Sarge, but sometimes he would look down and see his hands were shaking, and when he tried to remember, he couldn’t recall the last time he’d eaten anything. He had to go back to setting the alarms on his phone in an effort to remind himself, and even then he sometimes forgot. And this time there was no voice, or It to annoy or snap at him to take care of himself. He was the voice, had always been, and this, whatever this was, seemed to have affected both of them. It became a struggle, a never-ending struggle, to remember to shower and shave, and put on clean clothes. If not for Sarge, he doubted he would have ever left the house.

He was all right when he was with Sarge, and all of the other dogs he now felt responsible for. They were quiet and accepting, and didn’t judge him. And he never missed one of his volunteer sessions, or Sarge’s training classes. But even then, sometimes it felt like he had only blinked, and would be coming to with Sarge licking his chin, and realizing he was either on the train, or standing outside of Petco, and not remember how he had got there.

Sarge and the rest of the dogs he looked after may not have cared, but the people in his life, the people he had somehow managed to gather around him, certainly noticed. And they did care, and started asking him if he was okay whenever they saw him.

“You’ve gotten skinny again, James,” Teresa said, when he came down the stairs to help her with her groceries. “What’s the matter? Why aren’t you eating?”
“I’m eating,” he said, bending over to pick up her bags, which felt heavier than ever before.

“Well not enough,” she declared as she followed him up the stairs. “You’re coming with me into my apartment, and you’re going to sit there while I make us some pozole. I got a nice, juicy piece of pork. You’re going to love it.”

“’Kay,” was all Bucky could say.

“Okay, so you know how much I love you in red, cos you’ve got that creamy skin and all, but this is making you look very washed out today. And I know your size, so those pants should be a perfect fit, but they’re actually hanging on you.” It was Yuna’s turn. “Are you sure you’re alright? You don’t look so good.”

“I’m fine,” Bucky lied, and then forced himself to smile. “I guess today’s just not a red day, huh?”

“Are you alright James?” It was Andy’s turn two days later. “You seemed kinda off today, and I’ve never seen Sarge act like that.”

“He’s a good dog,” Bucky was quick to defend. Because he was. He was the best dog, and the only thing that was making it bearable to breathe.

“He’s an excellent dog,” Andy was quick to agree. “And what I meant was that he spent all his time near you. He wasn’t even interested in playing with any of his other friends, and Tootsie was here today. You know she’s his little girlfriend right now.” Sarge had spent most of the class hovering, not willing to step more than two feet away from Bucky’s side. And he always came back, rising up onto his hind legs so he could drape his paws on Bucky’s shoulders and lick his chin.

“We’re fine,” Bucky lied yet again. “We’re just having a rough couple of days.” It was weeks, but Andy didn’t need to know that.

“If you say so.” Andy didn’t seem convinced. “Now go on and give Sarge a treat. He’s been a really good dog today, and he deserves one.” On that at least they could agree.

And then, and then...
“So Meghan’s gotten it into her head that we now have to do this banana cleanse bullshit. And I mean I love her, you know I totally do, but I am so fucking tired of bananas and diarrhea. I just want some goddamned bacon, is that too much to ask?” Tara complained before she reached out to tap his shoulder.

Bucky flinched and crouched, as if she’d had a gun in her hand, instead of the frappuccino he had purchased for her like he normally did. She froze, just as startled as he, and immediately lowered her hand.

“Bucky…Bucky are you alright?” she asked quietly, her eyes wide with shock.

And no, no, he wasn’t all right. Because she was Tara, and Tara was the first person who had ever been kind to both him and Sarge when he’d needed help. Bucky adored her, and her easy-going nature, frank sense of humor, and pretty smiles that made her eyes and nose crinkle. She was one of his favorite people in the world, and had never once done anything to hurt him. So he couldn’t understand why he’d been afraid, could only be thankful that he hadn’t struck out, struck back, moved to defend himself. Because he would have hurt her, and she was Tara, and Bucky would slit his own throat before he did anything to deliberately cause her harm. He walked her to the goddamned train at the end of her shift because he wanted her to be safe so badly. Why had he reacted like that to her?

“I…I…” was all he could stutter.

She didn’t reach for him again, but she didn’t back away, because she was brave and strong and everything that was good about his new life.

“What’s the matter Bucky?” Her voice was still quiet, but gentle, and tender, just like she was. “You don’t look so good.”

“I don’t?” he managed to ask.

“No.” She shook her head. “You’re paler than a sheet, and you have these huge dark circles under your eyes. I’ve never seen you look like this, even when you first started coming here. What’s going on with you?”

“I think,” Bucky swallowed, reaching down to pet Sarge, who was curling around his legs and
“I think I’m sick.”

“How do you feel?”

“Have you gone to a doctor?”

“No.”

“Why not? Don’t you have insurance?”

“I do.” That was another one of the benefits listed in his packet, full medical coverage, although it was doubtful he would ever need it.

“Then why not?”

“Because I hate doctors.”

“Bucky, don’t be an idiot,” she said. And this time she did step forward to press her palm against his cheek. “If you’re sick, you need to go to a doctor.”

As if it were as simple as that.

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But her words stayed with him. For the rest of that night, and the following day, and the day after that. Something was very, very wrong, that much was obvious. He just had no idea what it was. It wasn’t his body; he knew from experience that as long as he was consuming enough calories, the serum made him practically indestructible. But he wasn’t eating enough, and losing weight. The simplest tasks exhausted him, and his hands never seemed to stopped trembling now. He was cold all the time, even though July was proving to be brutally hot. And he felt as if the smallest thing would be more than enough to break him.

But where in the world could he find a doctor that would understand all of that. That would be willing to help him, without demanding he go through another barrage of tests, where they drained his blood, shot lights into his eyes, and tested his reactions to external stimuli and pain.
As he lay on his bed, curled up around Sarge, who was the only thing warm enough to help Bucky not feel cold, he remembered other words, from just a few weeks ago. From another conversation over cups of coffee, when Bucky had been too suspicious and overwhelmed to actually hear what was being said.

_You’re going to need help…_

_A long history of working with vets…_

_Not affiliated with SHIELD or the military in any way…_

_And I can tell you from personal experience, that she’s an excellent therapist, and really knows what she’s doing…_

An envelope being slid across the table in his direction. From someone who had been kind to him, in his own way. Sam Wilson, someone Steve obviously trusted, who had searched him out on his own, with apparently no ulterior motive.

So maybe, just maybe…

When Bucky dug out the leather portfolio from his hidey-hole beneath his mattress, the envelope was still there, exactly where he had left it, tucked in the corner, right behind his passport.

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Dr. Miriam Callahan had been born in Binghamton, New York in April of 1960, graduated with honors from Cornell University with PhDs in both Medicine and Psychiatry, specializing in trauma recovery. In 1998, she moved to Midwood, Brooklyn and opened her own private office, where she still practiced to this day. Although her office was small, she had published several well-received articles as well as books, and was highly regarded in her field. While her specialization was trauma recovery, particularly working with vets, true to what Sam told him, Bucky’s research proved she had never been employed by either SHIELD or any other military branch.

She was still a doctor though, just like McAdams, just like Zola, and the dozens of others who had
poked and prodded at Bucky, treating him like nothing more than a thing or experiment, so even
with his realization that he did need help, it was still difficult for Bucky to initiate contact. It wasn’t
until nearly a week later, after another night where his dreams forced him out of his apartment so he
could walk off the fear, the terror, the endless images of corpses behind his eyes, and Teresa, Andy
and Tara all again asked him if he was all right, that he finally turned on his phone to call her office.
She had no power over him, couldn’t force him to stay if he felt she was unsafe, and one visit
couldn’t hurt. Or at least make things any worse. After being assured it was fine if he brought his dog
with him, Bucky made an appointment for the next day, took the train to her home in Brooklyn,
where Dr. Callahan saw her patients, and sat in the small waiting room, with a sweating palm and
Sarge curled at his feet.

When Dr. Callahan opened the door to her office a few minutes later, she was…she was not was
Bucky had been expecting.

She was a tall, raw-boned woman, with shortly cut salt-and-pepper curls framing a handsome face.
Her eyes were bright green, and her cheeks lined, as if laughter and smiles were something she was
very familiar with. Instead of the stiff and perfectly creased uniform McAdams wore during their
sessions, or the initially pristine but ultimately covered with blood lab coats of Zola, she was wearing
a comfortable looking pair of faded jeans, a loosely flowing tunic of pale blue cotton, and, of all
things, slippers on her feet.

Bucky had no idea what to make of her.

“Mr. Barnes?” she queried in a low and even voice, but friendly too.

“Yes,” Bucky answered, rising from his chair.

She smiled at his response, her eyes quickly looking him over before they landed on Sarge, where
her grin grew even wider. “And is this your dog?”

“Yes,” Bucky said again. “This is Sarge.”

“He’s beautiful,” she admitted, taking a small step forward, but pausing to glance at Bucky before
she proceeded. “Can I pet him?”

Bucky nodded. “He’s very friendly.”
“Well hello there Sarge. It’s very nice to meet you.” She knelt down and held her hand out, allowing Sarge to sniff her, before Sarge gave her an approving lick and leaned into the fingers she extended to scratch his ear. “Aren’t you just a sweetheart.” There was laughter in her voice, as if she was enjoying the encounter just as much as Sarge. “And a big boy too. How long has he been with you?”

“Eight months. I found him when he was just a baby. And he’s – he’s still growing.”

“He’s going to get even bigger?” Her tone was curious, but pleasantly so.

“His breed can easily get up to over two hundred pounds.” At just that moment, Sarge decided he was done introducing himself, and returned to Bucky’s side, where he sat, as he usually did, on the top of Bucky’s booted foot. She watched, that smile still on her face, calm and warm, but observant, before she straightened and took a step back, gesturing to the door she entered through.

“Why don’t you step into my office, Mr. Barnes, and we can discuss why you’ve come to see me.”

Even her office was different.

It was medium sized, bright and airy, with a set of windows on one end, and curtains that were currently open to let in the morning light. There were several chairs, one that actually faced the corner instead of the center of the room, a couch, and even a bean bag near the window. Bookshelves lined the walls, and a throw rug covered the center of the floor. Most shocking of all, there was no desk, and as Bucky looked around, he wondered where Dr. Callahan would sit, how would she establish her dominance over him if there was no makeshift throne for her to use as she passed her judgements and made her proclamations?

“Just sit wherever you think you’ll feel comfortable,” she instructed as she closed the door behind them, waving a careless hand around. “And if you have to move around before you find a spot you like, that’s fine too.”

“Anywhere?”

“Of course.”

“And Sarge, he can sit with me too?”
“Why wouldn’t he? If that’s what makes you feel comfortable.”

“Even on the couch?”

“Why not? It’s just a couch.” She was still smiling, but her eyes were watchful, alert, studying him, but not judging, not yet. It took Bucky a moment to make up his mind, before he did decide to sit on the couch, Sarge immediately jumping up to lay with his head on Bucky’s lap.

“So, just a few things before we get started,” Dr. Callahan began before she settled herself in the chair directly across from him. “My name is Dr. Miriam Callahan as you know, but you can call me Dr. Callahan, doctor, doc, or even Miriam. At some points in this process, you may even feel like calling me you bitch, and that’s fine.”

“Really?” This Bucky could not believe.

“Yes really. Believe me, I’ve been called a lot worse by some of my patients,” she laughed. “The point is, feel free to call me whatever’s the most comfortable for you, I won’t take it personally.”

“Okay.” Bucky still wasn’t sure what to think of her. And what little he’d seen had not provided him any guidelines, remembered protocols he should follow.

“Secondly, and this is even more important,” she went on, not commenting on his obvious confusion, “when you called me, you introduced yourself as Mr. Barnes. Is that what you want me to call you during our sessions?”

“I have a choice?”

“Of course you have a choice, Mr. Barnes. These sessions are about you, and helping you get what you need. And the right to be addressed by however you prefer is something everyone has a right to.”

She was definitely not like Captain McAdams. Bucky straightened in his seat, and gave her another careful study. He was still unsure of her, and their interactions so far had not provided him with any further clues. So he decided to test the truth of her words, see how she would react, and get through
the next hour before he could leave and truthfully say, ‘Well, at least I gave it a try, but all you
doctors are just the same.’

“My name is James,” he began. “But most people call me Bucky.”

“All right Bucky, it’s nice to meet you,” she said with a nod. “Now why don’t you tell me a little bit more about why you’re here, and we’ll see if we can work together.”

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Dr. Callahan was very different from anyone Bucky had ever encountered before, doctor or otherwise. As Bucky sat there on that bright Tuesday morning, trying to explain in fits and starts what he’d been going through, she sat and quietly listened, never interrupting him, waiting until he finished before she asked questions of her own.

“How often are you having the nightmares?”

“Almost – almost every night now.”

“Can you get back to sleep after you’ve had one?”

“No.”

“And how is that affecting the rest of your life?”

- and -

“You were a soldier?”

“Yes.”
“For how long?”

“Too long.”

When Bucky didn’t say anything else about it, she didn’t probe or press, just asked him to tell her anything else he felt might be relevant at this point, only occasionally asking for a bit more clarification. She never frowned or scowled at him, her expression open, her gaze intelligent, but again non-judgmental. When he needed to pause to take a breath or gather his words, she simply waited, patient while Bucky ran the thumb of his right hand over Sarge’s brow, staring down into his warm brown eyes with their black mask of fur, which always, always looked back at him lovingly, as if he were the best thing in Sarge’s entire world. He thought it was only because of that, that he was able to make it through the first forty-five minutes of that session. Until Bucky was out of words, exhausted by even that much, and had nothing left to say. She watched him, quiet and patient, not speaking until it was obvious Bucky was not going to continue.

“So, Bucky,” she finally began. “From what you’ve told me, it sounds like you’ve been having a really difficult time of it lately, which is perfectly understandable from what little you’ve said. And I think we’d be able to work together to help you regain your equilibrium. But there’re some rules we need to discuss before you make up your mind.”

Here we go, Bucky thought. He knew that, in spite of all outward appearances, it was too good to be true. Wasn’t even surprised really. He should have known he shouldn’t have trusted anything Sam Wilson said.

“First off, if you do decide to come back, I’m going to need you to be as honest as possible with me,” was the first one. “I know you have no reason to trust me yet, but the work we’re about to do is going to be very difficult, and challenging for the both of us. But it can only work if we’re both honest with each other.”

That was not what he’d been expecting to hear.

“Now granted, I understand in situations like yours, you’re not going to be able to help it. Because sometimes the biggest lies are the ones we tell ourselves.” When Bucky glanced at her she nodded. “Oh yes. Either because that’s what we’ve been taught to believe, or because we’ve needed those lies to help us survive. And that’s okay, we’ll work through all that. But I still need you to promise me that you’re going to try your best, even if your best is sometimes just showing up and telling me you’ve had a really bad day, even if you can’t tell me why.”

“Okay…”
“That also means that if I’ve made a suggestion or offered you a technique I think will help, and you’ve tried it, given it your best shot, but it’s not helping you, then you have to tell me that.”

*What?*

“*What?*”

“Therapy isn’t a one-size-fits-all process, and it’s not my job to try to force you into some premade mold. What works for someone else may not work for you and vice-versa. My job, and my only job is to listen to you and help you find the things that work for you.”

“That’s…that’s different.”

“It shouldn’t be, and if that’s been your experience, I can’t tell you how sorry I am,” Dr. Callahan said. “Which leads me to rule number two. During our work together, you have absolutely every right to tell me no, or you need to stop.”

“What?”

“Oh yes,” she nodded. “This is about your recovery Bucky, and from my experience working with others who have been in similar circumstances, sometimes the most important thing is the right to say no. If you don’t want to talk about something, just let me know and we’ll stop.”

“Just like that?” Bucky found that impossible to believe. McAdams had never stopped, so Bucky had resorted to talking over him. And no one else, no one, had ever listened to him, no matter how much he had begged and screamed and pleaded with them, to please, please stop, I’ll do anything, just make it stop.

“Just like that,” Dr. Callahan leaned back in her chair. “Now, don’t get me wrong, if you don’t want to talk about something, it means we probably need to. And I am going to ask you why – is it too big for you to talk about, does it make you too afraid, what you’re physically feeling at that moment. But I won’t force you to talk about it. What we will do is work on getting you to place where you feel you can talk about it instead. That will most likely take time, and a lot of patience. But, and I know you don’t believe me yet, I’m not here to judge you, or tell you that there’s something wrong with you. This is supposed to be a safe place for you Bucky, and that means you have autonomy here, and the right to say no.” Bucky could only stare at her, wide-eyed with shock.
“Now I don’t want you to get the wrong idea, and think it’s going to be easy. Because therapy and recovery aren’t an easy process. It’s going to be a lot of work, Bucky, a lot of it, and sometimes it’s going to feel like it’s getting worse before it gets better.”

“Oh that’s just great.” Even Bucky could hear the disappointment in his voice.

“Do you cook?” she asked him, seemingly out of the blue.

Bucky nodded. “I like to cook.”

“That’s wonderful, and something we’ll definitely talk more about, but this will help me put it in a way that will hopefully help what I’m saying make more sense to you.” Bucky glanced at her to let her know he was listening. “Have you ever made a roast, or baked a chicken or broiled something?” She waited for Bucky to nod before she continued.

“Well, when you’re done with the meal, what you’re left with is this pan that’s burnt and has all these bits and black blobs crusted on the surface, and if you try to clean it right away, no matter how hard you scrub you can’t get those bits off. What you have to do is let it soak for a while in warm water overnight. And when you go back to it the next day to start cleaning it, it’s this huge mess, with murky water and all this gunk everywhere that looks worse than when you started, that’s getting all over the place. But if you’re patient and steady, and keep at it, eventually what you have is a clean pan, with maybe some stains and dents that nothing is going to get rid of, but a perfectly good pan, that you can use for your next meal. Therapy is a lot like that.”

“How long do you think it’ll take?”

“That I can’t answer for you. It’s going to take as long as it takes. You’re just going to have to trust in the process, and most importantly yourself. It’s going to take time, and a lot of hard work, but I do believe we can get you to a much better place than you are now.”

“I’m not afraid of hard work.” He wasn’t, he never had been, even if what she was saying terrified him. But as far as he could tell, she was doing her best to be honest with him, which wasn’t something he could ever remember a doctor being with him before. Could he trust her? He still didn’t know. But she seemed to recognize he couldn’t, at least not yet, and wasn’t trying to force him into doing anything he wasn’t ready for.
“So what do you think Bucky? Do you think this is something we can work for together?” she eventually asked.

He took a moment, and then another, and then one more, looking down at Sarge, who had been quiet and patient the entire time, warmth and softness and comfort, in this place that was new and strange and yes, frightening, but not cold or hostile, and thought that maybe, just maybe, he could take a chance. He was free to leave at any time, and really, how much worse could it get. So after a moment of playing with Sarge’s fur, stroking the soft fuzz that ran along the inside of his big, floppy ears, Bucky eventually looked up and nodded. Seeing this, Dr. Callahan smiled and nodded back.

“Right then,” she said. “So let’s look at setting up some appointments that work with your schedule.”
They agreed on a morning session, twice a week, Tuesdays and Thursdays. And of course, if Bucky was having a bad day, or just needed to talk, he was free to call her on her cell phone whenever he needed. In fact, she encouraged him to do so instead of letting something that was starting to fester get worse. She was semi-retired at this point in her career, only seeing a few patients currently, and that allowed her a lot of flexibility in her schedule. She was there to help, to aid him in his recovery, and that meant he was free to reach out to her whenever he needed, and as long as she wasn’t in the middle of a session with someone else, she would make sure she was available to him. And even if she wasn’t, she promised she would get back to him as soon as possible. That was very different from anything in Bucky’s past.

She also assigned him homework. Near the end of their first session, when she asked if Bucky had ever heard of PTSD, and he shook his head, she handed him several pamphlets she told him to read, as well as provided him with a list of websites he could browse for further information. She also instructed him to write up a list of goals he hoped to achieve through therapy that they could go over together during their next session in two days.

It was short list, with only three items, but it took Bucky a long time to even put those to paper.

No more nightmares.

Remember to eat.

Stop being so afraid all the time.
She took the crumpled paper from his hands, carefully looking it over, not criticizing its brevity, nodding instead.

“This is a very good starting point, Bucky. And we’re going to break this down even further in just a little bit. But first, do you have any questions about the reading materials I gave you on Tuesday?”

That was the other thing about Dr. Callahan. She always called him Bucky; not James or Mr. Barnes, but Bucky. Just like he asked her to. While he still didn’t trust her, it made it easier for him to listen to her, actually listen instead of just pretending to pay attention or nodding when he thought it appropriate. During their second session, after he told her he didn’t have any questions regarding the pamphlets she provided, (he had read them, as well as visited the websites; he just didn’t know what to make of all the information yet), she asked him to tell her a little bit more about himself. How did he spend his days, did he have a job, what were his hobbies and routines, smiling when he told her about the time he spent volunteering at the animal shelter.

“And you enjoy that?”

“Yeah.” Bucky felt himself nodding. “I really, really do. I love working with all those dogs, especially…”

“Especially?”

“Especially,” Bucky paused to swallow, “the really difficult ones. I’m good with those, don’t know why. But they’re all good dogs, you know? They just need someone willing to give them a second chance, I guess,” he finished with a shrug.

“It’s good that they have you then,” she said after a moment when he didn’t go on. “And it’s also good that you have something you’re so passionate about. It’ll help.”

“I love dogs, all animals really, but…dogs, yeah.” Bucky smiled as he reached down to give Sarge’s ear a scratch, in just the right spot, that always made his back leg twitch and his tail thump happily against Bucky’s thigh. There was no way Bucky could have stopped himself from laughing at that. When he finally glanced back up, Dr. Callahan was smiling at him.

“Of course you do,” she agreed. “I don’t know you very well yet Bucky, but even I can see that. Now, let’s talk about this list a little more.”
The next session, she started by asking if he’d had any nightmares since they’d last seen each other. Bucky nodded, and she then asked him to describe them to her. Bucky baulked, feeling his throat closing up and any words he may have said frozen in his throat. He ended up shaking his head instead.

“Okay,” she told him gently. “But can you tell me why you don’t feel like you can talk about them right now?”

Bucky swallowed, and then swallowed again, his right hand once again clenched in Sarge’s fur, before he was finally able to whisper, “They’re just so big, and-and horrible, and…And you’re gonna think I’m crazy.”

“All right, first off, let me assure you Bucky that I won’t, okay?” She paused, waiting for Bucky to acknowledge her before continuing. “And secondly, let’s talk about the word you just used.”

“Which word?” Bucky muttered.

“Crazy.”

“Why? What’s wrong with crazy? It’s what I am, ain’t it? You said you wanted me to be honest. I’m just telling the truth.” Bucky laughed dryly, angrily, because it was the truth. He had gotten, or was about to get, everything he had ever wanted; his freedom, a house, money, a dog. Why would he be having all of these nightmares and problems if there wasn’t something inherently wrong with him?

“You are not crazy, Bucky.” Dr. Callahan’s voice was firm, determined, not harsh, but brokering no argument. “And first off, let’s get back to that word. In my profession, there’s no such thing as crazy. It’s a misnomer, or a slur used by people who don’t know any better. Yes, there are people with severe mental illness, who struggle constantly to do the simplest of things, but they aren’t crazy. They’re just reacting to the environment in a way that makes sense to them. They need a lot of help, and oftentimes medication, but they aren’t crazy Bucky. And neither are you.” She ignored the glare Bucky shot her way, pausing for a moment to allow him to process what she’d just said, before continuing.

“Look at it this way. If someone was in a horrible car accident, where their leg was crushed, and they walked with a limp, would you think something was wrong with them?”
“No,” Bucky mumbled. “But this is different.”

“No, it’s not, not really,” she countered. “Think of all your past experiences as a horrible car accident that you survived. They left an imprint on you, but instead of your leg, it’s on your brain. And right now, your brain is limping along, trying to get by as best it can, while it works to process and deal with all that pain. Just like you wouldn’t judge that person for their limp, you shouldn’t judge yourself for struggling with an injury.”

“I just want to be normal again,” Bucky admitted, even though he knew that was an impossibility. There was no way, with what the serum had done to his body and his metal arm, all the things he could do that only one other person could, that made him valuable, made him a tool, a weapon, an asset, that he could ever have anything close to a normal life ever again. Dr. Callahan confirmed that with her next words.

“There’s no such thing as normal, Bucky,” she told him. “How I react to something is going to be different from how you react to the same thing. But so will how your neighbor reacts, or the waitress in your favorite restaurant. There’s only normal for you, which is based on what you’ve been through, and your past experiences. But it’s not the same for everybody. Right now, your reactions are a bit extreme, but that doesn’t mean it’s bad either. The biggest problem is how those reactions are affecting the rest of your life. Going back to the person from the car accident, they’re probably always going to walk with a limp. But with enough care and rehabilitation, that doesn’t mean they can’t live a very happy and productive life. Some days the limp will be worse than others, some days their leg might not even bother them at all. It’s a wound, one that will always need a bit of extra care, but that doesn’t make them any less than anyone else. And like I said, they can still have a very happy and fulfilling life. That’s how you have to start thinking about yourself, and this process Bucky. You’ve been wounded, and those injuries haven’t been tended to properly. But we can work on that, get you the tools you need so you’re not always in pain, so that you have more good days than bad ones, and that when you do have a bad day, you’ll be better prepared to handle it.”

“But why now?” he asked her, desperate for something, anything, to explain why his life had so drastically changed, when just about everything he had ever wanted was in his grasp. “Things are better now. It shouldn’t be like this. It should be better.”

“That’s probably the reason why.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Let me give you another metaphor, to see if that helps, all right?” She waited for Bucky to nod before proceeding. “One thing the human brain is very good at is compartmentalizing. And when you have something else that needs to be done, that’s taking up all of your energy, that’s what the brain focuses on, blocking out everything else in order to survive. But that doesn’t mean all of the
other things that need to be dealt with have gone away. You’ve just put them in a box, and shoved them to the back of your closet while you dealt with everything else. And while you have been, you’ve just been shoving more and more boxes into the back of your closet. Until everything else has been taken care of, and you’ve forgotten about them. Haven’t even gone into the same room for months, or even years. Until one day, you’re sitting at home alone, minding your own business, and you hear this horrible noise. And when you go to look, you see the closet door has come crashing down, and everything you’ve been shoving in there for years is all over the place, and now you’re stuck with having to clean all that up. Sorting through it all, and folding it neatly, finding places for it to fit.”

“So my brain is basically a closet filled with junk?”

“It’s a gross over-simplification, but basically yes,” she answered. “And not all of it is junk. Some of it we can definitely throw away, and some of it should be saved. Some of it may need a washing, or a couple of stitches before it can be used again. But we won’t know until we look. Our ultimate goal is to sort through it, rearrange some things, and get it to the point where it isn’t this mess that’s taking up the entire room.”

“I think… I think there are a lot of monsters in my closet,” Bucky heard himself whisper.

“There probably are,” she agreed. “But here’s the thing about closet monsters Bucky. They don’t do very well once you turn the lights on. And we’ve got big flashlights.”

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She was so different from any doctor Bucky had ever encountered before. And in spite of himself, in spite of his past experiences and all the warning bells clanging in his own head, he found himself listening to her. She had a way of explaining things in such a way that made it easy for Bucky to understand what she meant. And there were no ‘You need to do this,’ or ‘This is how you’re supposed to be’ from her. That wasn’t to say she didn’t have advice or provide him with guidelines to follow, but she always asked for his feedback, and actually listened to his answers, adjusting her approach, or finding an alternative when it was obvious something she suggested wasn’t working.

One of the first issues she addressed was Bucky’s eating habits, when he confessed to her that while he liked to eat and enjoyed cooking, when his days were really bad, he often found himself forgetting to feed himself.

“And the alarms on your phone don’t help?” she asked. Bucky shook his head.
“Don’t know why,” he shrugged. “They did before, but sometimes it’s like I zone out or something and I don’t even hear them.”

Her recommendation once she heard that was for Bucky to go out and purchase one of the multitude of smart watches on the market (if he could afford one, which he could), that he could sync to his phone, and whose vibrations against his wrist would be a different stimulation than the audio of an alarm. She broke it down even further than that, instructing him to purchase a whiteboard he could hang on the wall over Sarge’s food bowls, so he couldn’t help but see it whenever it was time to feed his dog. Once he did, she had him color code his days by mood. Pink days were good days, where he was fine and had no problems feeding himself. The only thing she had him write under that was *Try new recipe*. The remaining columns were labeled *orange, yellow, grey* and *black*, the last two being the worst. Under grey she had him write meat, can or bag of frozen vegetables, rice, water. Four simple ingredients he could always keep at hand and throw into a slow cooker, something else she recommended he buy, requiring no fuss, preparation or thought, so that in a few hours, when his watch vibrated there would be a healthy, warm and filling meal ready for him. Under black, there was simply her number, written in red so he knew he could call her if the situation was that desperate. It never got to that point, but he found himself referring to the grey column quite a bit. On those days, when all he was able to do was walk Sarge, he would come home to find his apartment smelling like a home cooked meal, and the scents, along with the vibration against his wrist, triggered his hunger enough so he could sit down and eat the warm and hearty dinner waiting for him.

“Ultimately, I don’t care what you eat,” she told him the day they worked on writing out the columns. “If you can only manage a bag of potato chips or an apple, that’s fine. I just want you to try and eat something, because everybody needs to eat, and it’ll help stabilize your moods and give you the energy you need. But this should help, make it easier for you to remember, on your really bad days.”

Bucky had to admit, it did. Initially he didn’t regain any of his weight, but he did stop losing it. Eventually even that changed, his hip, collar and cheek bones less prominent, his clothes no longer hanging off of him. And when he told her, of his own volition, that he did love to cook when he had the energy for it, finding something about the process relaxing, and had started to head to his small kitchen instead of out walking the streets some nights when the nightmares were bad, she was fully supportive, praising him for finding a technique on his own that worked with a bright smile.

So Bucky started to bake. Simple things at first; cookies, pound cakes, muffins. As far as he could remember, he had never baked before, so there were no negative associations with the process. And there was something so soothing, simple, in pulling out a bowl, and mixing a predetermined set of ingredients, that as long as he followed the instructions had a guaranteed result that Bucky could look at once he was done and say to himself, ‘I made that. I did that. Things may be fucked up right now, but I. Did. That.’

It also made his kitchen smell great. So much so that on the mornings after Bucky had spent hours
kneading dough or mixing chocolate chips, nuts and oats into a bowl, (because there were never any oatmeal cookies in his nightmares), Teresa would knock on his door with two mugs of her still brutally strong coffee, and ask him what he had made them for breakfast. She was still worried about him, he knew, but she also quickly seemed to adapt to this newer, more mercurial state of his moods, and was a quiet companion on those mornings, offering him company, but not expecting him to talk to her. It was nice, soothing, comfortable.

Besides, they were both adults, and they could eat cookies for breakfast if they wanted to.

***

The nightmares kept coming though, and they remained just as emotionally, if not as physically, draining. And there were still days when Bucky blinked, and found himself on the train on his way to the ASPCA, or in front of Petco, Sarge in his lap or by his side, with no memory of how he had gotten there.

And he still couldn’t find a way to talk about them, no matter what Dr. Callahan suggested. The last time he tried to recount his most recent one, one that had been so bad he couldn’t even bake and needed to clip Sarge’s leash to his collar and take to the streets, his hands had trembled and his teeth clattered so violently it was all he could do to just sit there on the couch and not bolt from her office.

“I want you to take a deep breath Bucky, a nice, deep breath and hold it for a count of three, good, good, just like that. Now let it out, just as slow. Good…And again, one, two, three…And let it out.”

It took a long time, and Bucky realizing that Sarge was licking at his chin, before he was able to unclench his hands, and slowly lift his head.

“Better?” Dr. Callahan asked. She was so kind, so patient with him, never criticizing him when Bucky was too weak to attempt the things she recommended.

“It’s not weakness, Bucky,” she told him when he said this. “It’s just something you’re not ready for yet.”

“There’s a difference?”

“There’s a big difference. But we’ll get there. It’s just going to take some time, and a lot of patience.
You’re doing the best you can right now, and there’s nothing wrong with that. We just have to take it
day by day. Remember that.”

Easier said than done, but it really was all he could do some days. Under her guidance, Bucky was
learning to accept that, yeah, there were going to be good days and bad days, and sometimes just
getting through one of the bad ones was a huge accomplishment. And that was okay. It was more
than okay, because it meant he had survived, when so many people had tried so hard to destroy him,
had never believed he could make it this far. And yet, here he was. Still standing, and all right,
maybe sometimes leaning, but he had a dog that currently weighed nearly one hundred and seventy-
five pounds, and Sarge never seemed to mind.

Which was good, which was more than good. Especially a few weeks later, when one of his
monsters, one of the biggest ones, finally decided to come out of Bucky’s closet in an attempt to eat
him alive.

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The night had been a rough one. In fact, the past four nights had been rough ones, the dreams
coming fast and furious, a relentless tearing of screeches and blinding explosions ripping through his
brain. He couldn’t sleep, was terrified of closing his eyes, and hadn’t been able to bake, instead
spending most of the nights practically running through the streets in an effort to get away. But
nothing he did, no amount of deep breathing, or trying to focus on the positive things in his life,
helped. His head throbbed, his eyes burned and every inch of his skin itched, and nothing he did
would make it stop.

He had barely been able to make it to his appointment, after forcing himself to eat cup of yoghurt that
had been bitter and sour in his mouth, where he couldn’t even sit down, and was instead pacing back
and forth and back and forth in Dr. Callahan’s office, feeling like a caged tiger rather than a human
being.

“How long has it been since you were able to sleep?” she asked as she watched him.

“Four, maybe five days, I dunno,” was all he could say, pacing, pacing, pacing, back and forth, and
back and forth. The goddamned room was too damned small, and was filled with too much crap.
How could anybody stand to be in here for more than five fucking minutes?

“Nightmares again?”
“What the fuck do you think?” he snapped at her. It was the first time he’d ever snapped at her, and if he had the energy, any resources left at all, he would have felt bad about that. But it was all he could do at the moment to not start ripping his own hair out. The room was so damned crowded, and there was not enough space, with that stupid couch and idiotic bean bag on the floor.

“I don’t know what to think Bucky,” she said, her voice calm, even, steady, seemingly unaffected by his behavior. “That’s why I’m asking you to tell me.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Pace, pace, pace, back and forth, back and forth.

“I know you don’t. But that’s why I think you really need to.” They hadn’t been able to overcome this, not yet, Bucky unwillingness to discuss his nightmares. She had suggested writing them down, drawing pictures, even recording what he remembered on his phone once he was calm enough. But none of her suggestions, none of her tips or tricks, would ever make it easier. “Now come on, I want you to listen to my voice and take a deep breath. Are you ready?”

“I don’t want to take a deep fucking breath! I just want the goddamned nightmares to stop! When the fuck are they going to stop? You’re supposed to be helping me, but they aren’t fucking stopping!” Pace, pace, pace, back and forth, back and forth.

“I know they’re not, so let’s talk about that. Do you want to sit down, or do you need to keep pacing?” She was so calm, so placid, in the face of his fury, his desperation, just like all the rest. Like every single one of those other doctors and scientists, right before they strapped him down in that goddamned chair.

“I am not going back to that motherfucking chair!”

“What chair Bucky?” was the last thing he heard. Because suddenly, suddenly, there it was. Where the couch should be, the bean bag, even where Dr. Callahan was sitting. The Chair, the Chair, the Chair, the monster from his closet, the demon from his dreams. But it had escaped, just like he had escaped, and now it was following him everywhere he went, trying to pull him back, devour him whole, take it all away…”

*The Chair…*

*The Chair…*
The Chair…

…until it did. And there was nothing left of him at all.

***

His name was James. No, it was Soldier. No, no, it was nothing, it was lost, lost, lost, even to him, forever forgotten on this plane of endless greys. He had been here before, that he knew, even if he couldn’t remember his own name. It was quiet here, peaceful, safe. There was no chair, no hacksaws cutting into his body, no targets he had no choice but to kill. Quiet and grey and endless, and he had spent time here, so much time here, he knew he'd been forgotten. There was no one left to remember him, no one left to look, but it was safe, safe, and that made it bearable.

But lonely.

Because something was missing. So many things were missing. Because, because he had a dog, didn’t he? And a name once. Not James. Not Soldier. Something else, something someone had once whispered into his ear, between kisses and hot breaths, cherished in the night. And that name, his name had been...Had been...

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“Bucky, can you hear me Bucky?” A voice calling his name. But not the right one, female instead of male, soft but insistent, determined in its desire for his attention. Yet it was the wrong voice, so he could ignore it.

A weight on his chest, solid and heavy, and wetness on his chin. And that he could not ignore, so he groaned and shook his head.

“Can you hear me, Bucky?” the voice asked again.

“Ungh,” Bucky groaned, all he had the energy for at the moment.

“Do you know where you are right now, Bucky?” the voice persisted. He tried to answer the
question, he really did, but at that instant his mind was nothing more than a kaleidoscope of greys and jagged edges, and none of them held any answers.

“No,” he finally managed to whisper.

“That’s okay Bucky. Just know that you’re safe and no one here is going to hurt you. Sarge is with you, and he’ll make sure of that.”

“Sarge?” The weight on his chest, the wetness on his chin.

“Yes Sarge. He hasn’t left your side. Now, I want you to take a deep breath, good, good, just like that, and then another one, good, good, and now try and wiggle your toes. Can you do that for me Bucky?”

He had no idea how long it took, but eventually, after being asked to wiggle his fingers and his toes, and then to open his eyes, but only when he was ready, Bucky slowly did to find himself lying on his back, staring up at the ceiling, Sarge laying on top of his chest.

“Do you know where you are, Bucky?”

“Dr. Callahan?” Bucky twisted his head toward the sound of her voice, to find her kneeling on the floor a few feet away from him. “Wha’ – wha’ happened?”

“You dissociated Bucky.” Her voice was soft, steady and even, which he was so thankful for, given the way his head was pounding.

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Don’t worry about it. That’s not what’s important right now. How do you feel?”

Bucky took a moment before he answered her. “Tired. Confused. Don’t know how I got here.”

“That’s okay. Do you think you can sit up yet, or do you need more time?”

Bucky definitely needed more time. Everything, everything felt heavy and muted, as if his limbs were made of wet sand, and his mind a jigsaw puzzle whose pieces had been tossed to the floor. Dr. Callahan was patient, and encouraging, asking him simple, basic questions, while urging him to take deep breaths and to keep wiggling his fingers and toes. Until eventually, finally, Bucky thought he might be able to sit up and not vomit.

“Do you need my help?” Dr. Callahan asked.

“Don’t touch me!”

“Okay Bucky, it’s okay. I won’t. I promise you,” she assured him, and then kept her word, standing a respectful distance away while still keeping an eye on him.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, using Sarge to help him as he slowly clambered to his feet. “Don’t know why I’m like this.” His poor dog. He was such a good dog, his tail immediately starting to wag once Bucky reached down to scratch his ear. Bucky was so grateful he had gone out to do his laundry that cold and miserably wet December day. “It’s okay Sarge, it’s okay. I’m all right now.”

“You have nothing to apologize for Bucky,” Dr. Callahan told him. “But I’m going to ask you again, how are you feeling right now?”

“Like shit,” Bucky admitted.

“I’m not surprised, after what just happened,” she said, running her eyes over him in a careful study. “Now, do you think you can walk yet?”

“I – I think so.”

“Not far, just to my kitchen. I think we need to do something a little different today.”

That morning, for the first time, Bucky followed Dr. Callahan out of her office, through a different door, and into her kitchen, another bright and airy room, where she had him sit at her kitchen table while she proceeded to make him a cup of tea, of all things, which she carefully placed in front of him, along with a plate of shortbread cookies.
“I want you to sit there for a few minutes, and just breathe, okay?” she told him, while she prepared her own cup. “Hold the cup in your hands and focus on how warm it is beneath your fingers. Smell the tea, breathe in the scent and use that to help ground you. And when you’re ready, take a sip, but be careful, because it’s hot, and tell me what you taste.”

“Lemon,” Bucky said a few minutes later, after he had done everything she’d instructed.

“Do you like it?” she asked as she sat herself down across from him. “It’s one of my favorites, but I have others if you don’t like that one.”

“No, it’s good.” Bucky took another sip. It was bright and sharp on his tongue, sweet, but not overly so, and it was definitely helping to clear his head.

“Try it with a cookie, and tell me what you think,” she smiled, doing exactly the same.

It was a strange way to pass the time, sitting in his therapist’s kitchen, drinking tea and eating cookies, but Bucky had to admit it helped. It helped a lot, as did Sarge who was faithfully sitting at Bucky’s side, his head resting in his lap. So much so, that when Dr. Callahan finally did break the silence, he was able to bear it and not feel like his skin was being peeled off strip by strip as it had before.

“Do you know what just happened Bucky?” was the question she asked.

“You said I…disa-something?” was all Bucky could remember of those first few minutes of his return to consciousness.

“Disassociated,” she said.

“I still don’t know what that means.”

“It’s a coping mechanism, basically. When someone has been forced to experience a horrible trauma, or even remember that trauma, in order to survive the experience, the brain shuts down, locks itself away, so it doesn’t have to deal with that experience. It shuts itself off to escape the pain. The body can remain alert and functional while this happens, but it’s too big for your mind to process, so it
creates its own avenue of escape.”

“So what are you saying? I turn into a zombie basically?” The tea and cookies were suddenly a lot less appetizing.

“No, that’s not what I’m saying. I’m saying that your conscious mind shuts down while your body relives the experience.”

“Well that’s just fucking great.”

“It’s not a bad thing Bucky,” she assured him. “ Granted, it’s not something we want to encourage, because those things in your mind, those are the things we’re going to need to talk about. But we can work on getting you to a place where you can. What you need to remember is that it’s a safe place your brain created for you, to help you deal with what was happening to you. It was your only escape, when no other was possible for you, and it helped to keep you alive.”

“The monsters in my closet,” he murmured, running his thumb in a circle over and over again on Sarge’s brow.

“The monsters in your closet,” she agreed.

“I think there’re a lot of them.”

“Probably. But we know they’re there now, and how some of them manifest. We can work on making you strong enough to start slaying some of them.”

“Not gonna be easy though, is it?”

“No, it’s not. I told you that when we first started. But it’ll get better Bucky, I promise you. It might get worse before it gets better, but it will get better.” Bucky nodded at her words, because she had told him that.

“Can I ask you something?” she went on a few minutes later.
“Do I have a choice?”

“You know that you do,” she told him. “But before you answer me, let me rephrase that... Do you feel strong enough to answer a few questions?”

“I don’t want to talk about the chair,” he almost, almost snapped.

“We won’t, not today,” she assured him. “But has this ever happened to you before, that you can recall?”

“Sometimes,” Bucky eventually admitted with a shrug. “Sometimes it’s like I’m suddenly waking up, and I’m on the train, or getting ready to bring Sarge to Petco for his classes, and I don’t remember how I got there.”

“Do you have any idea what causes it?”

“Usually it’s after a night when the dreams have been real bad.”

“Okay. Thank you for telling me that. I know it’s not easy.”

“You told me to be honest,” Bucky shrugged. “Just am.”

“And I appreciate that,” she smiled at him. “Now sit back and relax. Finish your tea, and eat some more cookies. You had a rough session today. Just sit there, take a few deep breaths, and pet your dog.”

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In spite of her words, she did send him home with homework though, asking him to record any future instances of when he disassociated, and if there was anything he could remember, aside from the nightmares, that could be possible triggers. A sound, a scent, a situation where he was uncomfortable. But she also told him to do something nice for himself, as a reward and reminder as
to why he was doing this. To take a bath, reread a favorite book, or eat some ice cream if that’s something that made him feel better. It didn’t really help, but Bucky wasn’t going to complain about being given permission to eat a banana split that he shared with Sarge.

And then during the next session, they went back to work. To Bucky’s shock, she didn’t bring up the chair, focusing instead of teaching him techniques that would help ground him in the present, things he could do that would remind him where he was, and whatever he was remembering was just that, a memory, that while painful, was just that, a memory. Deep, measured breaths. Wiggling his fingers and toes to get a better sense of where he was. Using Sarge, and his constant licks to Bucky’s chin, his endless warmth, his clean, dog-like smell, and the feel of his soft fur beneath Bucky’s fingers, as his loadstone, because Sarge was his companion, and as long as he was by Bucky’s side, Bucky knew he was safe.

They worked. Not perfectly, and not at first, but a few sessions later, while he clung to Sarge and pressed his face into his ruff, while taking great, heaving gasps, Bucky was able to tell Dr. Callahan about the Chair, and the horrors of it. How he had been forced into it, and strapped down, knowing what was coming and there was no escape, until the halo clamped down on his head, and the who of him, all he was, was stripped away, leaving him as empty as a blank canvas. But how no matter how many times they made him sit there, it never lasted long enough, and eventually things would start coming back to him, fragments that didn’t make any sense, but made him question, made him doubt, and that was enough of a sign of disobedience that they forced him back into it again and again and again and again. How he dreamed of that chair, blood dripping from his ears and the corners of his eyes, and how sometimes, sometimes, even though he knew he had escaped, every chair was That Chair, and how when that happened, he couldn’t even bear to be in a room with a seat that had arm rests.

He didn’t disassociate, but it was a near thing, as he spoke in fits and starts, Dr. Callahan’s voice reminding to him to breathe and remember where he was, and that Sarge was there with him. When it was done, and he had nothing left to say, the room was silent, and he felt as pounded and bruised as a piece of tenderized meat, as shredded as an old tissue, and more exhausted than he could ever remember being.

“I’m so sorry you had to go through that Bucky,” was what Dr. Callahan said when she finally broke the silence. It was the first time anyone, anyone had ever apologized to him for what he’d been through, and it was that, more than anything else, which almost broke him. Not sympathy, but compassion, an acknowledgement of his pain, one he couldn’t remember getting for over seventy years, even longer than that, when there were always missions, poverty or a greater need that took priority. So much bitter in his life, with very little sweet, and never being allowed the spit the bitter out, because sometimes it was all you had to eat. It was so shocking to hear it, he had no idea what to say to her in response. So he said nothing. But she seemed to understand, and instead of asking him anymore questions, she slowly rose from her chair and motioned toward the door.

“Come on, you’ve worked hard enough today. It’s time for tea and cookies.” A little more sweet to counter all that bitter.
That night, for the first time in far too long, Bucky actually slept for a solid sixteen hours without any nightmares. Poor Sarge barely hung on long enough for them to make outside so he could relieve himself, and Bucky did miss his volunteer shift that day. But it was the best sleep Bucky could remember having in far too long.

***

After that, it became easier. Or perhaps easier was not the word Bucky would have used, but once he managed to talk about the Chair, it seemed as if the floodgates opened, and the monsters came pouring out of his closet.

But…

But…

He could face them now, or at least try to.

The next one that came tearing out of his closet bore Armin Zola’s face, and the buzz saw, already bloodied, its ridges clotted with bits of Bucky’s flesh, as Bucky told Dr. Callahan about how his arm had been removed, with no pain medication, while he was still conscious as they first cut off what was left of his arm and then attached the metal one.

He did disassociate that time, coming to and finding himself lying on the floor, Sarge laying on top of him. And it took him a long time, far too long, to get his breathing back under control. But Dr. Callahan sat with him, and helped him through it, with lots of breathing exercises, followed by tea and cookies, and once again telling him she was sorry he’d had to live through that. The nightmares that night were brutal, and he needed to constantly stare at the grey column on his white board to remind himself to eat. And he knew there were times when his brain shut itself off. But eventually, after several more sessions, he was able to sit and talk about it, not easily, and not without a hitch in his breathing, and clinging desperately to Sarge, and they began to slowly break down the experience, so Bucky could process it and understand all of the ramifications it had left on his psyche.

The third monster…

The third monster was very, very different. Because it wasn’t about the Chair, or pain, or a hacksaw
to his shoulder, but the absence of all of that, of anything actually, but even more terrifying than the previous two monsters had been.

“Before – before the chair, they used to – they used to lock me in a room and turn out all the lights, for, I d-don’t know, days, weeks, months at a time, and just-just leave me there, in the dark all alone. Wh-when whoever it was finally opened the door, I would have cr-crawled on my hands and knees over to them, and done any-anything they wanted, if it just meant they wouldn’t leave me a-alone in there like th-that anymore. Why? Wh-why did they do that to me?”

Bucky was again on the floor, but this time he didn’t disassociate. This time he curled around Sarge, and sobbed and sobbed and sobbed and sobbed, an awful, ragged noise, howling out seventy years of isolation, pain and starvation.

“It was a form of torture Bucky,” Dr. Callahan said from her own spot on the floor not too close, never too close, but not too far away from him either, when he finally stopped, however many hours it was later. “All human beings, and most mammals, need touch to survive. By denying you that, they took away one of your most basic needs in an attempt to dehumanize you.”

“It fucking worked too,” Bucky sniffed, wiping at the snot and tears on his face with the sleeve of his shirt. “Because look at me now.”

“Yes, let’s do exactly that, let’s look at you now,” she said gently. “Because you’re still here Bucky. They tortured you, and that’s a horrible thing. But you survived. And you’ve managed to build a life, with interests, and new friends, and a dog that’s crazy about you. They may have taken something from you, but that doesn’t mean you can’t get it back. In fact, it looks to me like you’ve already started.”

It took a while for Bucky to process her words, and actually hear what she was saying, but once he did, once he flipped them over in his head and examined them from all sides, he discovered that… she wasn’t wrong. He had started to rebuild his life, reclaim the things once lost. In fits and starts yes, but he was doing it.

“Huh,” he said, uncurling from Sarge so he could lean back against the edge of the couch.

“Huh indeed,” she smiled at him. “Now I’m going to ask you something, and I want you to remember that it’s absolutely all right for you to say no.”
“Okay.”

“Can I give you a hug Bucky?”

“Why?”

“Because after today, I think you really need one. But again, only if it’s something you really want.”

“Yeah,” Bucky agreed after a few seconds, slowly climbing to his feet. “Yeah, that would be all right. I think I’d really like that.”

Dr. Callahan was a tall woman, determined, fierce and extremely intelligent. But kind, compassionate and gentle too.

And she gave really, really great hugs.

***

It wasn’t all brutal tears, and coping strategies. As the weeks passed, Bucky was surprised to discover that sometimes therapy could almost be enjoyable.

Like the time he spent nearly the entire hour talking about how well Sarge was doing in his current class. And Lollipop, the dog he and Andy had been working with at the shelter, who had been in a bad state when she’d been brought in, but had ended up being adopted by a really sweet old lady the day before. Or how excited he was about the house he had put a bid on.

“Sorry,” he apologized when he realized he had spent the past fifty minutes yammering away about this and that.

“Why are you apologizing?” she asked.

“Well, we kinda just wasted this session, didn’t we?”
“It wasn’t a waste Bucky,” she assured him.

“Really?”

“Yes really. You’re not just all the bad things that happened to you. You’re the good things too. And it’s okay to talk about the things that excite and make you happy. I like hearing it, and it lets me know there’re parts of your life that are going well. And we can use that during the difficult sessions too, pull on all those things to help you regain your equilibrium.”

“Huh.”

“‘Huh’ indeed.”

Therapy could also be very, very enlightening.

“You should hear the way Tara just goes on and on about her girlfriend. I mean, it doesn’t matter to me, I don’t care. But Jesus Christ, if the wrong person hears her, she could end up getting killed!”

“Why?” Dr. Callahan asked.

“What do you mean why? That shit’s not safe, and if they catch you, if you’re lucky they’ll just lock you up. If you’re not, they’ll…they’ll…” Bucky knew all about being unlucky. Everybody knew what happened to inverts if you got caught. They’d had to be so discrete, so careful, because if they’d been discovered, he might have survived, but Steve was so small, and so sick most of the time, and he never would have made it.

“Bucky, while there are certainly still pockets of hate, and places where it’s not safe to come out, gay rights have come a long way in the past thirty years. And no one is going to get put in jail for it anymore.”

“They – they aren’t?” Bucky asked.
“No, they’re not. At least not in America.” She paused to stare at him. “Why don’t you know this?”

Bucky met her gaze, seeing the honest curiosity there, and realized she had no idea who her newest patient really was. And that maybe, just maybe, it was time for him to take this box out of his closet, lift its lid, and show her the contents.

“You don’t know, do you?” he asked.

“Know what?”

“You call me Bucky, and that’s my name. But my full name, the name I was born with, is James Buchanan Barnes. And while the year on my driver’s license says 1991, they had to change it so no one would ask too many questions. I was really born in 1917.” She sat there, blinking at him, not saying a word. And for the first time, Bucky wondered if she actually did think he was crazy. “I know you don’t believe me. I wouldn’t believe me either. But you can look me up online. Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes of the 107th, and the Howling Commandos. Captain America’s second-in-command. There are even pictures of me in the Smithsonian. I saw ‘em myself.”

“Now?” she asked, doing something she had never done before and reaching for her phone in the middle of a session.

“Yeah, it’s okay. You can look,” he said, and then waited quietly as she did just that. He saw the moment, the exact instant when she realized he was telling the truth, her eyes flicking from the picture on her screen, to his face and then back down to her phone.

“Yeah, that’s me,” he nodded, when her eyes again lifted to study his face. “Captain America wasn’t the only one who spent time on ice.”

“How-” She stopped to swallow and take a deep breath before she continued. “How long were you a prisoner of war?”

“Seventy years, just about. The Russians found me not too long after I fell from the train.”

“That’s – that’s a damned long time.”
“You’re telling me,” Bucky agreed. “So yeah, things are quite a bit different now from back in my day. Because back then, there was no such thing as gay rights. And if someone found out you were queer, you got killed.”

Dr. Callahan was a smart woman, with keen instincts, always quick to adapt when presented with new information. And she always seemed to know when there was something Bucky wasn’t saying that they needed to talk about.

“Was that something you had to hide back then?” she asked carefully.

“I like girls too, I really do. They’re pretty and soft, and smell sweet.” He paused to take a deep, tremulous breath before he could go on.

“But there was this boy when I was growing up, and I—I loved him a lot. With all of my heart. And he loved me too. At least I think he did. But yeah…We had to be real careful, and were always terrified someone was going to find out,” Bucky finished in a whisper.

If she knew, had guessed who he was talking about, she didn’t say. Instead, she quickly shifted gears, nodding to herself just once, before she met his gaze and said, “Well then, it looks like we have quite a few things we need to talk about. Because times have changed Bucky, and they’re things I think you’re going to like knowing.”

***

She sent him home that day with a stack of three books she pulled from her shelves, telling him to look through them and come back to her with any questions he had. Bucky spent the next several days reading and rereading those books from cover to cover, transfixed and a little shocked by their contents. Because they didn’t just contain information, but pictures as well, more graphic than anything he had ever managed to get his hands on growing up.

“So I ain’t sick?” was the first thing he asked her at the start of their next session.

“No Bucky, you’re not,” she answered him easily as she settled in her chair.

“Really?” Bucky had a hard time believing that, when everything he had heard growing up had told him it was wrong, he was wrong, for feeling the way he did.
“Really. Whatever you consider yourself, straight, gay, bisexual, asexual, trans, none of the above, or some combination, that’s just how you’re made. And there’s absolutely nothing wrong with that.”

“And they can’t lock me up for it?” Bucky needed to know.

“No,” she shook her head. “And while there are some people that are still going to try to convince you there’s something wrong with you, the science just doesn’t back them up. And no matter what they say, they can’t put you in jail for it anymore. Gay people can even get married now.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Huh.”

“Huh indeed.” She smiled at him. “Now do you have any questions for me about the books I gave you to read?”

Did he ever. But he wasn’t sure he was ready to talk to her about that just yet. Some things were just private. She seemed to recognize this, and at the end of that session provided him with a list of websites, and stores he could visit himself, where the staff was both very knowledgeable and discrete, and said, “Trust me Bucky. They’ve seen everything. They’re not going to judge you for any asking about anything you may be interested in.”

It took him a week to build up the courage to actually visit one of the stores she suggested. Sure, there were websites, but there were just some things a person needed to see for himself before he made up his mind. But that part of his body, his self, had slowly started to wake up again, and he had to admit he was curious. So, with Sarge by his side, he made his way to one of the stores Dr. Callahan included in her list.

Two hours later, he returned home with the items he purchased discretely hidden in the plain paper bag the store provided.

Three hours, and some messy sheets, after that, Bucky had to admit that living in the twenty-first
century certainly came with some advantages.

And that he was definitely going to need to start stocking up on more batteries.

***

It was progress. Slow, sometimes so slow it felt as if they were going backwards, but steady progress. He still had nightmares but as they slew monster after monster from Bucky’s closet, those happened less and less, until it eventually reached a point where he had only one or two a week. And that was fine, Bucky could deal with that. There were still times he opened his eyes and couldn’t remember how he had gotten someplace, but he had tips, techniques and Sarge’s steady presence now to help re-orient himself, and he always talked about it with Dr. Callahan at their next session. So those too started happening less and less, and for a shorter duration when they did. And now that he was back on a healthy eating schedule, managing to consume at least one, and usually two, big meals even during his grey days, the weight came back. The eating was something he worked very hard on reintegrating into his routines, because Dr. Callahan was once again right; if he consumed enough calories, he was stronger than if he didn’t, and any setbacks that occurred ended up taking less out him when his body had more resources to pull from.

So definite, tangible progress, even if there were still bad days (and there were). But to Bucky’s surprise, the therapy was actually working, and every day things became easier and easier to deal with. So much so that all his friends noticed, and of course commented on it.

Teresa and Bucky now usually shared two meals almost every day together; the breakfasts Bucky baked, and the dinners Teresa so carefully prepared, while they gossiped about their neighbors, and theorized about what would happen on that night’s episode of La Reina de Las Piratas. Yuna had taken to introducing even more colors into Bucky’s wardrobe, adding whites and yellows to her palette of selections, since Bucky had put on more weight and his color was so much better these days.

And Tara, she always greeted him with a bright smile when he arrived for Sarge’s training class, although Bucky had to wonder if that was because he now showed up with a Tupperware container of baked goods from that day’s latest experiment.

“Gimme!” she said, reaching out with both hands for the frappuccino and banana nut muffins Bucky brought with him that day.

“Jesus Christ woman,” Andy chided with a roll of his eyes. “Say hello to the man first before you start shoving that food into your mouth.”
“Bhegan’s convinced be neeb to be a twee cleanse,” Tara mumbled around a mouth full of muffin. “I’b starbing.”

“I have no idea what you just said, but I have a feeling if I tried to take one of those muffins, you’d bite my fingers off,” Andy said. In response, Tara growled at him around a second muffin. “Yeah, alright, c’mom Bucky. Let’s get out of here before she tries to eat your dog.”

“Tank you for da buffins!” was what they heard as they walked away.

“I dunno man, I love my wife, but if she tried to make me live on nothing but tea, I’d divorce her in a heartbeat,” Andy grumbled as they made their way downstairs.

“Tits out to here,” Bucky grumbled back.

“Yeah…Okay. That might make a difference.”

The class that night went well, even if Bucky was a bit distracted. There was a reason Bucky had so many extra muffins with him that day. He’d had another nightmare, followed by a very intense therapy session, so Bucky was feeling somewhat drained. It wasn’t too bad though, and it felt good to get out of his apartment and do something both he and Sarge enjoyed. But they did well, Sarge once again proving how he was the smartest one there (and Bucky still didn’t care what anyone said, he wasn’t biased, he wasn’t), until the class wrapped up, and Bucky did as he normally did, and helped Andy to clean up.

It was soothing, rhythmic work, and while he bent over to pick the discarded toys up, Bucky found himself going over what he and Dr. Callahan had talked about that day, a fellow soldier Bucky had served besides, barely twenty years old. A nice kid, with a sweetheart he was planning to marry as soon as he got back home, who died from a gunshot wound to his head right in front of Bucky’s very eyes before he ever got to tell Bucky her name. It had been so sudden, so abrupt; one second the kid had been talking, and the next Bucky was diving for cover behind his still twitching body as they tried to figure out which direction the Krauts had come from.

He didn’t realize he’d gone back there, was reliving that moment, until he felt the steady wet pressure of Sarge’s tongue on his chin, calling him to the present, telling him he wasn’t back in that trench, was safe now and no one could hurt him.
“Yeah, yeah, I’m okay now. Don’t worry buddy, I know, I know,” Bucky said, dropping the toy in his hand so he could give both of Sarge’s ears a scratch. From not too far away, Andy stood, his arms crossed, watching him. “Sorry ‘bout that. Got distracted there for just a second.”

“Don’t apologize.” Andy uncrossed his arms as he made his way over, kneeling down to help Bucky regather the toys he’d dropped. He was quiet for another minute or two, staring at Bucky out of the corner of his eye, before he finally broke the silence.

“Can I ask you something, son?” he eventually said.

“Okay,” Bucky nodded. And that was interesting. He had never called Bucky that before. Initially it was James, and then eventually Bucky, once he’d asked him to.

“Are you a vet?” Andy’s voice remained calm, quiet, passive, as if he already knew the answer.

Bucky paused, because this was something else he and Dr. Callahan were working on. Given his history, there was no way Bucky could ever be fully honest about his past, except with a very few, very select group of people. Both Bucky and Dr. Callahan understood the reasons why. But Bucky did have a history, a very long one, one he shouldn’t be ashamed of (although Bucky disagreed with that), and he should be able to admit to some of it, tell a limited version of the truth of his life to the people he trusted. It was hard, but Dr. Callahan thought it would help.

“How could you tell?” he asked, reaching out to once again scratch at Sarge’s ear.

“Just could,” Andy admitted. “Got that look about you. Bad experience?”

“You could say that,” Bucky nodded, and then took another deep, grounding breath. “I was a POW for a while.”

“Figured as much. You’ve been getting some help?”

“Gotta therapist now. She’s pretty good, been helping me work through some things. Why’d’ya ask?”
“Cos I’ve known you for a while now, and I have to admit, you didn’t look so great when you first started showing up for my classes.”

“I looked like a homeless person, you can be honest,” Bucky snorted.

“Yeah, you did,” Andy smiled. But it was a kind smile, loose and easy, lasting only for a few seconds before his expression once again grew serious. “But not for too long. The more you worked with Sarge, the better you started to look. You cleaned yourself up and even put on some weight. Lord knows Lisa wouldn’t stop chasing you around.”

“Ugh.”

“Yeah well, you clean up well. And for a while there, it looked like you were back-sliding for a bit, but that seems to be getting better.”

“My doc’s real good. But,” and here Bucky paused to look down at his puppy, his Sarge, the best friend anyone could have ever asked for.

“But?” Andy pressed when he didn’t go on.

“But I don’t think I would’ve gotten this far if not for Sarge.”

“And that’s what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“What?” Bucky asked, suddenly on alert. Nothing about Andy set off any warning signals in his head, had ever set off any warning signals, but he’d been fooled before.

“It’s nothing bad Bucky,” Andy assured him. “I’m just wondering if you’ve ever heard of service dogs.”

“I’m not training Sarge how to fight, or sniff for bombs or corpses,” Bucky growled. “I’m done with that. I’m not going back, and I’m not going to expose Sarge to that either.”
“Woah, woah, woah, easy there Bucky. That’s not what I meant.” Andy had raised his hands and was holding them up, palms open, in a gesture obviously meant to pacify.

“Then what did you mean?” Bucky had pulled Sarge closer, had actually wrapped his arms around him to keep him safe.

“While there are dogs that are trained to do all of those things, amazing dogs, soldiers in their own right,” Andy began to explain, “there are other types of service dogs as well, trained specifically to assist their owners, and that’s what I meant.”

“Like how?”

“The one you’re most familiar with would probably be a seeing eye dog. But there are other kinds as well. Dogs that are trained to help people with mobility issues. Seizure alert dogs. And then there are dogs called psychiatric service dogs, that help people deal with PTSD. And, this is the reason why I brought this up, a lot of vets find them very, very helpful.”

“He kinda already does that for me,” Bucky admitted, running both of his hands over Sarge’s ears.

“I know, I’ve seen him,” Andy nodded. “He’s a smart dog, with the right temperament for it, and you’ve already got an amazing bond with him. But this would involve even more training, much more intense than anything the two of you have gone through before, and Sarge would need to become certified.”

“Why would I bother with that if he’s already doing so much of that on his own?” Bucky asked, wondering why Andy was bringing this up.

“Because once he’s certified, the both of you would be covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act, which means Sarge is allowed to go anywhere you go. Restaurants, movie theatres, air planes, even places with a strict no-pets policy. Anywhere you go, he goes, and by law no one can stop him. That’s why the extra training is so important. Because not only will he be taught extra ways to help you, but because he also has to prove that he’s well-behaved and as least disruptive as possible.”

That…that would be nice. Bucky never went anywhere without Sarge; the thought actually terrified him. But Sarge was a big dog, still growing, and there were always asshole cops or Uber drivers who refused his fare once they saw him standing at the curb with his dog. The people in his neighborhood knew Sarge on sight, and were very welcoming, but not everyone was. It would be
nice to not have to worry about that, or have to find alternative places that would accommodate him and his dog.

“How would I go about getting him certified?” It really didn’t take Bucky very long to make up his mind.

“Well here’s the thing,” Andy said with a bright smile. “How about I make you a deal?”

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Getting Sarge certified would be a time consuming process that required working with a specialized trainer. Andy’s business partner, Jake, just so happened to have the specialization. In exchange for not being put on a waiting list, and a greatly reduced fee, Bucky would agree to become Andy’s apprentice, working for a training certificate of his own.

When Bucky asked him why, he was told, “I’m fifty-eight years old Bucky, and I love my job. But I’m starting to think about retirement, not right away, but it’s something that’s getting closer and closer. Jake’s quite a bit younger than me, but we’ve spent over twenty years building our business together and I don’t want to leave him short-handed. I’ve trained lots of people, but the truth is I’ve never seen anybody who has a talent for it like you do. I’ve watched you work with the dogs over at the ASPCA, even the desperate cases, especially the desperate cases, and I’ve never seen anyone with your gift. You’re patient and kind, and just have a natural understanding of them. Even more importantly, they seem to trust you, almost instantly, and that’s something very few people can do. I love dogs, went into this business because I wanted to help them. And I think deep down, you do too.”

He did. He loved dogs, loved the time he spent volunteering with them at the shelter. And if he could help them find good homes, help people find just the right dog, like he had, he thought it would be a way, however small, to help balance out all the damage he’d done.

It wouldn’t be easy, but like therapy, just because something was difficult didn’t mean the benefits wouldn’t be worth it in the end. The more he thought about it, the more he wanted to do it. He could work with dogs, actually get paid for it (although money wasn’t an issue), and have a purpose in his life. And if it meant Sarge could get certified, and keep doing what he’d been doing ever since he made a home in Bucky’s life, that just made it even better.

So after a little bit more discussion, and a few additional questions, with a shake of hands, Bucky agreed. And then asked what he would need to do.
The first step was adjusting Bucky’s schedule so he could attend Jake’s classes. They would take place five days a week, for three hours every day. After a lunch break, Bucky would spend the next two hours shadowing Andy from class to class, watching and observing, and also helping Andy whenever asked. It meant less time volunteering, but since Andy spent most of his time as the shelter anyway, Bucky would still get to spend time with the dogs.

He also needed to see if his therapy appointments could be moved to later in the afternoon, as well as asking Dr. Callahan if she could provide him with a letter, stating that Bucky needed a service dog, that one was vital to his well-being and recovery.

When he brought this up to her during their next session, not only was she more than willing to change the time of their appointments, but extremely enthusiastic as well.

And then, to Bucky’s surprise, she also apologized.

“Why are you sorry?” he asked once she was done.

“Because I already thought he was your service dog Bucky, just from the way the two of you interacted. I should have asked, and that’s my fault, because if I’d known he wasn’t, I would have recommended it much, much sooner.”

“So you’ll write me a letter?”

“I’ll do it right now. I already have a template on my computer. Just give me a few minutes and I’ll print you out a copy.”

When he left later that morning, Bucky had three copies of the letter, notarized by Dr. Callahan’s neighbor in his pocket. Along with an appointment for Dr. Callahan to accompany Bucky to Com-Paws-Sionate Training in Queens, the facility where Andy’s partner did most of his work.

It wasn’t a requirement, but it would be helpful for all those involved to sit and discuss what their goals should be while they worked towards Sarge’s certification. So the following Saturday, Bucky
took a cab to Queens, where Dr. Callahan was waiting for him, and accompanied by Andy himself, met his partner Jake for the first time.

“So this is the Bucky you won’t stop going on about,” Jake said with a smile. He was a short and squat man, with broad forearms, light brown hair and matching eyes. He was somewhere in his forties, but just like Andy he had a kind and patient expression, and an even voice.

“I guess so,” Bucky answered, not holding out his hand. Jake didn’t seem to expect him to, instead turning his attention to Sarge.

“And this is Sarge?”

“Yeah, this is my boy,” Bucky nodded with a smile of his own.

“Friendly?”

“He’ll probably end up licking your face off if you let him,” Bucky grumbled as if it were a problem. But they all knew he was lying.

After the introductions were made, they sat around a table and went over what the goals for the next couple of months would be. Mostly they involved focusing on Sarge’s behavioral training, since he would be accompanying Bucky everywhere. But there were several key behaviors that needed to either be developed or reinforced that would also need to be focused on.

“Sometimes Bucky disassociates, or loses himself to his memories.” Dr. Callahan had waited for Bucky’s permission before she began speaking. “And during that time, I’ve noticed that Sarge will start to lick his chin.”

“I’ve seen him do that too,” Andy interjected.

“And that helps?” Jake asked Bucky directly.

“Yeah, it helps a lot,” Bucky nodded.
“What about it helps?”

“What do you mean?”

“Is it just the licking, or is it something else?”

“Um…He lies on top of me too. He does it whenever I’m having a nightmare as well. And the weight, I think that helps.”

“Like a gravity blanket?” Jake asked.

“I guess?” Bucky could only shrug.

“Okay,” Jake nodded. “We can definitely work on reinforcing that. Anything else?”

They decided on several additional tasks to focus on during Sarge’s training, including blocking and shielding, since Bucky was still uncomfortable with anyone touching him without his permission, and if he did dissociate, Sarge would prevent any stranger, however helpful their intentions, from coming too close. Given his size and inherent strength, they also decided Sarge should be trained to assist Bucky get to his feet once he regained awareness, standing by his side, and waiting for Bucky to speak the right command before slowly helping him rise while simultaneously preventing him from falling. It was going to be a lot of work, and a huge time commitment, but one that would help improve the quality of Bucky’s life even further, and since Sarge was a working dog on both sides, be a job he would actual enjoy and look forward to performing.

Such a strange outcome, one Bucky never would have expected when he first dug through those bags of trash because he’d heard a sound. But a blessing in disguise, and one he would definitely be grateful for the rest of his life.

***

Assess and adapt, assess and adapt, the mantra of Bucky’s life, especially now. And that’s exactly what he did. Training with Sarge in the mornings, followed by lunch, then accompanying Andy to his classes in the afternoons, or late at night at Petco, where Bucky was his apprentice instead of a
student, and got to spend even more time chatting with Tara, both before and after classes. Teresa was thrilled when he told her about Sarge’s training, and made him a special meal of chicken with mole sauce, something he had never tried before, but was so delicious he ended up licking his plate clean, and Sarge avoided Chico by draping himself over Bucky’s lap. Teresa thought it was hysterical, the way a nearly one-hundred-and-eighty-pound dog was terrified of a turtle weighing less than three pounds. But even Bucky had to admit it was pretty funny, once she took a picture of the two of them with her phone and showed it to him.

He still saw Yuna, making sure to stop by Second Chances whenever she sent him a text telling him they had just gotten something in she thought perfect for him, and Bucky did enjoy exploring all the clothing options available to him in the twenty-first century. He’d always been a bit vain about his appearance, he could remember that now, and that aspect of his personality hadn’t seemed to change. Besides, Yuna was a lot of fun to be around, and had been the happy recipient on more than one occasion of Bucky’s baking binges.

And then there was Bucky’s therapy, still ongoing, now taking place during the afternoons. There were fits and starts, headways and setbacks, but it was definitely helping. There was only one area where they clashed heads, and that was Bucky’s continued refusal to attend any VA groups.

“Why? I’m already coming here? What’s the point?”

“Because I think it would help you,” she would always counter.

“But why?” Bucky wanted to know.

“Because you’ve been doing a lot of hard work Bucky, and made excellent progress, and I’m so, so proud of you, because I know it hasn’t been easy,” she began. “But for a lot of vets, especially those suffering from PTSD, it can feel very, very isolating.”

“But I have friends,” Bucky argued.

“You do, and that’s a very, very good thing. But how many of those people can you honestly say you’d be comfortable talking about what you’ve been through?”

She had him there, because while both Andy and Teresa, and now even Jake, knew he was a vet, they didn’t know any of the details. They respected his privacy and he appreciated that. But he would never even think to tell them about what his life had been like as a soldier.
“But I talk to you about that stuff.”

“You do, and that’s important,” she nodded. “But I’m not a soldier Bucky, I’ve never been one. And while I can definitely empathize with you, offer you guidance and techniques, there are other things you can get by talking to, or just listening to, other people who have similar experiences. I can’t stress enough how much it helps to know you’re not alone, not the only one who’s going through the same struggles. And sometimes the people at these groups can offer you advice I can’t, because we either haven’t talked about it, or it’s not something you want to bring up here.”

“How will sitting around with a bunch of strangers help?”

“Because it’s another option, another tool you can add to your toolbox.”

“Toolbox’s starting to get pretty damned heavy,” Bucky grumbled.

“That’s not a bad thing Bucky. You spent over seventy years of your life without any options. Why shouldn’t you have this one as well?”

“Hmmph.”

“Uh-huh. Give it a shot. Just one. How bad could it possibly be?”

Pretty bad, Bucky thought, but didn’t say.

But Dr. Callahan was persistent, insistent about it in a way she hadn’t been about anything else, always asking him at the beginning of their sessions if he’d gone to a meeting, always rolling her eyes at him when he told her no.

And then Bucky had a bad week, followed by second, and he thought, well, how bad could it be. He could go to one meeting, just one, and then tell Dr. Callahan about it at their next session. It would get her off his back, and he could say he’d given it a shot, and could we please try something else now?
But he would only go if they let him bring his dog.

***

They would.

“Goddammit!”
There was a VA Center down on Chapel Street in Brooklyn, which held multiple support groups several times a week. After going over his options, and cross referencing them to the list Sam Wilson had provided him, Bucky chose a meeting for those struggling with PTSD that met on Monday nights at six pm. Feeling the need for a little bit of extra armor, Bucky dressed himself in a tight pair of black jeans and matching t-shirt, which he covered with a light long sleeved button up, and for a little bit of luck and courage, his pink Converses, still his favorite. Of course he matched that with a pink harness and bandana that he tied around Sarge’s neck, his dog panting happily the entire time.

Then he hopped on the train (thankfully there were no asshole cops that time, and anyway, he had his letter from Dr. Callahan stating that Sarge was his service dog in training), made his way to the non-descript building, and after a quick survey of his surroundings, walked into room 117, where the meetings were supposedly held.

It was a medium sized room, with a series of foldable chairs stacked throughout, and a table on one side, where coffee, tea and water was on offer, as well as several sad looking cookies (Bucky couldn’t help but note that his were probably better). Even though he was five minutes early, there were several people already there, two women and three men, who nodded at him but didn’t approach. Bucky took a seat in the corner closest to the door, and a minute later, a final man arrived. He was tall, with olive toned skin, sharp brown eyes, and the beginnings of a pot-belly. He had broad shoulders and was casually dressed in a pair of khakis and a green polo shirt, but he still emitted an aura of command. Bucky studied him, taking in all the signs that indicated he had been a former CO as the man glanced around, saw Bucky and gave him a nod before he proceeded to start the meeting.

“Hey everyone, good to see you all here tonight,” he began as he made his way to one of the empty chairs. “Before we get started, since it’s been a while since I last did this, my name’s Marco Mangione, and we’re all here for the Monday PTSD support group. Couple of rules, in case any of you assholes forgot them since the last time. We’re here to listen to each other and provide support,
and support only. That means everybody will get a chance to talk about whatever they want to talk about, and we’re not here to judge or make fun of them, just listen and offer support. If you don’t feel like talking today, and just wanna listen, that’s fine too. With that said, does anyone have any questions?” He had a roiling voice, with an accent Bucky thought may have been from Florida, but not too heavy. He was calm and smiled encouragingly while he spoke, even if Bucky knew that little speech was for his benefit. When no one said anything, Marco nodded again and said, “So, does anyone have anything they want to talk about today?” They were a varied group, of different ages and races. There was Shawn, the middle-aged black guy, clean shaven with neatly cropped hair just starting to go grey at the temples, who also had broad shoulders and a melodic voice. Mel, a short Asian woman, who had alert eyes and spoke in a clipped tone. Next to her was Angie, a Latina woman, who was quiet but also watchful, and listened but didn’t say much, but made sure to offer encouragement and support when needed. Sitting next to her was Roger, a middle-aged man with a stocky frame, who was probably the loudest of the group, with blue eyes, blond hair, pocked-marked skin and a mustache. The last member was just a kid, Timmy, who Bucky would swear was barely out of his teens, pale with freckles, big ears and curly red hair. He had scarring on the left side of his face, was twitchy and didn’t seemed to be able to sit still. He listened when someone else was speaking though, turning his head in a way Bucky recognized, letting him know he had a hard time hearing out of his left ear. And once whoever was speaking was done, he asked questions, lots and lots of stupid questions. They weren’t insulting though, innocent in their way, with an obvious curiosity. The rest of the group seemed accustomed to him, answering easily enough, with a bit of playful push-back, until it became obvious whoever had first spoken patience’s was starting to wear thin, and Marco stepped in to redirect everyone’s attention to the original issue.

They seemed used to each other, comfortable as well, as if they were friends more than people who just met up once or twice a week because they needed support, and Bucky didn’t know what to make of it. So he said nothing, just sat and observed, scratching at Sarge’s ear until the meeting was over, and he left as quietly as he arrived.

It was just so normal that Bucky couldn’t help think it weird, and he said as much to Dr. Callahan when he saw her for their appointment the next day.

“How so?” she asked.

“Well, they were all just sitting there, talking about things, but if you looked at them, you’d never know…”

“Never know what?” she pressed when he faltered.

“I dunno,” Bucky shrugged, reaching down to scratch Sarge’s ear. “They just all looked so normal. You would never guess they’re as fucked up as I am.”
“Bucky.” Her tone was admonishing.

“I know, I know…But still. If you looked at them, you’d never be able to tell.”

“Bucky,” she began, staring at him. “When you’re walking down the street, and other people are passing you by, how many of them do you think are dealing with issues of their own?”

“I dunno,” Bucky shrugged again.

“It’s a lot,” she told him. “I could give you statistics and numbers, but unless someone has told you personally, you’d have no idea how many of the people you just passed are survivors of sexual assault or domestic abuse. Some are recovering addicts, and some are dealing with chronic pain. Some are dealing with disabilities you can’t see, like diabetes or anxiety. Some are struggling with depression or PTSD just like you are. That woman you passed a second ago could have just had a miscarriage or that man could have been diagnosed with cancer. And you would never know. But there are so many people out there that have their own pain or trauma they’re dealing with. It’s not like it comes with a big sign that points them out and makes it obvious.

“But here’s the other thing Bucky. That woman who’s been raped or that man who’s a recovering addict – they’re all survivors, just like you are. And they’re trying their best, to live their lives, just like you are.

“And here’s something else you need to remember. All these people I just mentioned, these people who were abused as children have grown up, and have happy marriages now, and are raising beautiful happy children of their own. Rape survivors who are in very satisfying sexual relationships where they feel safe. They’re also doctors and teachers, entrepreneurs and artists. Nurses and contractors, police-officers, or chefs. And they’re living good lives, with their own struggles, yes, but also their own joys and happiness.

“Because we are also more, so much more, than the parts of our lives that hurt us, but the parts of our lives that are quiet and simple, easy, that bring us happiness. We’re all more than just our cracks Bucky, but our good days and our joys too. Remember that the next time you’re trying to figure out what normal is.”

Bucky looked at her, running her words over and over in his head, trying to find the fault or twist in her logic. But there was none, at least none he could find just yet. Instead, he looked down at Sarge, and felt a slow blush heating his cheeks.
“Dog trainers too?” he eventually asked.

“Dog trainers too.” He could hear the grin in her voice.

“Huh.”

“Huh indeed.”

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The following Wednesday, Bucky went back. From his research on their website, this group met twice a week, and was led, once again, by Marco. It was the same collection of people, even the kid, and this time they were less surprised to see him, smiling at him, but leaving him alone, and respecting his space and his quiet. He studied them again, trying to be as unobtrusive as possible, but with the new perspective given to him by Dr. Callahan.

They seemed like an alright bunch, even if became obvious during that session they all had their own issues they were dealing with. Mel was still struggling to find a job, Shawn had some bad nightmares that week, and Roger was arguing with his ex-wife about getting to see his kids. But nobody judged them for it, just sat and listened, and offered advice when they had it.

Apparently Dr. Callahan had been right. Because there was something comforting, soothing, in knowing he wasn’t the only one. He was sorry for their suffering, since from what little he had seen they all seemed like good people. But he wasn’t the only one, and the fact that he had nightmares, and sometimes disassociated did not mean he was weak, or less than. It simply meant he was human. And he could live with that.

So he went back again the following Monday. He was once more greeted with smiles, and an acceptance of his quiet nature, and no one asked him to speak or forced him to talk. That certainly made it easier, and he started to relax, just a little bit, and pay more attention to what was being said instead of trying to assess the situation every time he walked into room 117.

Until the fourth session when Roger exploded, because he’d had a rough week, and shouted at his ex-wife over the phone, and as a result she was refusing to let him see his kids.

“Who the fuck does that bitch think she is? Does she think it’s easy? Those kids are one of the few
things I have left after the fucking Army took everything else away from me, and she doesn’t want to let me see them? I love those kids! What fucking right does she have to try to take them away from me?" 

It ended with Roger throwing a chair across the room, before he broke down in the middle of the meeting and started to sob. No one reacted or yelled or told him to shut up and behave himself, *outbursts are to be punished*, *control yourself or we will wipe you again*, just let Roger vent, while Timmy quietly picked up and straightened the chair. Once Roger was done, Angie handed him a tissue, and Marco asked him if he was all right before he said he would give him a list of resources and a lawyer he could call who had worked on custody cases for vets in the past. Support and acceptance, understanding, and an offer of assistance. Matches being lit when your life had turned into nothing more than a black room with no means of escape. As Bucky sat there, he thought he might, just might, be able to light another one.

He waited until the meeting was over, and then discretely trailed Roger (apparently there were instincts and skills bred into him that would never go away) as he went into the bathroom, casually standing by the water fountain as he waited for Roger to come back out.

“Hey,” Bucky said quietly, nodding at Roger as he stepped into the hallway. Roger jerked in surprise at hearing his voice; it was the first time Bucky had spoken to any of them, and it was obvious he was shocked.

“Hey,” he responded cautiously, crossing his arms. He had a right to be suspicious, Bucky supposed. Bucky was the new guy after all, and he’d been very careful not to leave any impression except for his silent nature.

“Rough meeting today,” Bucky added, making sure to keep his posture as loose and non-threatening as possible.

“Yeah, and?” Roger was still suspicious, wary as he stared at Bucky.

“So, here’s the thing,” Bucky went on, pushing himself off the wall he’d been leaning against. “My dog,” Bucky glanced down at Sarge sitting alert by his feet, “he’s super sensitive to that kind of thing, and I’d really appreciate it if you gave him the chance to make sure you’re okay now.”

Roger glanced from Bucky to Sarge and back to Bucky. “And just how do you expect me to do that?”
“Just pet him and let him lick your face,” Bucky said. “I know he looks like a bear, but he really is a sweetheart, and…”

“And?” Roger asked when Bucky didn’t go on.

“It might make you feel better too.”

Roger again looked from Bucky to Sarge, his face inscrutable.

“He’s not going to eat me?”

“Nah, he only likes to eat redheads,” Bucky smiled. “I mean, just look at him. He’s dying to say hello.” Sarge’s ears were up and alert, his tail wagging as he stared at Roger.

“Just…just pet him?” Roger asked.

“Yep, that’s it,” Bucky nodded.

“Okay.”

“Go, Sarge.” Long familiar with the command by now, Sarge happily trotted towards Roger, who was still eyeing him cautiously, but had his hand held out. Once Sarge had gotten his sniff, he rose up to his hind legs and started to lick at Roger’s face.

“Jesus Christ, he’s a big motherfucker!” Roger gasped in surprise. But…but he didn’t push Sarge away. Of course he wouldn’t; Sarge was magic. Bucky knew that well from personal experience. No one could withstand the power of Bucky’s one-hundred-and-eighty-pound teddy bear, especially when he was licking your face and wagging his tail so happily just because you were petting him.

Roger certainly wasn’t immune. His surprise faded as he scratched at Sarge’s ears, growing quiet and softer, until he was eventually kneeling on the floor, his arms wrapped around Sarge and his face pressed into his fur.
“Yeah, definitely magic.”

It took about ten minutes before Roger finally let go of his dog and slowly rose to his feet. Bucky didn’t mind; he had nowhere else to be. And he knew, he knew how helpful just stroking a dog could be when it felt like your entire life was crumbling around you.

“Thanks for that,” Roger said, wiping the tears from his face with his shoulder.

“No problem.” Sage had returned to Bucky’s side, looking up at him happily. “Good boy.” Bucky reached down to give him more scratches of his own. When he looked back at Roger, he was staring at him again, his expression easier than before, if no less intent.

“What’s your name, Dog Guy?” he asked.

“Dog Guy?”

“Yeah well, since you haven’t introduced yourself to anyone, that’s what we’ve all been calling you,” Roger said, only the slightest bit of accusation in his voice.

“Name’s Bucky.”

“Nice to meet you Bucky,” Roger nodded, before glancing down at Bucky’s dog. “And that’s Sarge, you said?”

“Yeah, that’s Sarge.”

“He’s a beautiful dog. Big, but you’re right. A sweetheart.”

“He’s gotten me through a lot,” Bucky admitted. Roger nodded as if it were obvious.

“Thanks for letting me pet him. It did help.”
“He just needed to make sure you were all right.”

Roger nodded again, and turned to go. But before he did, he stopped and looked back at the both of them standing by the water fountain.

“You should introduce yourself to the rest of the group next time. We all understand if you don’t want to talk, but you seem like a nice guy, and we’ve been curious.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Do,” was the last thing Roger said before he walked away.

“That was kind of you,” Marco said, stepping into the hallway once Roger was gone. Bucky had known he was there; civilian or not, it was impossible for anyone to sneak up on him these days.

“He looked like he needed it,” Bucky shrugged as he looped Sarge’s lead around his wrist.

“Bucky, was it?” It was Marco’s turn to study him, a curious but sincere expression on his face as he ran his eyes over the both of them. “I’m Marco, but I’m guessing you knew that?”

“I did.”

“And this is?” Marco cocked his head in Sarge’s direction.

“Sarge.” Bucky glanced down at his dog, whose tail was once again wagging happily. This was new people, and Sarge loved meeting new people. “Yeah, alright, go ahead.” Bucky let go of the leash and Sarge happily bounded forward to introduce himself.

“Hey there Sarge,” Marco laughed, bending over so Sarge could sniff him. “It’s nice to finally meet you.” He glanced up at Bucky. “The both of you.” But then Sarge started licking him, demanding all his attention, and Bucky knew from personal experience that no one could resist that.

“He’s a beautiful animal,” Marco nodded.
“Thanks…He’s uh, he’s helped me a lot these past couple of months.”

“I have three of them myself, so I know exactly what you mean.” Marco straightened after giving Sarge another good scratch. “Anyway, like I said, that was kind of you.”

“Just trying to help.”

“You did,” Marco nodded. “And Roger’s right. You should introduce yourself the next time. No pressure, but we’re not a bad group. You should definitely give us a chance.”

“I’ll think about it.”

And he would.

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Bucky didn’t introduce himself at the next meeting. But it didn’t look he would need to, because once again Sarge took care of that for him.

It was another intense session, this time Mel being the one who broke down. She was a field medic, with a specialization in trauma. But after her experiences in the Army, even just a glimpse of blood made her so sick her hands shook, and she only saw the faces of all the young men and women who she hadn’t been able to save. She had graduated at the top of her class and was highly skilled, but couldn’t handle a job in the field she once loved. It left her feeling useless, and weak, so goddamned motherfucking weak, and how could she ever look her parents in the face again and tell them she was still answering phones at a Verizon call center.

As Bucky sat quietly in his chair, watching her cry, he felt a tap to his ankle. Bucky looked over to see Roger staring at him, glancing meaningfully between Mel and Sarge. A few minutes later, when Marco asked if anyone had any advice they could offer Melanie, for the first time ever, Bucky slowly raised his hand.

“Yes Bucky?” Marco asked, as almost everyone else but Mel and Roger turned to him in surprise.
“Um,” Bucky hesitated for just a second, before he swallowed and decided in for a penny, in for a pound. “I think my dog would really like it if Mel pet him.”

He could see Marco was trying to hold back a smile, but he did it and he did it well, before he turned to Mel and asked, “Would that be all right with you Mel?”

“I- I guess?” Mel sniffed.

“It’ll help. Trust me. And that dog’s a sweetheart,” Roger insisted.

Bucky frowned at him. Because seriously? This was like Petco all over again. Roger just shrugged, so Bucky sighed, looked down at his dog and said “Go, Sarge.” And off Sarge went, slowly, gently, but his tail eagerly wagging. Mel was hesitant at first. But once Sarge rested his head on her lap and looked up at her with his big brown eyes, she melted (of course she did), and started to pet him, eventually leaning over so she could wrap her arms around him and sob into his fur.

But, at the end of the meeting, she was smiling and she gave Bucky and Sarge an appreciative little nod before she left.

At the next meeting, when Marco asked if there anything anyone needed to talk about, Shawn raised his hand.

“Yes Shawn? You have something you want to talk about?” Marco said.

“Yeah, but…”

“But?” Marco urged.

“I think I’m gonna need the dog to get through it.”

“Is that all right with you Bucky?” Marco asked, and there was definitely a smirk on his face. Bucky sighed, because really, he had no one else to blame but himself. (And maybe Dr. Callahan.)
“Go, Sarge.” And once again, off Sarge went.

At the next session, when Marco started it by asking if anyone had any questions about the materials he distributed last time, it was Timmy who raised his hand.

“Yes Timmy?”

And Bucky knew, he just knew what was coming next.

“Can I pet the dog this time? Because everyone’s had a chance so far, and I’ve been waiting for my turn. But I just can’t wait anymore. Can I please pet Sarge? Please?”

Bucky sighed. There really was no getting away from it at this point.

“Go, Sarge.”

Sarge didn’t even have to go far, because Timmy happily met him halfway, falling to his knees in the middle of their circle, his arms already open to give Sarge a hug. But Timmy didn’t just hug him, oh no. He scratched at Sarge’s ears and his ruff, all the while asking an endless array of questions.

“What kind of god is he? ‘Cos omigod, he’s huge. He looks like a bear, or maybe a lion, yeah definitely a lion, what do you feed him? Do you feed him cows? And how big are his poops, cos they must huge. Do they stink? I like his mask, he looks like Batman. Have you ever read the Batman comics? Does Sarge like Batman, cos he’d make a great superhero! But no, he wouldn’t be Batman, he’s more like the Hulk. Do you think the Hulk has a dog? That would be awesome, but I bet if he did, he wouldn’t be as cool as Sarge! Where did you get him? Does he like chicken? Have you ever taken him to KFC? I like their popcorn chicken, but the sandwiches are pretty good. And they have a special lunch menu that’s real cheap. Or is that McDonalds? Yeah, McDonalds. I like the McRib, but it’s expensive. Do you think Sarge would like the McRib? I can bring one for him the next time if you want. Or what about Carvel? Have you ever taken him to Carvel? I bet he’d eat all thirty-one flavors, no, wait, that’s Baskin Robbins.”

Bucky sat there, unable to do anything but blink, while Timmy adored his dog, and Sarge was happy to let him.
“It’s your own damned fault, you know,” Roger muttered to him out of the corner of his mouth once Timmy paused to take a breath. But only for a second, before Timmy seemed to catch his second wind and was off and at it again.

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So that was how Sarge, and Bucky, started going twice a week to meetings at the VA center. And it wasn’t too bad; the complete opposite of bad actually. Strange at first, certainly, and it took him a while to get used to it. But it appeared as if Dr. Callahan was right, because there was something soothing, comforting, even relaxing maybe, in being around people who understood, on an inherent level, a lot of the things Bucky had been through and the way the after effects could be devastating. It made him feel less alone, more normal, no matter how much he knew Dr. Callahan would admonish him for using that word. But it did. And that helped, in unfathomable ways Bucky quickly grew to appreciate.

And these guys, this group of six that met twice a week, they were good people. Welcoming, once Bucky decided to interact with them. Supportive in ways both tangible and not, and most surprisingly of all, friendly too.

At the end of the meeting where it was a contest over who drooled over the other most, Timmy or Sarge, they all came up to him and introduced themselves personally, and then invited him to join them at a nearby diner for a post-session dinner, all of them agreeing to go, except for Marco, who had another meeting he had to lead.

“They serve some damned fine burgers,” Shawn explained, “and they’re used to everyone from the center stopping there all the time. They’ll be fine with Sarge.”

“They have to be,” Bucky said, but not unkindly. “He’s my service dog, well, my service dog in training. He’s not certified yet, but we’re getting there.” Still, it would be nice to go to a place where he didn’t have to explain that.

“Really?” Mel asked. After Timmy, she was the most talkative and curious of the lot. Bucky thought it a shame she could no longer work in the medical profession, because she had an open face and an overall gentle demeanor. He could also see how she would be good at her job at the call center, even if she did hate it, simply because when she wasn’t having a bad day, she was friendly and inquisitive. And her question opened the floodgates.

As they walked the two blocks to Nancy’s Kitchen, they asked him question after question about Sarge, mostly the usual ones Bucky got when someone first encountered his dog; how old was he,
how did Bucky get him, what breed, and the inevitable, he’s going to get how big? Sarge, smart
cucker that he was, seemed to know he was the topic of conversation and walked proudly at Bucky’s
side, his tail wagging and ears perked (or as perked as those floppy bits Bucky so loved to stroke
could ever get).

True to Shawn’s word, no one even gave them a second glance when they entered the brightly lit
and very clean diner. And ten minutes later, when their waitress came to take their orders, she merely
 glanced down at Sarge and asked if there was anything she could get for him.

“We can make him some plain hamburger, or chicken if he’d like,” she said with a warm smile.

“Chicken breast, boiled, if you can.”

“Not a problem.” She jotted Bucky’s response down on her notepad, gathered their menus, and with
another smile turned and walked away.

When she returned with their order, she handed Bucky a plate with the promised chicken breast, two
large pieces actually, that Bucky took from her gratefully. Once she was gone, it was time to
reinforce Sarge’s training. Because this was something he and Jake had been working on. In order to
get certified, Sarge had to prove he was able to sit under the table by Bucky’s feet, ignoring all other
distractions, and not move, not even to eat, until Bucky gave him permission.

“Down, Sarge,” Bucky commanded gently but firmly (he was always gentle when he spoke to
Sarge, never raising but instead changing the tone of his voice when it was a command he needed to
obey), holding his hand parallel to the floor as he made a lowering gesture. They were struggling a
bit with this, as whenever Bucky sat, Sarge’s favorite position was to sit next to him with his head in
Bucky’s lap. But they were working on it, and Sarge was slowly getting there. He obeyed this time,
lying on the floor. “Good boy.” Bucky clicked his ever-present clicker. Then he carefully placed the
plate in front of Sarge on the floor, again with his palm lowered and said, “Stay.” Sarge waited, even
if it was obvious he was interested in the food. It may have seemed cruel to a casual observer, but he
needed to learn he was working, and how to ignore any distractions around him, until Bucky told
him it was okay. They had managed three minutes so far, which Jake assured him was excellent
progress, and it looked as if the training was holding, because Sarge remained lying at Bucky’s feet,
his head on his paws, patiently waiting. Bucky made him hold for two minutes, while he salted his
fries and put some ketchup on his burger, before he smiled down at his dog, and said, “Good boy
Sarge, release,” and Sarge moved forward, while staying low, to devour his chicken.

“That’s amazing,” Mel commented, while around her everyone else nodded.
“There’s a lot of things he still needs to learn, but well,” Bucky couldn’t hide the pride in his voice as he spoke. “He’s super smart, and he’s getting there.”

“He’s awesome!” Timmy chimed in, and then, to no one’s surprise, started asking a million more questions. Bucky spent the first half of that meal answering them all, (it wasn’t only Timmy who was curious), and then a few more minutes after that answering a few about himself. But to Bucky’s surprise, and great relief, after a quick, “Army?” from Roger, no one asked him anything else about his service, just more about him as a person; where did he live, was he married, was he in school or did he have a job? Nothing too invasive, just the general things people tended to ask when they wanted to get to know someone. Then the topic shifted to the latest episode of Game of Thrones, and what everyone had thought of it. That wasn’t a show Bucky watched, although that was all right. Because Angie was also watching La Reina de Las Piratas, and Bucky spent the rest of the meal quietly conversing with her in Spanish about what they thought Lucia was going to do next, while Timmy kept looking under the table at Sarge.

It was a nice meal, which Bucky found himself enjoying more than he thought he would, before they were all rising to go their separate ways. He shared meals with Teresa, and coffees and snacks with Tara, and he and Andy oftentimes had lunch together now, but Bucky couldn’t remember the last time he had sat and eaten with more than one person since…He thought it must have been sometime during the war, when he and the rest of the Howling Commandoes would gather either around a campfire or in a mess hall, and just shoot the shit, sharing their stories about home, and what they all planned to do once they got back. Before that, it had been meals with his family, all of them, including Steve, clustered around their small kitchen table, laughing and teasing one another as they each talked about their day. It was nice, Bucky thought as he placed his cash on the table, to have this again. It had been far too long, and he wondered, as he and Sarge waited for the train that would bring them back to Manhattan, if during those cold nights huddled around a campfire in the middle of the forests of Europe, any of that group, that amazing group of people, had ever thought to wish for a meal where the food was good, and the company easy-going. Could any of them have imagined the paths their lives would take once the war was over. Bucky certainly hadn’t, and yet here he was, nearly seventy-five years in the future, one of only two of that original group left standing, doing exactly that.

As he lay down that night to go to sleep, Sarge at his side, Bucky thought, hoped, wished, that it wouldn’t be the last meal like that he got to share with others.

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It wasn’t.

Bucky kept going to the meetings at the VA, where he interacted more now than previously. He was still one of the quieter members of the group, but he felt less defensive, smiling and talking more, listening and offering whatever support he could whenever someone else brought up an issue they
were dealing with. And Sarge absolutely loved going to the meetings, because they began with him happily going from person to person so they could shower him with the love and attention Sarge knew he deserved, before he faithfully returned to Bucky’s side so the meeting could proceed. With the way everyone always so enthusiastically greeted him, especially Timmy, who now made sure to sit next to Bucky during every meeting, Bucky was pretty sure they were happier to see Sarge than him.

But that was okay; Bucky totally understood.

As of yet, he hadn’t raised his hand, or said there was anything he needed to discuss. That didn’t mean he didn’t have his grey days, or ones where he struggled to not get lost in the overwhelming issues he and Dr. Callahan were working through. And while no longer as frequent, there were still the horrible dreams. Sometimes, when he was digging deep and struggling to breathe as he attempted to work through whatever it was he remembered, they lasted for several nights. It wasn’t easy, but Bucky now understood it was a process, one he had to be patient with, with definite benefits. That didn’t mean it was easy, and he still had nights where he either went out walking, or more common now, baked and baked and baked and baked.

The previous weekend had been particularly brutal, and Bucky had spent so much time in his kitchen (and he really couldn’t wait until he was finally handed the keys to his new home) that there were stacks of brownies everywhere. He’d given some to Teresa, some to both Andy and Tara, who had nearly sobbed in thanks, and even some to Yuna. But he still had at least thirty left over, and as much as he enjoyed cooking, and could admit he was a pretty damned good baker at this point, there was only so much chocolate he could eat in a day before even Bucky’s stomach told him it’d had enough.

To hell with it, Bucky thought, as he filled three large Tupperware containers with the remaining brownies. It’ll be better than those damn cookies. And if anyone complained, he could always leave them with Anna, the receptionist at the VA center who Bucky had started to greet whenever he arrived for a meeting, and who, just like everyone else, was madly in love with Sarge.

No one complained.

In fact, right after Marco entered the room, and everyone had given Sarge his customary pets and cuddles, it was Angie, having gone over to the table to get herself a cup of coffee, who asked, “Hey, who brought the brownies?”

“Brownies?” Timmy immediately perked up, jumping to his feet and dashing over.

“When did we get brownies?” That was Mel.
“I thought this place was too much of a dump to afford anything but those sad, discount cookies,” Shawn complained.

“Oh god, those things taste like rocks.” Mel again.

“I actually ate rocks in the dessert that tasted better than those,” was Roger’s contribution.

“Thanks a lot guys,” Marco grumbled.

“Seriously, who brought the brownies?” Mel asked, sitting back down with a cup of coffee and, Bucky couldn’t help but notice, two of his brownies in her hand.

“I did,” Bucky said quietly with a small shrug.

“Where’d you buy them, because holy shit these are amazing!” That was the loudest he’d ever heard Angie speak, and he’d certainly never heard her curse before.

“I didn’t. I made them myself,” Bucky admitted.

“You made them yourself?” Mel asked in disbelief.

“You made these?” Roger was staring at him.

“What? I can cook,” Bucky shrugged again, feeling his shoulders curling inward. Because there was a reason he had baked so many brownies, and the reason left him feeling small and weak and helpless. But, and here Bucky took a breath and forced himself to remember that this was a support group, and these people were sort of his friends. Maybe, just maybe, they’d understand.

“And it helps,” he added quietly.

“Helps with what?” There was a reason Marco was the one who ran these meetings; he not only had
the training, but enough experience and intuition to hear what wasn’t being said. But also, how to encourage and guide, offering his support without judgement, in a way that made everyone in the room trust him. So his voice was gentle and curious, knowing, but not forceful when he asked the question.

And this was a support group. This was what he was supposedly here for. He had listened to the others, heard their fears and frustrations, watched them simultaneously struggle themselves and accept the struggles of everyone else. Maybe…Maybe it was his turn for him to share a little of what he’d been through, and admit to some of the truths that had brought him there. So Bucky took a deep breath, and decided to have some faith.

“The nightmares,” he finally admitted. “I get ‘em real bad sometimes, and I can’t sleep when I do. Sometimes I take Sarge and we go out and walk. And sometimes, well, sometimes I bake,” he finished with a shrug.

“Rough weekend Bucky?” It was Marco who spoke again.

Bucky swallowed and nodded. “Yeah, pretty bad.”

“I fucking hate the nightmares,” Roger said.

“Me too,” Shawn agreed.

Mel looked down at the brownie in her hand, before she lifted her gaze to Bucky’s face with nothing but compassion and understanding in her eyes.

“I clean,” she said with a small smile. “Usually the bathroom or kitchen. I just get on my hands and knees, and start scrubbing and scrubbing until Trina and the kids get up to get ready for school.” Bucky knew Trina was Mel’s cousin, whose spare bedroom Mel was living in until she got herself back on her feet. “Trina says she feels guilty, because she hates that I have nightmares, but she loves that her house is so clean. We joke about it sometimes. It’s not funny, we both know that, but it helps to be able to laugh about it.”

“It’s okay to laugh about it sometimes,” Marco interjected. “Sometimes it’s all you can do.”

“Eighty fucking brownies,” Bucky grumbled.
“Well, if it helps, they’re delicious,” Angie said quietly, gifting him with a gentle smile of her own, full of understanding and her own secrets, that weren’t so secret in this small room on that Monday night. And it did.

As did the rest of that session. No one asked Bucky to share what his nightmares had been about, although they would have listened if he wanted to talk about them. Instead, they all discussed the ways each of them had found to cope.

“I go out and I drive,” was Roger’s way.

“I knit,” was Shawn’s, said with a self-deprecating laugh and shrug, but no one made fun of him for it.

“I organize my bookshelves,” was how Angie dealt.

“I like coloring books,” Timmy said, speaking up for the first time. He had spent most of the meeting quiet for once, eating brownie after brownie while he turned his head so he could better hear the conversation. “Need new crayons though. Starting to run out.”

It was a gift they were giving him. Not criticizing or offering to fix him, but letting him know they understood, that this was something they all shared. And maybe it was bitter and maybe it was painful, but it made them all brothers and sisters of a sort, united in their understanding of pain, but no weaker or less than because of it.

It helped. It helped a lot. So much so that when the meeting was over, Bucky felt no shame or hesitation in heading back to Nancy’s, where they let him but didn’t leave him alone. And that was enough, it was more than enough, and another thing Bucky could add to his ever-growing list of things he was thankful for.

That and the fact that Timmy happily took the rest of the brownies with him. After he spent some time loving on Bucky’s dog.

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They helped each other in other ways too. And not always on Monday and Wednesday nights. As the weeks passed, and Bucky spent more and more time with them, he realized that while none of them were serving anymore, they formed a unit of their own, not out of circumstance, but by choice, simply because they could.

The meeting after Bucky admitted to having nightmares, once everyone happily greeted Sarge, and looked over the offerings on the table (where Bucky brought a huge container filled with chocolate, chocolate-chip muffins, not because he’d had more nightmares, he had to assure them, but simply because there had been a new recipe he discovered and wanted to try), Roger dumped a bag on Timmy’s lap. Inside, when Timmy opened it, was a brand-new box of sixty-four crayons. Timmy spent the entire meeting cradling the box, and at least two of Bucky’s muffins, in his arms.

When Mel complained about her car breaking down, Shawn told her about his cousin, who was a mechanic, and how he would call him and let him know she was coming, and that she would get the family discount because she was a friend of his. (Bucky brought pound cake with him that day.)

At the following meeting, after everyone raided the table for the cupcakes Bucky decided to try making, when he complained about his hair, whose ends were still jagged and frayed in spite of how well he now took care of it, he got a few snorts. Bucky had taken a deep, calming breath, clenching at Sarge’s fur, and explained he had a hard time dealing not only with anyone behind him, but especially someone with a knife or some sort of blade. It was such a simple thing, he complained, something people did every day, but he just couldn’t bear it. It drove him crazy (and he knew Dr. Callahan would not be happy with his word choice, but still, it did), because it felt like a weakness every time he looked in the mirror. No one had snorted at him then, sharing the other daily tasks they felt everyone else took for granted that each of them struggled with. Before the meeting wrapped up, Mel turned to him and told him that the cousin she lived with was a hair stylist. Not only that, but Trina also donated a Saturday a month to a woman’s shelter, where she helped women who had been abused and denied the most basic of rights feel beautiful again, or get them ready for upcoming job interviews. Mel was certain if she asked, Trina would be more than willing to come to Bucky’s apartment, and work on his hair in an environment where he felt both safe and comfortable. Mel even went so far as to offer to join Trina, if it would be easier for Bucky if there was someone else there that he knew.

When Bucky thanked her for it, she merely shrugged him off and said, “Just bring some cream cheese brownies to the next meeting and we’ll call it even.”

Two weeks later, after both Trina and Mel left his apartment, Bucky’s hair was sleek and shiny. Not only had Trina taken care of all his jagged, split ends, being quiet and gentle, explaining to him what she was going to do next with each step, but she’d added a layer that framed his face in such a way that even he had to admit looked damned good. It was a relief, and another step in his recovery, and out of gratitude, Bucky not only made Mel her brownies, which he knew would end up being shared with the rest of the group, but a raspberry cheese cake to take home, for both her and her cousin to share. Apparently Mel had a bit of Tara in her, actually growling at anyone who came too close to the cake pan she kept on her lap the entire time.
Not too long after that, it was Bucky’s turn to help. Sarge always accompanied Bucky as he went to meeting after meeting, and everyone always greeted him when they first showed up before that day’s session commenced. But there were usually days when someone was having a rough go if it, struggling, and really needed to talk. Sarge was Bucky’s service dog, but Bucky quickly recognized how his presence was a welcome addition to their group, one that provided an extra level of support and comfort that had not been there before. So Bucky never complained when someone asked if they could pet or hold Sarge when they’d had a bad day or were struggling with the words to express themselves. It was easier, he knew, to find those words when there was someone warm and comforting by your side, who would never judge you, and loved you simply because you were petting him. So Bucky shared Sarge, happily, easily, grateful that he could do even this much for someone else. And everyone in the group appreciated it, so much so that Marco pulled him aside a few weeks after Bucky first initiated contact with Roger, to personally thank him for being so generous.

“I know he’s your service dog Bucky, and you don’t have to let everyone else use him for support during the group, but it’s made a big difference, and I just wanted to thank you for that,” Marco told him.

“I’m glad he can help,” Bucky shrugged him off. “And you’ve seen him, he loves doing it.”

“He’s a great dog,” Marco agreed. “But I have to say, I think a lot of that has to do with his owner.” Bucky had grunted at him for that, and they never spoke of it again, but still it was true. There was no harm in letting these people, good people, have a little extra support when they needed it. He got to be with Sarge all the time, he could share him. A little bit. It was only fair. (But just a little bit.)

So Sarge quickly became not only their group’s mascot, but their support animal. Bucky often wished he could do more, but he also had enough awareness and experience now to realize that sometimes the only thing you could do was sit there and listen, letting the person speaking know they were not alone.

Until one Wednesday, Angie raised her hand and said there was something she wanted to talk about. She was the quietest of them all, seldom if ever speaking on her own behalf. Bucky now knew it was because she dealt with social anxiety, that could be debilitating sometimes. She was fine as long as she was with a small group who she was already familiar with, but new situations, especially ones where there would be a lot of people she didn’t know, frightened her. But she had promised her younger brother she would attend his wedding, and not only was that terrifying her, but as of yet, she had not even been able to purchase something to wear.

That was when Bucky raised his hand and said, “I know this great shop, that not only has all these awesome clothes, but one of the women there is amazing, and she really knows her stuff. I’d be
happy to take you there, if you think that would make it easier for you?”

“You’re willing to take Angie shopping for something to wear to her brother’s wedding?” Roger asked in disbelief.

“Well yeah,” Bucky shrugged. He couldn’t see what the issue was. “Besides, have you seen me?” Bucky gestured at himself; today he was wearing a pleated pair of grey linen trousers that rode low on his hips, and a tight fitting long-sleeved thin cotton yellow shirt that, he had to admit, did a nice job accentuating his silhouette. Combined with his sleeker hair style and matching yellow Converse, never mind Sarge’s grey and yellow halter, Bucky knew he looked damned fine. “You only wish you could look this good.”

“He’s right, you know,” Mel cut in, with a sing-song intonation before Roger could respond.

“Anna certainly seemed to think so, if the way she was smiling at him to day was any indication,” Shawn decided join in, more to get a rise out of Roger than any comment on Bucky’s appearance.

“That’s just because she likes his cookies,” Roger countered.

“And my buns,” Bucky smirked, which caused Timmy, who had been making his way through one of Bucky’s cinnamon rolls one handed, while petting Sarge with his other, to snort and briefly choke. “But anyway,” Bucky continued once they were certain Timmy was all right, “Yuna, my friend, she’s got a really great eye, and she loves to help people find the perfect thing to wear. And I wouldn’t mind taking you with me. I’m practically there every week anyway.”

“No shit.”

But in spite of Roger’s good natured grumbling, Angie accepted Bucky’s offer. The following Friday afternoon, Bucky took Angie and Mel, who had agreed to come, to *Second Chances*, where Yuna happily greeted them. Bucky had called ahead of time to let her know they would be stopping by, what they were looking for, and that one of his friends was a bit on the shy side. Yuna took it in stride, like so many of the women in his life now, and within an hour found Angie the perfect yellow dress, with an empire waist, and matching flats, that flattered her somewhat larger figure and complemented her darker skin tones. They all honestly agreed it made her look beautiful, and it was obvious by her shy smile that Angie was pleased with the outcome.

And then, because she had asked Bucky quietly afterwards, once the three of them had settled in a
nearby pastry shop to have some coffee to celebrate a successful day, Bucky agreed to join her as her
plus-one to the wedding. Not as a date, Angie made certain to clarify, but simply as support. Bucky
understood; he didn’t have Angie’s problem with crowds, but there was a reason why he and Jake
were working on teaching Sarge how to block others from getting too close when Bucky wasn’t
comfortable. So a few weeks later, Bucky put on a new suit (also purchased with Yuna’s assistance)
and escorted Angie to her brother’s wedding out in New Jersey (ugh, Jersey), and spent a pleasant
enough couple of hours sitting quietly together, and Angie’s brother Miguel got to share one of the
happiest days of his life with his sister.

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So, help. Both giving and receiving. Dinners with people he knew and liked on Monday and
Wednesday evenings. Bucky didn’t know if he considered them friends, not just yet. But it certainly
felt like it was getting there. Sometimes, during the darker moments that he still had, late at night,
when it was just him and Sarge, and Bucky couldn’t sleep, he wondered if he was still in the cryo-
chamber somewhere, dreaming all this. Because the Soldier was a tool, an instrument, a weapon, and
those didn’t have any friends. It was a fleeting thought, but a cutting one, borne of seventy years of
isolation and loneliness. Of being forgotten, and abandoned, time and time again, with no end in
sight. But then Sarge would start to lick his chin, whimpering as if Bucky’s pain was his own, and
Bucky would remember there was no way he could have dreamed up Sarge, and that made it easier
for him to breathe.

But still, the misgivings lingered.

Or at least they did, until the second week of August, when Bucky signed one last piece of
paperwork, and a set of keys was placed into his hand.

Because Bucky was finally, finally the owner of the home of his dreams.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was a strange thing to be a home owner, Bucky thought as he stood there that early Friday evening, looking around at his mostly empty living room. Almost everything was bare, except for the plastic crates with his few possessions, mostly filled with his clothes and all the items he had purchased for Sarge over the past nine months since Bucky found him. His apartment had grown increasingly cluttered during that time, to put it kindly. After a celebratory meal with Teresa, where she prepared pozole at Bucky’s request, he had loaded up the van he had rented for the occasion, and with a final kiss to Teresa’s cheek, and a promise to pick her up next Tuesday so they could have dinner together, Bucky made the drive to Brooklyn, and his new home.

It would take some getting used to, he supposed, and there were things he needed to take care of. The heat and electricity had already been turned back on, and registered in his name. The cable company was due to arrive tomorrow to get everything hooked up. He was definitely going to get the locks replaced and a security system installed. The lawn, his lawn now, needed to be mowed, which made him realize he didn’t own a lawn mower. The walls needed to be repainted, the floors refinished, and the appliances in the kitchen, while serviceable, definitely needed to be updated. He was going to have to purchase furniture, lots and lots of furniture, and even curtains or drapes or blinds, he didn’t know which yet. Which meant shopping. Which meant new.

Bucky’s brain actually stumbled over the thought. Because he couldn’t remember the last time, aside from what he had bought for Sarge, when he’d had anything new. His entire life, as far back as he could remember, had been filled with hand-me-downs. All of his clothes growing up, patched and thin because they hadn’t been able to afford anything else. The furniture in the tiny apartment he’d lived in with his family. Even the smaller apartment he and Steve had shared for those few, short years, (happy years, blissful years, in spite of all the hardships and struggles they faced), had been filled with anything they could scrounge and scavenge from the streets. But this was a fresh start, a culmination of all Bucky’s hopes, desires and dreams, and he had more than enough money to go shopping for new (new) furniture, items of his own choosing, his own tastes, not because it was all he could find, but simply because he liked them.

It was almost too much, too overwhelming, and Bucky thought he would have curled up into a ball on the floor, laughing at the absurdity of it all, if at that exact moment, his doorbell hadn’t rung, halting his impending what - Happy panic attack? – and causing Sarge to bolt toward the source of the sound, barking as he went.

It took a minute for Bucky to gain his footing, and then another to calm Sarge down, before Bucky was able to peer through the small, grimy peephole, (something else he would need to replace), to see two women standing there. They must have heard him trying to get Sarge settled, because as he looked the one on the right lifted her hand and waggled her fingers in front of the peephole. Bucky had no idea who they were, or why they would be ringing his doorbell, but they didn’t resemble any
of the agents from SHIELD he had encountered, or a member of HYDRA. None of the research he’d done on the residents of the neighborhood, before he decided to put a bid on the house, triggered any red flags. So while confused, he was relatively certain they were harmless.

“Yes?” he queried, intending to open the door only a few inches. Sarge had other ideas though, and tried to wedge his way outside. Bucky ended up having to let go of the doorknob so he could grab Sarge by his halter, muttering a “Dammit Sarge, heel.” Apparently how to greet strangers at the door was something they were going to have to incorporate into Sarge’s training. “Sorry ‘bout that. He’s a good dog, just a little excited at the moment. Sarge, heel.” Thankfully, this time Sarge obeyed. Once Bucky was sure he was settled, he looked back up through the now open door to see the two women, well, actually two and a half women, standing there with their mouths open.

“Holy shit, that’s a big motherfucking dog,” the first one said. She was tall and beanpole thin, with short curly blonde hair and deep, brown eyes, wearing a pair of faded blue jeans and a bright purple tank top, which revealed a tattoo sleeve on her left arm, the one she was using to hold a baby cocked on her hip.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Betty, that ain’t no way to greet our new fucking neighbor.” The second woman was much shorter, with a softer figure, milk pale skin and bright blue eyes. She had shoulder length straight black hair, cut into short bangs over her forehead and a lip piercing. Both of her arms, as well as what Bucky could see of the top of her chest peeking out from the black sundress she was wearing, were covered in tattoos. And she was holding, of all things, a large basket in her hands.

“I’m just sayin’, is all.”

“And when Lizzy’s first fucking word is fuck, you’ll know who to blame.”

“Um, can I help you?” Bucky got the feeling if he didn’t cut in now, the two of them wouldn’t even notice if he shut the door.

“Oh right, sorry about that,” the tall one said. “I’m Betty, and this is my wife Paige,” she tilted her head to the other woman, Paige, and then paused for a second, obviously waiting for some reaction from him.

“Okay?”

“Okay, he obviously doesn’t get it, so hurry it up, cos it’s getting close to Lizzy’s feeding time and
“My tits are starting to leak,” Paige cut in. Bucky was seriously considering closing the door, and maybe hiding under his bed. If he had one. Which he didn’t. Just a ratty old mattress. That was something else he was going to have to add to his list.

“Right, so anyway, we saw the moving van in the driveway, and figured someone had finally moved into old Mrs. Colucci’s house.”

“Which was a shame—”

“Not that we mind, of course—”

“No, we don’t. It’s just she was a great neighbor. Batty as fuck, but a sweet old bitch—”

“Definitely,” Betty nodded. “But anyway, we saw you carrying your stuff in, and figured we should come on over and introduce ourselves and welcome you to the neighborhood. So, hi, welcome to Bay Ridge, we’re your lesbian neighbors, please don’t be a homophobic dickwad.”

“I’m not?” Bucky was so confused.

“You sure about that? ‘Cos you don’t sound so sure.” Paige was squinting at him.

“Since I’m bi, I don’t think so?” It was the first time Bucky admitted that out loud to anyone aside from Dr. Callahan. He thought it would be harder; instead there was something unbelievably freeing in that.

“Halle-fucking-lujah,” Betty interrupted Bucky’s realization.

“Right,” Paige agreed with a nod. “So with that shit outta the way, it’s nice to meet you…?”

“Bucky.”

“Huh, great name Bucky, old-timey but neat. But anyway,” Paige said, lifting the basket in her arms, and holding it out to him. “Here’s a welcome to your new home basket.” When Bucky remained
motionless, she shook her arms, indicating he should take it from her. Which he did, eventually, while still blinking at the two of them.

“What’s this?” Its weight, surprisingly heavy for its size, was the first thing Bucky noticed. The second was that it was covered with a neatly folded blanket, deep blue with golden swirls, that looked unbelievably soft.

“It’s just some basics to help you get through your first night in your new house,” Betty explained. “We’ve both moved enough in our lives before we settled here to know that sometimes, while you’re trying to get all your shit together, you forget the simplest things.”

“We put a container of milk, a can of coffee, some sugar, a couple of buns and a packet of hotdogs in there. You’re not a vegetarian, are you?” Paige asked. She was squinting at him, they both were, using Bucky’s surprise as a chance to study him closer.

“No,” Bucky shook his head.

“There’s also a couple of menus from our favorite take out places that deliver,” Betty went on, before she snapped the fingers of the hand not holding her daughter. “Oh! And I almost forgot the most important bit. There’s some toilet paper in there too.”

“Which if you forgot to bring with you, you’re gonna be real thankful for in a few hours, trust us,” Paige added.

“Thank you?” Bucky said, shaking his head. And then his brain rebooted and came back online. “No, seriously, thank you. That’s very kind, thank you.”

“You’re more than welcome,” Betty smiled. By this point, Sarge had apparently run out of patience, and was trying to sneak past Bucky, (as if Bucky wouldn’t notice all one-hundred-and-eighty pounds of him attempting to slink past Bucky’s legs), because there were new people, and new people were some of his favorite things, and why hadn’t Bucky let him say hello yet.

“That big motherfucker trying to be all sneaky, that’s Sarge by the way.” Bucky nodded at his dog. Both Betty and Paige took a hesitant step back. And oh, Betty and Paige; he got it now. Ha! “And yeah, I know he looks like a werewolf, but he’s a sweetheart, and wants to introduce himself. He really just wants to lick you to death.”
“Really?” they asked at the same time.

“Yeah, really. Just let him sniff you and you’ll see.”

“Well hello there Sarge.” Paige was the first to step forward, holding out her hand before she bent over to rub Sarge’s forehead. As she did, Bucky noticed that the base of her neck, as well as the back of her shoulders were tattooed as well. “You a big motherfucker.” Sarge rose up to his hindlegs to lick her face, and to Bucky’s eternal relief, Paige released a deep and throaty laugh.

“Sorry ‘bout that,” Bucky apologized anyway.

“Totally fine,” she laughed again, before stepping away so Betty cold have a turn. “I love dogs.”

“I’m a cat person myself,” Betty said, handing Lizzy to Paige so she could hold out her hand. “But you’re right, he’s a fucking sweetheart.”

“Yes, well, we all know how much you love the fucking pussy Betty, but this is about welcoming Bucky to the neighborhood, all right?”

Oh boy, was all Bucky could think. Why fucking me?

But they were nice enough, welcoming and friendly, Bucky discovered as he spent the next five minutes chatting with him. They told him a little about his other neighbors on the block, who were a good bunch, even ‘that fucker Richie who lives across the street. He’s a cranky old bastard, but pretty much harmless,’ and about the nearest grocery, drug and hardware stores. He found out Betty was a physical therapist and Paige a tattoo artist (which explained all of her ink), and had been married for nearly seven years. They also told him not to hesitate if he had any questions about the neighborhood as they’d lived here for five years already and had a great lay of the land. Nice people, if a bit overwhelming at first, Bucky thought as he finally closed the door. Good neighbors, welcoming, thoughtful and kind.

He was also extremely grateful a few hours later, when he realized Paige had been right, and he had forgotten to pack any toilet paper.

Brownies, he thought that night as he curled up with Sarge on his mattress under the soft blanket from his welcoming basket, which Betty informed him she knit herself. He would definitely have to
bake them some brownies once he finally got his kitchen set up.

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“I finally closed on my house!” Bucky announced at Wednesday’s meeting when Marco asked if anyone had anything they wanted to share with the group. He’d had a busy couple of days, so much so that he actually skipped Monday’s meeting, the first time he’d missed a meeting since he’d started to attend. To his surprise, he’d received a text from everyone, asking if he was all right. He’d replied, assuring them he was fine, and would tell them all about it on Wednesday, after Sarge had been showered with all of the love and affection he deserved.

“You did?” Mel smiled at him. They all knew Bucky had been in the middle of buying a house, swinging back and forth from excited to bitching about what a pain in the ass the entire process was.

“Yeah,” Bucky nodded from his usual seat. “Closed last week, moved in on Friday. Spent the last couple of days busy trying to get everything set up. It’s why I wasn’t able to make it on Monday.”

“And it’s in good condition?” Roger asked, once all the congratulations had been given.

“Pretty good. The wiring’s new and the pipes were upgraded not too long ago. Foundation’s solid, no termites or nothing. The rooms all need a coat of paint, and the floors some varnising. But I already got the paint, and my bed’s being delivered on Friday, and my couch on Tuesday, so I want to get as much of that taken care of as I can before that happens, couple of weeks at most.” He had a few very busy weekends ahead of him. But the initial shock had faded, and Bucky was looking forward to it, to all of it, now.

Apparently, the twenty-first century wasn’t done surprising him though. And there was room in his life for a lot more shock.

“Right then,” Roger said with a nod. “Saturday at oh-eight-hundred work for everyone else?”

“What?”

“Works for me.”
“I can make it.”

“What bus do I need to take to get there?”

“It’ll be nice to get out of the house for a change.”

“What?” Bucky asked, knowing he had just missed something vital.

“Saturday at oh-eight-hundred,” Roger said again. “We’ll help you paint your walls, get your shit sorted. All you gotta do is keep us supplied in pizza and beer, and we’ll get it done.”

“What?”

***

That was how Bucky ended up with another five vets in his new home, who once he supplied them with enough banana nut muffins to well, feed an army, set themselves to the task of helping Bucky paint his house.

Bucky also needed to remember they were all former military, and once they assigned themselves to a task, they organized and strategized with a precision almost reminiscent of his Winter Soldier days. Since Bucky’s new bed had already arrived, over the course of that Saturday, they split up into teams of two, and worked on getting all the rooms on the second floor painted in under three hours. When Bucky stepped out for fewer than twenty minutes to pick up some beer, he came back to find Angie and Roger putting the last touches on the upstairs hallway, and both Mel and Shawn in his bedroom, the windows open to air out any fumes, his brand new bed unpacked and already assembled, including his box-spring and mattress. Timmy was down in the living room, already having made a good start, taking a quick break to spend some time playing with Sarge. He was unusually quiet that day, looking around with a quiet awe, and he tended to take more breaks than anyone else so he could pet Bucky’s dog. But never for too long, because there were tasks that needed to be done, so he would do them, and after a few minutes he would always go back to them with a will.

As all of the rooms on the main floor hadn’t been painted, along with the two that made up his basement, to Bucky’s utter surprise, without even asking, they all agreed to come back the next day, for more breakfast goods, and Chinese food for lunch. When they finished earlier than estimated, after breaking everything down, they even started on his lawn, helping to pull some of the weeds and grass that had overgrown while the house had been unoccupied.
Once they’d accomplished as much as they could, Mel, Angie and Tommy all agreed to go shopping with him, since there were still things he needed but hadn’t purchased yet, and Angie especially was working harder on getting out of the house more.

And then, and then, the fucking cherry of top of this unbelievable sundae, when asked what he was planning to do next, and Bucky told them he needed to buy a car, because while Sarge was his service dog, and legally allowed to accompany him everywhere, he was a big dog, who was still growing, and a car would make things easier, Shawn told him about another cousin of his, who owned a car dealership (apparently his family liked working with cars. As a gym teacher, Shawn was the exception), who would treat him fairly and give him a discount because he was a vet.

Bucky almost, almost broke down right then and there. In two days, this group, these amazing people that Bucky’s hesitation had almost talked himself out of knowing, accomplished what would have taken him weeks. They were no longer the people he saw twice a week to offer and receive support, and share a meal afterwards, but friends, his friends. And he swore, right then and there, that he would do anything they asked of him, because he was so damned grateful to have them in his life, and that what’s friends did for one another. What he and… he and Steve used to do for one another, and he’d never thought he’d have that again.

Bucky just needed to figure out a way. Small steps, he knew, baby steps, just like Dr. Callahan kept reminding him. And that, that was a mission protocol he could achieve.

So the next Monday, when Bucky arrived for their meeting, he carried with him a large insulated bag. Inside was a tray of fried chicken, one filled with baked macaroni, three pies, four types of cookies, and a large jug of homemade lemonade.

“To say thank you,” he explained as he laid everything out on the table. “None of the fellas from my old unit are around anymore. But we were brothers, all of us, in everything but blood. But you guys,” Bucky paused to swallow the lump that had formed in his throat, “you guys are just as amazing, and I would have been proud to serve with each and every one of you. You’re my new unit now. So this is all for you, the MWs.”

“The MWs?” Marco asked with a raised eyebrow.


“Huh. The MWs. I like it,” Mel nodded.
“It’ll do,” Roger agreed. And then no one said anything else at all. Because they started to eat. And even Bucky had to admit he’d outdone himself that time.

***

The following weekend, Bucky went to Shawn’s cousin’s car dealership.

A week after that, he drove off the lot in his brand new, cherry-red Chevy Tahoe SUV, that he’d bought for a very fair price, Sarge sitting next to him in the front seat, his head hanging out the window.

The Monday after that, Bucky showed up with a pecan pie he baked especially for Shawn, that Shawn refused to share with anyone else, growling at anyone who dared to get too close. (Thankfully, Bucky had brought plenty of brownies for the rest of the MWs, and Anna too. Even as the Soldier, he had never been a fan of unnecessary bloodshed.)

***

So Bucky moved and settled into his new house in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, and worked on making himself at home. He slowly explored his new neighborhood, taking note of all the best grocery stores, bodegas, bakeries and Italian delicatessens, as well as trying out the various restaurants, where he could now eat with Sarge with no one able to object. Bay Ridge was rife with eateries and small shops, and he enjoyed learning about all the best places and hidden treasures this area of Brooklyn had to offer him. He updated all the appliances in his kitchen, purchasing a huge oven and a large stainless-steel refrigerator, which had water and an icemaker in one of the doors, of all things. He went shopping with Mel, Angie and Timmy whenever they had the time, purchasing curtains and blinds, and several throw rugs, and out exploring the various flea-markets that popped up in the city on the weekends. He discovered that while he could easily purchase a new set of dishes, he enjoyed picking through the multitude of stalls for plates of different sizes and colors he could mix and match instead. Eclectic, he supposed was the word for it, but just like his new home, and his updated fashion sense, Bucky felt it suited him best.

He worked steadily on his garden, getting it into a manageable condition, and chatted warmly with both Betty and Paige whenever he saw them. He also took advantage of the other aspects of the neighborhood that had drawn him to his house, including Owls Head Park right across the street. He started jogging, early in the mornings, Sarge at his side, when the park was quiet and mostly empty, except for another early morning jogger he saw most days, a woman who ran with some kind of modified stroller, that she pushed in front of her while she ran. They began to nod at each other, and then started calling out greetings whenever they passed close enough to be heard.
“Looking good there Janet!” Bucky would say.

“My asshole of a husband said my thighs aren’t the same ever since I had Eva. I’m gonna run in the next New York City marathon, and then that bastard can kiss my fat free ass!” she would yell back.

*Brooklynites*, Bucky fucking loved them. And besides, Bucky thought her legs looked great, and he’d been up close and personal with the Black Widow’s thighs, so he would know.

After his run, and a cool down, Bucky would stay in the park for another thirty minutes with Sarge, so he could explore and play like the puppy he still was. Sarge was working so hard these days, his training intense, and this was a chance for the two of them to just be together, Bucky laughing while he watched Sarge chase squirrels, or galloped over the grass, in hot pursuit the stick Bucky had just thrown for him.

On weekends, because he had the time, and Dr. Callahan told him it was good to do new things just for himself, and was now in possession of a car that could easily fit both him and Sarge, Bucky began to actually drive out of the city, and into other parts of the tri-state area, where there were trails he and Sarge could hike, Bucky with a back-pack on his shoulders, and Sarge happily trotting at his side. Bucky loved being out in the fresh air, with the wind in his hair and the sun on his face, and when they finally returned home, Sarge had exerted himself enough to fall into an easy sleep, and Bucky’s cheeks would bear a slight flush, that always faded by the next morning instead of turning into a tan. Bucky supposed that was a result of the serum, his body quickly healing any damage even the sun’s kiss could mark him with. That was fine; it didn’t dampen his enjoyment of their hikes in any way.

Assess and adapt, assess and adapt. Find his coping strategies, and things he could enjoy simply because he could.

That balance helped, as he still had all the issues he needed to work on in his therapy. The latest one, to Bucky’s surprise, but not Dr. Callahan’s, was anger. There was no one to discipline him, no one to tell him *no* and threaten him with the chair if he displayed any disobedience, and for the first time in over seventy years, Bucky was allowed to get angry. And he was; he was furious over what had happened, what had been done to him, a bitter, deep seething anger that surprised him with its power, hotter than lava, more scalding than the dessert sun.

“You have a right to it, you know,” Dr. Callahan assured him. “In fact, it’s a very natural part of the healing process.”
“It’s driving me up a fucking wall,” Bucky hissed. “And I don’t know what to do with all of it.” For the first time, it wasn’t gruesome and painful dreams keeping him up at night, but snakes in his stomach, his veins, hissing with fury, turning his vision red.

“And that’s okay,” she told him. “We just have to find the right way for you to release it.”

“You want me to just let this shit go?”

“Not let it go, Bucky, release it. There’s a difference. And you have a right to be furious after everything that was done to you. But there are healthy ways to do it, and we just have to find the one that works for you.”

“Like what?” Bucky asked, his curiosity dampening the fires somewhat for the first time in what felt like weeks.

“I have some patients that have used art. Others that have danced it out. I even have one who locks herself in a room, buries her face in a pillow and screams for hours.”

“I think if I start screaming, I won’t ever stop,” Bucky admitted.

“Whatever way you choose, as long as you’re not hurting yourself or anyone else, that’s fine. But you do need to find a way to let it out, or it’ll turn into another monster in your closet. So we just have to experiment until we find something that does work for you, because yes Bucky, you have a lot of reasons to be very angry.” At least on that they could agree.

Bucky even went so far to bring it up in his next VA meeting. To his shock, no one was surprised.

“It’s part of the process,” Marco said, confirming everything Dr. Callahan had told him. “One of the hardest ones, but your therapist’s right. You gotta find a way to let it out.”

They’d all dealt with it at some point, were still dealing with it. Shawn ran, sometimes for hours at a time, until he was so exhausted it was all he could do to make it home. Mel went to the gym, and kick-boxed the shit out of a punching bag. Angie would lock herself in a room and listen to the loudest, angriest music she could find, while cursing at the world. Timmy told him he found as many glass bottles as he could, went to an alley where no one would see him, and threw them against a wall. And Roger kept lumps of clay in his apartment, that when he needed to, he would pound and
pound and pound into submission. All different methods, unique to each of them, but nothing Bucky felt was right for him. But he was thankful, grateful as he always was, for their understanding and advice.

Until one night, when Bucky had spent hours online searching for options and reading through forums for advice, frustrated at the lack of anything that felt as though it would work for him, he abandoned his efforts and opened up Craigslist instead to see if anyone had any dishware they were trying to get rid of. It was as he was scanning the available offerings, that a single listing caught his eye. Bucky stared and stared and stared at it, an idea slowly forming in his mind, and thought he might, just might, have found his solution.

***

“What the fuck did that car ever do to you?”

Bucky blinked, aware of his surroundings for the first time in who knew how long, looked up and saw Paige leaning against the railing of her back porch, wearing nothing more than her pajamas, green with purple sharks, and a mug of coffee in her hand. He blinked again, took another look around, at Sarge staring at him through the back door, where Bucky had locked him in, the sledgehammer in his hands, and then finally down at the mess he had created, was still creating. He was panting, dripping with sweat, the clothes he had put on that morning clinging to his skin. He blinked a third time, dropped the sledgehammer, and hunched over himself, using his hands on his thighs to support him as he took in deep, heaving gasps.

“I’m…finding…a…healthy… outlet…for…my…rage,” he finally managed wheeze. “I have some issues…and my therapist said…I needed to find a healthy way…to express my anger.”

“Is it working?” When Bucky glanced up at her again, he was surprised to find she was perfectly calm. Her hip was resting easily against the railing, and the cock of her eyebrow indicated honest curiosity more than anything else. Bucky took a few more deep breaths to actually think about her question, and found that yes, yes it was working. His entire body, from the back of his neck to his Achilles tendons ached, burning with the throb of over-exertion. He felt shaky and weak, and wasn’t sure if he would be able to make up the back steps and into his own kitchen. But for the first time in weeks (maybe even decades if Bucky was being truly honest with himself), the dragon of Bucky’s anger, black and sulphurous, that had found its home in his heart, roaring, shrieking, ripping everything apart with its nebulous flames, was quiet and still. Not gone, far from it, but sleeping, catching its own breath, ready to rest.

Bucky took another look at what had once been the piece-of-shit car he found on Craigslist for a steal the night before. After exchanging a couple of hundred dollars, he had barely managed to coax it back to his house and park it in the back lot, before it heaved a final sigh and turned over for the
last time. Now it was nothing more than shattered glass, and torn and pounded metal on the ground, mixed with his blood, sweat and tears.

“Yeah,” he managed with a nod, as he used his left hand to swipe at the sweaty locks of hair clinging to his forehead. “I think it is.” He took another look around, another blink, his field of vision expanding once again, and straightened. “Was I screamin’?”

“Little bit,” Paige nodded. “For two hours.”

“Sorry ‘bout that.” Bucky rolled his shoulders; they were sore, yes, and he knew he’d be paying for it tomorrow, serum or not, but they felt looser than he could ever remember them being.

“Don’t worry about it,” Paige waved him off with her free hand. “Trust me, both Betty and I understand fucking rage.” And then she smiled at him, a crooked grin with a crooked tooth that held dragons of its own in it. “You want some coffee after all that?”

Bucky took a minute to consider her offer, assessing his body, before he shook his head. “No, thanks for the offer, but no. I’m think I’m just gonna let Sarge out to do his business, then crash.”

“Suit yourself,” she shrugged. “But would it be alright if I asked Betty to stop by later on tonight? You’re gonna be hurting after all that, and she can help.”

“Maybe…But don’t worry if I don’t answer. I think I’m gonna crash hard.” Bucky slowly started to make his way to the back door, toward Sarge, who rose up on his back legs and started barking once he saw Bucky approach.

“Kay,” Paige agreed pleasantly enough. They were kooky, his new neighbors, but Bucky had to admit they really were a nice couple.

“Hey Bucky,” she called out to him again, just as Bucky laid his hand on the doorknob.

“Yeah?” Bucky glanced over his shoulder at her.

“Does your rage have a name?” she asked, tilting her chin toward the wreckage of the car. How
could he answer that question? It was yes and no and falling from a train and my arm being ripped off and a fucking chair and being brainwashed and tortured and choking on my own blood and people playing their fucking games and no one ever listening, even after, when I told them no, no, NO. Until all of it coalesced into a single name, with a face he knew he would spend even more time smashing.

“Yeah, it does.” And he knew, he knew, his grin was as sharp as knives, as poisonous as arsenic, as satisfied as a cat curled around the body if its latest prey, far from done with its games. “Captain Gregory Fucking McAdams.”

***

Bucky spent a lot of time getting know Greg over the next couple of weeks. Or, more precisely, introducing Greg to his sledgehammer, his metal fist, and even his booted foot on a couple of occasions.

That first night, Bucky did indeed crash hard, his sleep so deep he was practically comatose, only rousing when Sarge started whimpering at him, letting him know that he needed to go outside, and go outside now. Betty must have stopped by, but as predicted, Bucky hadn’t heard her. But there was another basket outside his backdoor, with a bottle of liniment and a box of doughnuts, of all things, as well as a note asking him to ring their bell whenever he felt up to it. After a shower, some coffee, and the entire box of doughnuts, he did knock on their door, where he was greeted warmly, invited inside and given another cup of coffee. While he sat in their kitchen, brightly colored and filled with small pieces of painted woodwork from all over the world, Betty asked him how he was feeling, and he told her honestly about his aches and pains. She then asked, her eyes filled with nothing but kindness and concern, if she could assess him to make sure he was all right. After a moment’s consideration (they were not HYDRA, they were not SHIELD, and taking chances had done well by him these past few months) he agreed and they moved into the living room, more Asian in style, with even more artwork hanging from the walls, where Bucky sat on their couch and Betty studied his posture and carefully palpated his shoulders, while Sarge sniffed curiously at Lizzy, asleep in a baby-pen in the corner.

It was inevitable, as Betty’s hands ran over his upper back, that she would feel the metal of his arm, and the way it fused into his shoulder. But to Bucky’s shock, she didn’t hesitate or express any surprise, simply asked “Prosthetic?” instead.

And then, in another first for him, Bucky removed the button-up he’d put on that morning, and lifted the sleeve of his t-shirt to reveal the bitter and brutal join of metal and flesh that would forever be a testament of his enslavement to HYDRA.

“Jesus,” Betty clicked her teeth. “I’ve never seen anything like that. I know Stark Tech has had some
amazing advancements with prosthetics lately, but their work doesn’t look anything like that. The scarring’s fucking brutal.”

“It’s not Stark Tech,” Bucky hissed quietly. “I didn’t ask for it. But it’s what I’ve got. And it works, so…”

“Is that part of the reason for your rage, Bucky?” Paige asked just as quietly, from her own chair in the corner.

“Yeah, it is,” Bucky nodded. “One of them, anyway.”

“Right,” Betty said, straightening and then coming around to stand in front of him. “So I can work on it for you, give you some stretches that’ll help, hit a couple of pressure points that probably haven’t been released in forever, but I’d have to touch you for that, so only if it’s okay with you.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Bucky shook his head. “I know it’s gross.”

“It’s not gross Bucky,” Betty’s voice turned firm, sure of itself, with no room for any lies. “It’s just a part of your body now that’s probably been causing you pain for a very long time. And you’re a nice guy, and a good neighbor so far. I went into physical therapy because I wanted to help people. Let me do this for you.”

Bucky spent the next hour, sitting on their living room couch, while Betty worked on his shoulders, his neck, and down his spine, releasing things Bucky hadn’t even known needed release, while in an obvious effort to distract him, Paige told him all about her work as a tattoo artist, and how one of her specialties was working on scars, helping people transform the remains of wounds into something colorful, bright and beautiful, a celebration of their survival. She went so far as to show Bucky some of the pictures in her portfolio, where Bucky was shocked to discover she had even worked on amputees, turning what remained of their limbs into songs of color and starlight.

“It’s beautiful,” he whispered once he had turned the last page. “You’re really talented.”

“Thank you,” she smiled at him. “So if you were ever interested in getting some ink-“

“Oh god no, needles freak me out now,” Bucky cut her off, but not unkindly. It was the truth, but also a shame, because after looking at her work, Bucky thought it might be nice to have something
that colorful and elegant on his skin. But not only would he never have been able to sit still and handle the process of being tattooed, he also knew it wouldn’t take. HYDRA had tried, multiple times, to brand him, like an animal, like chattel, but to their utter disappointment, due to the serum, within a week any marks put on his skin healed as if they’d never been there. But still, it was generous of her to offer.

“‘Kay,” she said easily enough. “But if you ever change your mind…”

“You’d be the first one I’d call,” he smiled back.

A little while later, when Bucky left their house, it was with a list of stretches and instructions he could follow to help loosen his muscles and improve his overall mobility so he would experience a lot less pain.

He ended up turning to that list quite a bit over the next few weeks. Because he spent a lot of time, *a lot of it*, venting his rage on Greg.

Sometimes he’d come to, and see Paige once again standing on her back porch, watching. When their eyes met, she would smirk at him, and lift her ever present mug of coffee in salute. Sometimes Betty would be there as well, but instead of smirking, she would call out instructions.

“*Use your abdominals more, it will help stabilize your core!*”

Or

“*Loosen up your thighs and bend your knees! It’ll keep your hips from cramping up!*”

They really were fucking crazy, but Bucky was pretty damned fond of them.

Until one Sunday morning, at the beginning of September, while Bucky was searching online for gardening tips, there was a knock on his kitchen door. When Bucky looked up, he saw Paige standing there, Sarge already on his hind legs, barking his hello.

“Sarge, *heel,*” Bucky commanded before he opened the door. “Hey, what’s up?”
“Hey yourself,” she nodded at him, before she reached down to scratch Sarge under his chin. Sarge was pretty crazy about their new neighbors; but then again, Sarge was pretty much crazy about all of Bucky’s new friends.

“You wanna come inside?” Bucky stepped back to make room for her. But instead of coming inside, she merely shook her head.

“No,” she said. “I stopped by ‘cos I was wondering if I could ask you for a favor.”

“Yeah, sure. Is everything alright?”

“Well, I’m fine,” she said with a slight shrug. “But I was wondering if it would be alright if Betty spent some time with Greg?”

***

“Goddamned bitch! Who the fuck does she think she is, talking to me like that!”

With his own cup of coffee in hand, Bucky stood on the back of his own porch next to Paige, watching as Betty used his sledgehammer to rain hell down upon Greg.

“To actually say to me, to actually fucking say to me that because I wasn’t the one to give birth to Lizzy that she ain’t my fucking kid! Fucking cunt! Fucking bitch!”

Bucky glanced at Paige, who glanced back and shrugged.

“Do I even wanna know?” he asked.

“My mother-in-law. She’s a piece of fucking work,” was all she said.

“I’m gay, Ma, gay! It ain’t no goddamned phase! We’ve been married for seven fucking years,
together for even longer than that! I don’t just need to find the right fucking man, you raisin assed bigot!”

“Gotta admit, she’s got a hell of a fucking swing on her,” Bucky said.

“Oh yeah,” Paige agreed. “You should see her play baseball. I saw her at bat, and just knew she was going to be the love of my life.” Paige paused to take a deep breath, before she turned her attention back to Betty and called out, “That’s my fucking girl!”

“Fuck you Ma! Fuck you! No way in fucking hell am I gonna let you guilt trip me just because you can’t go five fucking minutes without a man!”

“You tell her Betty!” Bucky decided if you couldn’t beat ‘em, you might as well join ‘em.

“She gonna be alright?” Bucky asked ten minutes when Betty hadn’t even paused to take a breath.

“Oh yeah, she’ll be fine,” Paige nodded. “And the sex tonight, it’s gonna be amazing.” Bucky arched an eyebrow at her.

“Do you need me to babysit Lizzy?”

“Would you?” Paige’s eyes were alight with glee. “Oh my god, that would be fucking fabulous. I’d kiss you, but you know, lesbian.”

“I’d let you, but your wife’s holding my sledgehammer, and while I love getting kissed by a beautiful woman, I ain’t never been that stupid.” Paige cackled in response, and then turned her attention back to Betty. They continued to watch her for another fifteen minutes, calling out encouragement, before Bucky sighed.

“What?” Paige asked, glancing at him out of the corner of her eye.

“I’m gonna have to start looking for another Greg,” Bucky nodded toward what little remained of the wreck. “Cos I think this one’s really on his last legs.”
“You let me know when you find him, and as long as you let me and Betty have a go at Greg the Second whenever we need to, I’ll put some money in the pot.”

“Deal.”

“Fuck you! Fuck you! Fuck you!”

***

Bucky did end up babysitting Lizzy that night. And two weeks later, when he found Greg the Second, true to her word, Paige gave him a hundred dollars to help cover the cost.

***

But it helped. Having something Bucky could smash, scream and beat against when he was at his most furious ending up being the release he needed so he could let it all out, sit back, and then process everything he’d been through and the emotions he was left with as a result. Bucky spent a lot of time with first Greg, and then Greg the Second. And the more he did, the easier it became.

Dr. Callahan thought his method a bit unconventional, but as Bucky wasn’t hurting himself or anyone else, and the results obvious, she was fully supportive. The MWs snickered when he told them the method he had found, but they also agreed that as long as it worked for Bucky, then it was a reasonable solution, and good for him for having come up with it.

Assess and adapt. Assess and adapt. As long as Bucky continued to do that, he found he was able to maintain an equilibrium in his life, that allowed him to experience the full scope of emotions that made up a human being, and find even more room in his life for other things, newer things that made his life in the twenty-first century so much more than he would have ever believed possible.

He still saw Teresa twice a week, her calm presence always a comfort as they sat and chatted about their favorite telenovelas. Tara still kissed his cheek, and hugged him, before snatching whatever treat Bucky made especially for her that day. Yuna always greeted him with a smile and new ideas whenever he ventured into Second Chances looking for something else to add to his ever-expanding wardrobe. (Bucky had so many clothes now he’d ended up transforming one of the spare rooms on the second floor into a walk-in closet. He’d felt a little indulgent about it at first, but then decided fuck it, it was his house, his clothes, and he could do whatever the hell he wanted with his home. Besides,
he couldn’t deny the satisfaction he felt when he walked into that room, and saw all of his fabulous jackets hanging from the two clothing racks he’d purchased. He just couldn’t wait until the weather got cooler and he could wear them again.) The house was coming along, slowly, but surely, as Bucky found more and more items he liked and decided to purchase, simply for the pleasure of having them.

Sarge’s training was going well too, as was his work with Andy. But even that had changed. At Andy’s recommendation, Bucky was looking at getting a degree in animal behavior and psychology, which Andy insisted would be very helpful in Bucky’s future career. He’d been talking to Marco about how to enroll in some online courses, using the G.I. bill to cover the cost.

And then there was Timmy, who out of all the MWs seemed to love Sarge the most. He still sat closest to Bucky at each of their meetings, so he could reach over and stroke Sarge’s ears. It was the only time he ever seemed to quiet, something about Bucky’s dog soothing something in him that allowed him to grow both peaceful and still. Bucky never said anything about it, because the poor kid deserved it. He’d had a rough go of it, probably the roughest out of them all. Bucky now knew he’d been kicked out of his house when he came out to his parents at eighteen. With no other options or money, he’d joined the Army as a last resort. It hadn’t been the best fit, but Timmy was a smart kid, even if he hadn’t always done well in school, and he managed to make it work. He’d even been lucky enough to find someone, another young man, and fallen in love. The Army was more accepting now, but they had chosen to be discrete, yet were still very happy. Until an IED had gone off during a routine patrol, killing Timmy’s boyfriend, and leaving him deaf in his left ear. He’d gotten an honorable discharge, and sent back home. Except his parents, assholes that they were, refused to take him back in unless he changed his ways, and admitted he was no longer gay, as if such a thing were possible. He’d been homeless for a while, living in shelters and on the streets until he finally managed to make his way to the Center, where Marco made it his primary goal to find him someplace he could afford on his pension, where he now lived, but was struggling to figure out what to do with the rest of his life.

Bucky spent a lot of time with Greg and his sledgehammer after he’d found that out, his heart aching for Timmy, who was really just a kid and a sweet one at that. So he let Timmy play with and pamper Sarge, observing, studying, wondering if there was something he could do to help.

And then an idea struck, and Bucky thought it might, just might, work.

“You really love my dog, don’t you?” Bucky asked, as he and Timmy made their way to his truck one Wednesday night at the end of August, after the MWs had parted ways for the evening. It was late, and even though Bucky knew Timmy could take care of himself, he had offered to drive him home instead of making him wait for a bus.

“Course I do! He’s awesome! I mean, just look at his big paws and his tail! It looks like he’s wearing a fur coat, which is stupid, because he already has his own fur, but it’s still the best! Do you think
animals would wear fur coats if given a chance? Well, no, that would be kinda weird because you know, what if it was like their brother or something…” He went on for a bit after that, in his usual way, and Bucky let him. It was mindless chatter mostly, but he knew the kid had spent so much of his life being told to shut up, just behave, be good, be normal for once. Bucky remembered someone else who had always been told that, and just like he never had with *him*, Bucky was never going to stop Timmy from saying whatever was on his mind.

“Is it just Sarge, or do you like all dogs?” Bucky asked once Timmy had run out of things to say and they were seated in his truck.

“Sarge is the best! He’s my absolutely favorite! But,” Timmy began, only to fall quiet while Bucky turned the ignition. When Bucky glanced over, Timmy was picking at a stray thread on the inseam of his jeans, his eyes distant, lost in a memory.

“But?” Bucky encouraged gently, checking for oncoming traffic as he pulled away from the curb to give Tommy the space he needed to gather his courage.

“My best friend Joel had a dog when I was growing up, and I always used to go there after school and play with him. I used to beg my father to let me get one, but he said they were a waste of time and money, and my energy could be better spent focusing on other things.”

*Of course he did. Bastard.*

“What about now?”

“Apartments too small. And I’m not allowed. My landlord’s real nice and all, but he doesn’t want to listen to a dog barking all day,” Timmy shrugged.

*Ah. That explained a lot.* “That’s a shame,” Bucky said instead.

“It is what it is,” Timmy shrugged again. “Besides, I’m real lucky with what I got now. I’m thankful, you know?”

“Yeah, I do,” Bucky did know. He also knew Timmy deserved so much more. But it made his idea sound even better. “But, you know, there are ways to work around that.”
“There are?” Timmy perked up, shifting in his seat to stare at Bucky.

“Yeah, there are,” Bucky nodded, as he stopped at a red light. “In fact, if you’re not too busy tomorrow afternoon, say about twelve-thirty, I can show you one of them.”

***

The very next day, instead of joining Andy for lunch, Bucky begged off, and told him he had an errand to run but he should be back in plenty of time for their training session at one. Bucky drove back to Brooklyn, heading to Bensonhurst instead of Bay Ridge, and to the address Timmy had given him. He rented a basement apartment in a small house, in a decent area, with a neatly kept front stoop, where Timmy was already sitting, his leg bouncing while he waited for Bucky.

“Hop in,” Bucky told him once he rolled the window down. Less than a minute later they were on their way.

Half an hour later, after Bucky had introduced Timmy to Bethany at the ASPCA, Timmy’s eyes were as wide as a kid in a candy store, or who had woken up on Christmas and found every item in his letter to Santa waiting for him beneath the Christmas tree.

“He’s a good kid,” Bucky told Bethany, as the two of them stood watching while Timmy went from cage to cage, peering inside at the dogs that were just waiting to be showered with all the love in his gentle, generous heart. “He’s had a bit of a rough go of it. But he loves animals, and I think he’ll do a great job.”

Timmy did. By the end of the afternoon, once Bucky finished his day’s work with Andy, Bucky had to practically drag Timmy back to his car so he could take him home. But not before Timmy signed up for four more volunteer sessions. He chattered happily during the entire drive, talking about how this dog had the greatest eyes, and that one the fluffiest tail he’d ever seen, and they were so many of them, and Timmy wanted to walk them all.

Bucky had been right; it was a good fit. Timmy may have been a bit exuberant, but he was also very enthusiastic, and true to what Bucky had said, a very hard worker. Except for one thing, that took even Bucky by surprise. Because it wasn’t the dogs Timmy ended up spending most of his time with (though he did definitely love them), but the cats. After a few days, whenever Bucky took a quick break to see how Timmy was doing and to check if he had any questions, he found Timmy sitting on the floor in one of the cat rooms, a pile of cats in his lap, that he spoke to and cooed over while either
giving them a good brushing, or waving a wand in front of them.

“Well look at you, Miss Lemonade, and your big fluffy tail. Aren’t you just the prettiest thing?

“Hello there Button. How are you doing today? I heard the last of your babies was adopted yesterday. Do you miss them? I know that you do. But they’re all in good homes now, where they’re gonna get all the treats. But don’t worry, you’re gonna get a new home too. You’re so pretty and someone is going to snatch you right up real soon. You’ll see.”

“Hiya there Peanut! Did you miss me? Do you want your butt scratched? It’s that why you’re sticking your ass in my face?”

Where no one could deny that Bucky seemed to have a gift with dogs, it seemed as if Timmy’s spirit animal were cats. He could spend hours, once he was done cleaning their cages and changing their food bowls, indulging their every single whim and desire, laughing happily the entire time.

Timmy now spent even more time at the ASPCA than Bucky did, from one to five on Mondays through Fridays. On Mondays and Wednesdays, once they were both done, Bucky would wait for Timmy to finish saying all his goodbyes, grab a quick snack for the both of them to eat during the drive back to Brooklyn, while Timmy told Bucky about all the adventures his feline friends had gotten into that day.

“You were right about him,” Bethany said a few weeks later, when Bucky asked how Timmy was doing. “He is a good fit. Bit of a chatterbox, but he loves all the cats in here like they’re his own.”

“He’s a good kid,” Bucky said again. “Going through a rough bit, and trying to figure out what he wants to do with his life, but I thought this would be good for him.”

“It is. It’s even better for the cats,” Bethany said. And then the two of them watched as Timmy picked up Tank, a twenty-three-pound Maine-Coon, to bop his nose with his own.

It seemed to settle something in Timmy, soothe some of the aches his experiences had left on his heart, and he grew calmer, easier, less fidgety in his own skin. He was still the most talkative out of all the MWs, but it was more enthusiastic, less nervous as more and more time went by, and everyone noticed and could not help but approve.
Especially when during their Monday session during the second week of September, Timmy spent the entire time telling them all about Fruit and Loop, the two FIV-positive cats who decided he was their person, and he had officially adopted over the weekend. Dogs may have been an issue with his landlord, but apparently cats were perfectly fine. And Bucky, as well as everyone else there that day, knew those two cats were going to be the most pampered felines in the world.

“That was a good thing, you did for him,” Marco told him one evening as their meeting was wrapping up.

“The way he was always all over Sarge, I thought he’d enjoy it,” Bucky shrugged. “They all love him there, and he’s great with the cats.”

“Hmmm,” Marco hummed, his eyes filled with knowing as he stared at Bucky.

“What?”

“You were the caretaker in your old unit, weren’t you?”

“Dunno about that,” Bucky shrugged. “Just like to see my friends happy, I suppose.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Marco smiled. “And I bet if I asked any of them which one they’d turn to if they needed something to make their lives easier, it’d have been you.”

“We had a great captain,” Bucky deferred.

“Yeah well, units aren’t just about their captains,” Marco continued in the same vein. “They’re important, don’t get me wrong. But a good second, the one who takes care of the men while their CO deals with the brass, they’ve always been worth even more than their weight in gold. And this group has changed a lot since you and Sarge started coming here. Don’t sell yourself short. I’m sure your old captain would tell you the same thing if he ever got the chance.” Bucky doubted it, but then again, what did it matter anymore. This was his life now, and it was a good one. The past was the past, and Bucky needed to focus on the present, and his future.

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So of course, once Bucky realized that, accepted it in his heart, with hope, happiness and even just a little bit of faith, his past came roaring back and decided to bite him on the ass.

***

It was the third Wednesday in September, just two more days until Fall officially began, and their meeting had just wrapped up. At Marco’s request, Bucky was lingering behind; there was a vet in one of the other groups he ran, who was having a difficult time readjusting to civilian life, and Marco was wondering if Bucky would be willing to talk about the benefits of having a service dog, hoping it would provide her with some insight and a potential recovery tool she could incorporate into her life. Bucky readily agreed, happy to share his experiences, and they spent a few minutes more working out a time for Bucky to meet her. He had just stepped back into the hallway, turning toward the reception desk, where he knew the rest of the MWs would be waiting for him, and froze.

Because standing there, as casual as could be, was Sam Wilson.

“Oh there he is!” Anna waved at him. “This gentleman said he knows you and wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Hey James,” Sam said with a quick nod as he pushed himself away from the desk and turned toward him. “Would it be alright if I talked with you for a minute?” Bucky may have been frozen in shock, but Sarge certainly wasn’t. He was sensitive to the slightest changes in Bucky’s mood and demeanor; from what Bucky had been told Sarge was even able to smell the changes in Bucky’s scent and sense his increased heartrate. And he was being trained to react to them accordingly, even when Bucky couldn’t. So he moved in front of Bucky, turning his body lengthwise, and blocked.

“Do you know this guy, Bucky?” Mel called from lobby. All of the MWs had turned when Anna pointed him out and were now watching the proceedings. They also knew enough about Sarge and how he tended to behave around Bucky to understand what he was doing. “Is he bothering you?”

That, more than anything else, gave Bucky the ability to break free from his shock, and shake his head.

“I know him,” Bucky said.

“I just want to talk to you for a few minutes,” Sam made a pacifying gesture with his hands. “I won’t take up much of your time, I promise. Would that be alright?”
Bucky really didn’t want to talk to him. But Sam was here. And Bucky knew he wouldn’t be here now if not for the resources Sam had been kind enough to share. He owed him an opportunity to have his say for that, if nothing else.

“Go on,” Bucky nodded toward everyone else. “I’ll catch up. Shouldn’t be too long.”

“‘Kay, if you say so,” Mel said, even if she didn’t look convinced.

Once they were gone, Bucky tilted his head in Sam’s direction and led him to the hallway, the very same one where Bucky had first approached Roger all those weeks, or was it months now, ago.

“How’d you find me?” Bucky asked as he leaned back against the wall, and Sarge did his job, positioning himself between the two of them. “Did SHIELD send you? I’m not going back.” That was his greatest fear, the only reason he could imagine why Sam would be here in Chapel Hill.

“Nah man, it’s got nothing to do with that. You’re free and clear, just like you were promised,” Sam shook his head. “And can you please call off your dog? He looks like he’s going to eat me.”

“He’s just doing his job,” Bucky said.

“Service dog?” Sam asked, with an arch to his brow.

“How did you find me, Sam?” Bucky repeated instead of answering his question.

“Truth?” Sam smiled. “I heard it through the grapevine. Someone in the Harlem VA I work at was talking about this vet someone told him about, with this weird fashion sense, long hair and the biggest fucking dog anyone’s ever seen. They said the dog’s a real sweetheart, and the guy a total charmer, in spite of what he’s been through, who brings cookies and cupcakes for all the staff whenever he shows up. I wasn’t sure, but they sounded familiar, and I thought I’d come here and see for myself.”

“Uh-huh.”
“You look good James,” Sam smiled again. “Like you’re doing well and things are working out for you.”

Bucky took a deep breath, thinking back to the last time he’d seen Sam, and how far he’d come since. He hadn’t thanked Sam then, didn’t know he’d have anything to be thankful to him for. But he was. In his own indirect way, Sam was responsible for so much of Bucky’s recovery. So Bucky decided to be honest with him.

“They are,” he admitted. “I’ve been seeing Dr. Callahan and coming here twice a week.”

“And it’s helped?” Sam sounded sincere in his concern.

“A lot,” Bucky nodded. “Dr. Callahan’s great, and so are the people here. I never would have gotten this far without any of them, and I wanted to thank you for that.”

“My pleasure man,” Sam smiled. “I’m so happy for you.” He glanced at Sarge. “And Sarge is fucking huge now.”

“Hundred and eighty-five pounds at his last check-up,” Bucky reached down to scratch his ear. “But he’s a good boy. Doing real well these days. We both are.”

“Good.”

“Why are you here Sam?” Bucky asked for the third time when Sam didn’t say anything else. “And don’t tell me it’s just to check up on me. We both know that’s not how this shit works.”

“No, you’re right.” Sam took a step back so he was leaning on the wall opposite from Bucky. “I’m here to ask you for something.”

And once again, just like that last time, Bucky knew. And all he could do was close his eyes.

“Is he all right?” he asked when he was finally able to open them.
“Steve’s fine,” Sam assured him. “But I know there’s not a day that goes by that he doesn’t think about you, and wonder how you’re doing. If you could just call him James, just once, and let him talk to you, hear for himself that you’re alright, it would mean a lot. I’d consider it a personal favor if you did.”

Bucky couldn’t look at him; all he could do was stare at the scuffed tiling on the floor. This was a turning point, a crossroads, and it was time for him to assess and adapt, assess and adapt. So that’s what he did. Because Sam wasn’t the only reason he’d been able to come this far. He knew Steve had been responsible for a lot of it, although Bucky still hadn’t been able to figure out why. He’d been a distant presence, at Bucky’s request, but still there, through so much of it, and Bucky knew, without being told, that Steve was the one who had stood up to both McAdams and Fury when what Bucky wanted, all he had wanted, was a chance to live his life.

And what a life it was. Filled with its own twists and turns, setbacks and triumphs, hardships and joys. Nights of soul-crushing loneliness, but days filled with friends and crazy neighbors, new clothes and a beautiful home, hikes on the weekends, and Sarge, Sarge, Sarge. None of that, none of that, would have ever been possible if not for Steve. And Bucky was stronger now, stronger than he’d ever been, in spite of all of it, or maybe because of. So maybe he could stand face to face with Steve and not be burned away, whitened out by the flames of Steve’s soul. It was a choice, and Bucky had the right make it, instead of being forced into it. Maybe that was the most stunning realization of all. And what allowed him to make the one he did.

“There’s a park, on the other side of Brooklyn. Owls Head Park. I go jogging there with Sarge at six am on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. If he wants to, he can meet me by the dog run. It’s usually where we both end up when we’re done,” he offered.

“Thank you,” Sam sighed out, and there was relief, so much relief in his voice Bucky couldn’t help but wonder what it had cost him to search him out and come here. “I’ll let him know that.” Bucky nodded. “Although seriously, what is it with you old fogies from Brooklyn and your goddamned pre-morning runs.” Bucky didn’t answer him, didn’t feel like playing nice anymore. He’d done his good deed for the day, and all he wanted at this point was one of Nancy’s mushroom and swiss burgers. He deserved it after this.

“Is that it?” he asked as he pushed himself off the wall.

“Yeah, that’s it.” Sam nodded.

“Kay, I gotta go. The others are waiting for me.”
“Right. Thanks for hearing me out,” Sam said. “Hopefully I’ll see you around some more.”

“Don’t count on it,” was the last thing Bucky said before he turned and walked away.

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Bucky knew he shouldn’t have been surprised when he walked back into the lobby to find all of the MWs standing there, pretending as if they hadn’t tried to overhear his conversation with Sam. But he had to admit, he was also very grateful.

“Seriously guys, I told you I’d be okay,” he smiled at them.

“He had a funny look to him,” Mel said.

“And we’re the MW unit,” Shawn added.

“That means no one ever gets left behind,” Roger finished for him, for everyone, if they way the rest of them were nodding was any indication.

Bucky loved them, he really did, even if…

“Where the hell did you get that broom from Timmy? And why are you holding it like it’s a goddamned spear?”

“What?” Timmy asked, trying, and *failing*, to look innocent.

“And who gave Angie a fucking crowbar?”

They were crazy, but they really were the best unit out there.
Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

FALL

Steve didn’t give him a week.

He didn’t even give Bucky the weekend.

Bucky knew he shouldn’t have been surprised. He’d been preparing himself for this confrontation ever since Sam showed up at the center, mentally going over all the possible outcomes endlessly in his mind, knowing it was coming and that he needed to be ready for it, for him. And Steve, serum or not, had never been the most patient person when it came to something he wanted, so Bucky didn’t know why he was surprised. But still…

Steve didn’t even give him the weekend.

The following Friday, after his run, Bucky was kneeling on the ground in front of Sarge, carefully picking at the grass and twigs that never failed to get tangled in Sarge’s coat, while his dog greedily slurped from the portable bowl of water Bucky had just poured for him, when there was the softest change, like a kiss, a single raindrop, the most silent of whispers, and he. Just. Knew.

Steve hadn’t made a sound, but Bucky had always known how to find him. In the dark. In the streets of their old neighborhood. In the middle of a battle. It appeared that skill was in fact not a skill, but an instinct, an essence of his being written into his bones, his blood, the very beat of his heart, that not even seventy-five years under HYDRA’s control had ever been able to erase.

Apparently the same was true, had always been true, for Steve as well.

Closing his eyes, Bucky leaned forward to press a kiss to the top of Sarge’s head, (for strength, for courage, for a tearful of grace), rose to his feet, and slowly turned around.
And there, there he was. Standing on the pathway, bathed by the gentle morning sunlight of that crisp and bright late September day, was Steven Grant Rogers. Big and broad shouldered, tall and strong, golden haired and eyes bluer than any Bucky had ever seen; bluer than his own. Bluer than any sky could ever hope to be. Bluer than all of Bucky’s hopes and dreams. Staring at him.

Bucky stared back.

Words failed him. All of his plans and protocols slipped away, caught carelessly by the breezes that just as carelessly carried away all the grasses Bucky plucked from Sarge’s fur. A turning point, a crossroads, and this time there was no assessing, no adapting, just a stunned silence as they stood there, face to face, for the first time in far too long.

“Hey Bucky.” Even his voice, as softly spoken as the words were, echoed like the fall of Troy, London’s burning, the initial breath of a newborn as it greeted the world for the very first time. It echoed, in Bucky’s body, his flesh and blood, the marrow of his bones, like all of that. Like none of it. And all Bucky could do was let it, accept the fall, and laugh on the way down.

So that’s what he did.

“You son of a fucking bitch.”

But then his arms were around Steve, pulling him close, pulling him in, holding on tight, laughing. It took less than half a second for Steve to return the embrace, his arms even stronger than Bucky could remember.

“That’s my mother you’re talking about, jerk.” Steve’s own laugh in Bucky ear, tickling his hair.

“Sarah’d be the first one to agree with me.”

“She would.” Steve was still laughing, his arms around Bucky growing even tighter, as if he never wanted to let go. “Bucky. Oh god, Bucky.” He did though, but only to cradle Bucky’s face in his hands as he took a small step back to run his eyes over Bucky’s face. “Look at you. Look at you. You look great.” Apparently Sam hadn’t been lying, and Steve had been worried, desperately so if the hunger in his gaze was any indication. And it wasn’t easy to stand there, in front of this man Bucky had known, had always known, when he hadn’t even known himself. It wasn’t easy, but, to Bucky’s surprise, it wasn’t hard either.
“Course I do.” Bucky stepped back with a crooked grin. But not far, letting Steve have his look, take in his fill. Even dressed in his running gear, sweaty, with his hair pulled back into a messy ponytail, Bucky knew he could still turn heads if he wanted to. “I always was the better lookin’ out of the two of us. Don’t see why that should be any different even eighty years later.” Not true, and especially not in the latter days. And Steve had always been the most beautiful thing Bucky had ever seen, no matter the size of his body, Bucky’s greatest gift, his most precious treasure. (But treasures, especially ones made of gold, always ended up being stolen, and Bucky had also long ago learned how to accept loss.) But that didn’t matter now, none of it did, as the two of them stood there in that small corner of Owls Head Park, years, years, years too late.

But it seemed as if it had been the perfect thing to say, the exact words Steve needed to hear, and he laughed again with a small shake of his head, his smile growing even wider.

“I’m serious, Buck.” Steve said, and then paused, his eyes growing cautious. “Or is it James now?”

“Bucky’s fine,” he nodded. “It’s my name,” the one you called me the first time you told me you loved me, “and after all this time, I decided I wanted it back.”

“It was always yours,” Steve told him, his eyes never pausing in their endless study. “I’m just glad—“

It was at that exact moment Sarge decided he was done with being ignored, and barked, coming forward to brush against the back of Bucky’s thighs. Per his training, he had sat and watched their exchange. Apparently nothing in Bucky’s demeanor indicated he was distressed and needed Sarge’s help, so Sarge had held back. But since Bucky didn’t, Sarge had taken it upon himself to remind Bucky that this was new people, and new people were still some of Sarge’s very favorite things.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, ya big goofball,” Bucky smiled, reaching down to scratch Sarge’s ear. “I haven’t forgotten you. C’mon. Come say hello. And how the hell did you get even more grass in your fur? I turned my back on you for less than thirty seconds.”

“This is…Sarge, right?” Steve asked, holding out his hand as Sarge chose to ignore Bucky picking at his coat to get a good sniff. Meeting whatever were Sarge’s own internal requirements, Sarge licked Steve’s palm and then rose up onto his hind legs to place his front paws on Steve’s shoulders so he could commence covering Steve’s face in spit. “Ooofah!” Steve grunted as he took a step back. It seemed as if even Steve, super-soldier that he was, could be taken off guard by Sarge’s weight and strength. “I can’t believe this is the little puppy you started carrying around all those months ago!”

That was a slip, Bucky was sure. He’d assumed all his comings and goings had been monitored, even his sessions with McAdams. What he hadn’t been so certain of was if Steve had been watching
the entire time. His words were a confirmation he had; this time Bucky wasn’t surprised. He was going to file that away for now, take it out and pick at it later. But now, now wasn’t the time for that.

“Yeah well,” he said instead, unable to keep himself from smiling at the way Steve’s entire face scrunched up in a futile attempt to escape Sarge’s tongue. “His breed was bred to take down wolves and bears.”

“He can take down a wolf?” Steve suddenly seemed a lot less comfortable having Sarge’s muzzle so close to his face.

“And bears,” Bucky made sure to remind him.

“And bears,” Steve repeated flatly. And yep, he was definitely doing a mental reassessment of the wisdom of having a dog of Sarge’s size so close to his throat.

“Don’t worry. He’s just a big meatball. The worst he’ll probably do is try to lick you to death.” Bucky decided to have mercy on him. “Sarge, heel.” And just like that, Sarge immediately backed away from Steve, and returned to Bucky’s side, where he sat, as he usually did, on Bucky’s foot. It seemed no matter how hard he and Jake tried, they were never going to break Sarge of that behavior. Bucky had to admit he really didn’t mind. It was them after all.

“He’s well trained,” Steve noted, while he observed the two of them.

“He has to be,” Bucky said, reaching down to pluck yet another stray leaf from Sarge’s fur, this time in his ear. “He’s my service dog. Or he will be, once he passes his certification in a few months.”

“Service dog?” Steve asked. Bucky looked up from Sarge, who had been panting happily at him, all right in his world as long as he was by Bucky’s side, and realized that while Steve may have been observing him from afar while Bucky still had been under SHIELD’s thumb, there were obviously things he hadn’t known.

“Yeah, a service dog,” Bucky decided to explain. If this was it, if this was what Steve needed to be able to convince himself that Bucky was fine, was managing on his own, Bucky wanted him to have as much of the truth as possible before they parted ways one last time. “It was really rough on me for a while there at the beginning, when I was trying to find my way back from everything HYDRA did to me. And I still got a lot of shit in my head that I need to work through. But having Sarge around helps. He keeps me focused and calms me down, gives me a reason to get out of bed on the real
shitty days. He’s good company, and having him around made a difference almost right away.” Bucky could see Steve was surprised by the ease in which Bucky spoke about his struggles. It wasn’t easy, not really, but Bucky had spent the past months talking about it, with both Dr. Callahan and the MWs. And he had learned, was still learning, that it wasn’t a weakness to admit when you were struggling, but a rebellion and an act of courage, because sometimes the bravest thing you could do was admit to your weaknesses and ask for help. There was no shame in that. It was not the way either of them had been raised, but times had changed, and so had Bucky.

“Then I’m really glad you found him,” Steve said instead of all the things Bucky could see in his eyes.

“Yeah, me too,” Bucky grinned, before he looked back down at Sarge. “And he’s a great dog, aren’t you? Yeah, you know that, you spoiled brat, don’t you? You’re my boy.” Sarge barked happily at him, because yeah, he did know that. Bucky made sure he did.

“What about you? How you doing these days?” Bucky turned his attention back to Steve.

“I’m doing good Bucky,” Steve nodded.

“Enjoying the twenty-first century?”

“Takes a bit of getting used to, but it ain’t too bad.” Steve had straightened and was back to staring at the both of them, trying to be subtle as his eyes ran over and over Bucky in an endless study. “And pizza, that’s definitely a perk.”

“Motherfucking pizza man,” Bucky agreed with a laugh.

“Although I could do without paying six bucks for a cup of coffee.”

“You did not just insult Starbucks, you punk!”

“That’s not even coffee Buck! That’s like drinkable ice cream!”

“And it’s amazing!” Bucky argued.
“For six bucks a cup?”

“Worth every fucking penny.” Bucky was not going to allow Steve to insult his drinking choices.

“Oh c’mon, are you tellin’ me-“ Steve was getting ready to launch into a rant, Bucky could see him winding himself up for it. And Bucky was getting ready to match him, step for step, with counter arguments of his own. In the past their bickering had been epic, and they could do it for hours. Anyone unfamiliar with the way they interacted with one another thought they would be gearing up for a full out fight. It had taken the Howling Commandoes weeks to figure out what was actually going on; that this was fun for them, how they let off steam, played with one another, teasing, snapping, poking until they ended up laughing over it. They probably would have launched right back into it, if at that exact second the alarm on Bucky’s cell hadn’t gone off, reminding him he needed to head back home, grab something to eat, and get ready for Sarge’s training session with Jake.

“Shit,” Bucky said as he pulled his phone from the armband he used to carry it while he ran. “I’m sorry Steve, but I gotta get going.”

“Oh, yeah, no, of course, I didn’t mean to hold you up.”

“You didn’t.” Bucky glanced at him out of the corner of his eye while he shut the alarm off. “It’s just that if I don’t get this one home and grab something for the both of us to eat, we’re gonna be late.”

“Then I won’t keep you any longer,” Steve said, his entire expression, posture shifting back to how it had been when Bucky first turned and saw him standing there.

“As if you ever could,” Bucky smirked. Teasing he could do; it was a gift Bucky had always been able to give him, and one Steve always gratefully received when he would shut down anyone else who ever tried. But then again Bucky had always been the only one who meant it as a joke, a kindness, when it had been filled with scorn and derision from everyone else.

“I meant it when I said it,” Steve cocked his chin in Bucky’s direction. “You look like you’re doing great. And I’m so happy about that. You have no idea.”

“Thanks,” Bucky nodded. “I know you had a big hand in how everything turned out, and I wanted to thank you for that.”
“It was my pleasure Buck.” Steve shrugged, as if it was a small thing, Steve’s faith, his belief that Bucky would have ever been able to make it this far. “It was the least I could do after everything.”

“You didn’t owe me anything Steve, you never did. But that don’t mean I’m not grateful for it.”

“Take care of yourself Bucky.” This time it was Steve who moved forward to pull Bucky into a hug, against his heart, the wall of him that had never yielded to anyone or anything. Familiar and strange, new and old, and all Bucky could think was oh. Oh.

Oh.

And then they were pulling apart, stepping away from each other, the only thing between them that early morning’s breezes and an endless bridge of September sunlight.

“You too Steve,” Bucky said with a final, soft slap to Steve’s shoulder.

“Thanks for letting me stop by.”

“Least I could do,” Bucky shrugged with a smile before he turned to go. “And you should try the Strawberry Frappuccino. Get it with extra whip, and then try to tell me the six bucks ain’t worth it.” He glanced back over his shoulder to cast one last wink at Steve, and maybe to catch the look of incredulity he knew would be there, before he clicked his tongue at Sarge and said, “C’mon Sarge. Let’s go home.”

As he made his way down the pathway, Sarge trotting loyally at his side, Bucky knew if he glanced behind him, he would see a tall, lone figure, standing sentry on a hill, watching him walk away.

***

There were things that people didn’t know about Steve.

There were historians who could claim they had studied and analyzed every detail of the life of the
hero the world knew as Captain America.

There were exhibits in museums all over the world dedicated to the man who was known to them as Steven Grant Rogers.

And now, in this new century, there were blogs and news articles all claiming to have some deep and personal understanding of the icon who stood for something better, something bigger than themselves, Truth, Justice, and the American Way.

But none of them, none of them, knew anything, knew a single goddamned thing about the person they all claimed as theirs.

They never had.

Because the truth was, the one thing about him that Bucky had always known, and no one else did, was that Steve was a motherfucking liar.

He always had been.

*No Bucky, I’m fine, I swear to you that punch didn’t even hurt…*

and

*No Bucky, you didn’t need to jump in. I coulda handled it on my own…*

and

*No Bucky, I ain’t gettin’ sick again. It was just one cough, now leave me alone…*

and
No Bucky, my back is fine. Shuddup, I am not walking funny...

and

No Bucky, I remembered to grab some lunch today, you don’t hafta give me half your food...

and

No Bucky, it’s not that cold, you don’t gotta give me all the blankets...

and

No Bucky, I’m not about to do something stupid, stop your fussing...

and

No Bucky, I’m not hurt. That bullet barely grazed me, calm down and go check on Morita...

and

I'm fine Bucky...

I'm okay Bucky...

You don’t need to worry about me Bucky...

and

I’m doing good Bucky.
Steve had always been a liar, at least when it came to himself. In a world ready to dismiss and mock him for what they perceived to be his weaknesses, Steve had learned to shield himself, surround himself in walls, challenge any who would doubt his capability, as a means of survival. He’d created his own language, one of steely glances, a silence to masquerade all the screams he held inside, a shell of diamond and stone, to protect the inner core of himself, that no one had been able to see.

No one except for Bucky.

Bucky had made it his life’s task to master the art of learning Steve’s language, of hearing all the truths about himself that Steve never said. Because Bucky had never seen Steve as weak, or lacking, or less than just because he wasn’t more. He was the opposite of all those things, a truth too truthful, an honesty too honest, an insurmountable flame that burned brilliant and bright with the power of the stars.

(And Bucky had loved him. God, how he had loved him.)

So he knew how to see the signs, read the cues, hear the words Steve was not saying, give Steve all the things he never gave himself the permission to ask for.

Calling for the doctor when he knew that cough wasn’t just a cough. A hand rubbing in circles over Steve’s lower back, when he knew it ached after a long day spent on his feet after Steve’s shift at Morelli’s grocery store. More of the meat, and less of the cabbage from the stew Bucky had managed to cobble together for dinner. Bucky’s arms around him, sharing his heat, his body, (what Steve had really, really wanted) when the nights were cold.

Apparently, Bucky had never lost the knack, forgotten all the cues and signs, even subtler than the twitch of a cat’s whiskers, that was the way Steve whispered his secrets to the world.

Because Steve’s eyes had been bright upon seeing him, but Bucky could see the shadows lurking behind the darker flecks of blue. His posture had been tall and strong, but there was just the ever-slightest curl to his spine, smaller than a fraction of a millimeter, as if something had torn, ripped itself open, deep in the core of his guts. And when Steve had held him, the first, and especially that last time as they said their goodbyes to each other, there had been a tremble, a hunger, an ache in him that would be invisible anyone else, (even the Black Widow for all her highly developed and keen perception), but felt like earthquakes to Bucky.
As he lay on his back in his bed that night, Sarge’s head resting comfortably on his chest, Bucky reran their encounter in his head, turning it over and over in his mind, it became obvious to him that something was very, very wrong with Steve. And that no one else had noticed. Or if they had, they simply didn’t care.

*I’m doing good Bucky.*

Liar.

Liar.

Liar.

In the past, it would have been Bucky’s job to call Steve out on his shit, pull him to the side and make him stop, reassess, feel whole again. Be the one to kiss it, to kiss it all in whatever way Steve would let him, until it released, and Steve could take a breath, the only time, even after the serum, Steve had confessed to him once, he ever felt like he could really breathe.

It may have been his job once. But that had been over eighty years ago, and their paths had long since diverged, other choices made, the new replacing the old. Bucky had needed to heal himself, and he never would have been able to do that with Steve there. And Steve, well Steve was Steve, and he’d never been one to ask for anything for himself, so Bucky doubted anyone even knew Steve would ever need to ask. He was an American Icon after all. Steven Grant Rogers. Captain America. The world’s first Avenger. The man everyone looked up to for what was right and just.

A man who was deteriorating right before their very eyes. Even heroes, especially heroes, could break. It was easier to accept the mythos than accept the human being behind the shield.

It seemed as if Bucky wasn’t the only man who had been left behind, forgotten in the remains of the battles of War World Two. But Bucky had Sarge now. And the MWs. Dr. Callahan, Andy, Tara, Yuna, Teresa, even Betty and Paige. Who the hell did Steve have?

Bucky didn’t know. Didn’t know if he even had a right to know anymore. He just hoped, and prayed to a god he had never believed in, that there was someone, anyone who was paying enough attention.
Because this, this was not good.

“Jesus Christ, Stevie,” Bucky whispered into the dark, as he stared up at the stars Mel and Timmy had helped him paint on his ceiling. “What the hell are you doing to yourself?”

***

With his newly acquired understanding of the situation, Bucky honestly couldn’t say he was surprised when he returned to the park with Sarge for their Monday morning run to see Steve sitting there on a bench, dressed in his own running gear. (And seriously, if there was any proof that nobody was looking out for Steve, it was the fact they’d let him leave the Tower looking like someone’s grandpa for their first meeting. Because really Steve, high-waisted khaki pants with a wide brown belt, a button up plaid shirt and loafers? That’s the look you were going to go with? I need to introduce you to Yuna.)

Bucky didn’t call him on it though; just like there was a language he’d had to learn to really understand everything Steve wasn’t saying, there was also one you had to use if you wanted Steve to hear you. So instead he just cocked his head to the side and stared at Steve as if he were a very dumb and very insipid child. Besides, Sarge was there to take care of the niceties, which he happily did, trotting over to the bench where Steve was sitting and laying his paws on Steve’s thighs so he could be showered with pets and praise.

“You uh, you never said I couldn’t come back,” Steve admitted sheepishly a few seconds later, when he noticed Bucky hadn’t stopped staring at him.

“Suppose I didn’t,” Bucky agreed as he moved to the back of the bench so he could do the pre-run stretches Betty insisted he perform. They weren’t really necessary; his body could handle just about anything he put it through, especially something as simple as a run. But, well, he’d seen her wielding his sledgehammer on Greg, and that was a chance he wasn’t willing to risk.

“And I love to run, in the mornings especially.” Steve was pretending all his focus was on Sarge, but Bucky knew he was the one who really had all Steve’s attention.

“You don’t have anyone to run with at the Tower?” Bucky could play this game, could play it all day if he had to.
“Well, there’s Sam, but he always bitches at me about how early I like to go. And then bitches at me about how fast I end up running.” Steve shrugged.

“Quite the bitcher then, that Sam?” Bucky asked nonchalantly as he bent his legs at the knees to stretch his quads.

“He’s not that bad. He just really hates it when I wake him up at five in the morning for a run.”

“I’ll just bet he does.”

“And since you’re already up for a run of your own, I just figured I’d give him a chance to sleep in for once.”

“Uh-huh.”

Steve finally stopped pretending Sarge was the only one he was interested in, and looked at Bucky.

“If it bothers you that I’m here, I’ll go. I just thought—“ he began quietly, looking so soft, his eyes filled with what Bucky could only call hope.

“It’s fine Steve,” Bucky cut him off. “And you’re right. I never said you couldn’t come back.” Bucky realized it was true as soon as he said it. It was fine. But then again, he hadn’t expected Steve to come of his own accord either. At Bucky’s response, Steve smiled, small and surprisingly shy, but more like the smiles Bucky remembered Steve once used to give him, than any Bucky had seen since they first started talking again.

“So how many miles are we looking at?” Steve asked, rising to his feet.

“’Bout three,” Bucky answered. It wasn’t really a challenge, and Bucky could have easily done more. But Sarge was still a puppy, for all his size, and Bucky really wanted to give him a chance to run and play, burn off any excess energy he may have had before he needed to buckle down, and focus seriously on all the tasks he was being trained to perform. And it was fun, when the park was empty and still, peaceful, the streets around them mostly quiet during that pre-rush hour time. It was a nice way to spend the morning.
“Three miles. Got it,” Steve nodded, and then they were off.

Owls Head Park wasn’t the largest park in New York City, not even the largest park in Brooklyn, but it was still a good size. What made it truly enjoyable were all the hills, some slow and sloping, others pretty steep that kept it interesting enough to prevent Bucky from getting bored. He took a different path whenever he ran, sometimes running in several circles around the park, and sometimes just letting his moods guide him. Steve was a quiet companion that morning, easily falling into pace at Bucky’s side, matching him step for step, letting Bucky choose their course. So they ran together, like they never had before, each enjoying the silence and the chirping of the birds, until it ended like it usually did for Bucky, just outside the dog run, where Bucky poured half of the water bottle he carried into Sarge’s collapsible bowl, and drank the rest himself.

“It’s a good run,” Steve admitted with a nod, his hands on his hips. “I can see why you like it.”

“It does the job.” Bucky was watching Sarge, waiting for his dog to finish spilling more of the water than he actually ended up drinking. “You done Big Guy?” he asked, when the last drop had been spilled and Sarge was licking his chops. When Sarge barked his affirmative, Bucky smiled and bent over, because this, this was his favorite part of their morning routine. “Right then. Fetch!” Bucky straightened and tossed the stick he’d picked up, laughing as Sarge happily took off after it, as if he hadn’t just spent the past half hour running around the park.

“He’s a gorgeous dog, Buck,” Steve joined Bucky in watching as Sarge picked up the stick in his mouth, and came galloping back to Bucky to drop it at his feet.

“He’s a pain in my ass.” Bucky bent over to pick up the stick and give it another throw, Sarge once again bolting after it. “But I’m pretty crazy about him.”

“I can see that.”

This time when Sarge came back, he held his head up high, the stick still in his mouth instead of dropping it at Bucky’s feet.

“Ah, I see how it is then. It’s time to play tug of war, is it?” Bucky reached for the stick with his left hand, shifting his center of gravity lower while Sarge shook his head and tried to pull it out of his grasp. “And how the hell did you get all those leaves on you? I was watching you the entire time. You’re a mess, you know that?” Two minutes later, when Sarge finally released the branch so Bucky could toss it for him yet again, he looked up to find Steve watching him, a small and mysterious smile on his face.
“What?” Bucky asked, wiping his hands on his track pants.

“Nothing,” Steve shook his head.

“Uh-huh. What?”

“Nothing,” Steve said again, his smile growing even wider. Bucky would have pressed for more, but Sarge had already come back and dropped the stick at Bucky’s feet for a third time.

“Wanna give it a go?” Bucky glanced down at the branch.

“Can I?”

“He’ll love you forever if you throw that stick for him,” Bucky admitted. And probably want you to keep throwing it for him forever too, if he can convince you to, Bucky didn’t add. Instead he said, “Just…”

“Just?” Steve asked as he straightened.

“Don’t give it your all,” Bucky told him. “Don’t need to be chasing my damn dog halfway across Brooklyn because you forgot how strong you are now.”

“Got it,” Steve nodded and then tossed the stick, mindful of Bucky’s words.

That was how they spent the next half hour, playing with Sarge while the sun slowly made its way higher in the sky. They didn’t say much, but they didn’t need to, Sarge happily running interference, until Bucky’s alarm went off, reminding him it was time for the two of them to start making their way home. Steve, who had been smiling and laughing while he played with Bucky’s dog, heard it too, and his shoulders did that ever so subtle shift, a quivering tightening Bucky knew was Steve’s way of preparing himself to go back to the real world. Bucky already missed the Steve from just a few seconds ago.
“Time for you to get back?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“Kay.” Steve nodded. “It was good seeing you again Buck. Thanks for letting me join you guys today.”

“It was fun,” Bucky wanted to make sure Steve knew that, in case this was the last time.

“Yeah, it was.”

Bucky looked at his dog, who was still galloping around the dog run, as if all was well in his world. “Sarge, side. Home.” And just like that, Sarge was at his side, ready to begin their day. “Take care of yourself Steve. Try not to do anything too stupid.” Bucky heard his snort as he and Sarge started to walk away. They had gone less than ten steps when Steve called out to him.

“Yeah?” Bucky asked, turning around.

“Wednesday?” And there was so much hope in Steve face as he asked, and also such a willingness to accept rejection. It broke Bucky’s heart.

“Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, same time,” Bucky nodded, as if he had ever been able to deny Steve anything he asked of him.

“Same place?”

“Maybe.” Bucky wasn’t going to make it too easy on him. Steve would get suspicious if he did. “Or maybe I should see how long it takes you to find us next time.”

This time when he walked away, he didn’t look back. He didn’t need to anyway; the sound of Steve’s amused chuckle was all the confirmation he needed.

Positive reinforcement. It didn’t just work with training dogs.
“Took you long enough,” was the first thing Bucky said from the bench where he sat waiting on Wednesday, not even bothering to look up from where he had been running his fingers over Sarge’s ears. One minute and forty-eight seconds to be exact.

“Yeah well, the trains were a mess this morning,” was Steve’s response.

“Uh-huh.” Bucky nodded at Sarge. “Go on, go say hello.”

“Hiya Sarge, how ya doin’ big guy?” When Bucky looked over, Steve was kneeling on the ground, his eyes closed but a smile on his face as Sarge licked his cheeks, wanting to see if Steve had eaten anything interesting since the last time Sarge had seen him.

“Ready to go?” Bucky asked, rising to his feet.

“Did you already do all of your morning stretches?” There was a bit, just a bit, of teasing in Steve’s voice.

“Uh-huh. There’s a reason why I look as good as I do in these pants. You don’t have to be so petty about it. Doesn’t suit you.”

“Jerk.” But Steve was laughing as he said it.

“Uh-huh,” Bucky said again. “Ready to go?”

“Yeah,” Steve nodded as he rose to his feet. “Let’s do this.” And that’s exactly what they did.

“You know, I get that this isn’t the biggest park in the world, but we could probably go a little faster,
push ourselves a little harder,” Steve actually had the balls to complain on Friday.


“No, I’m just saying it would be more of a challenge if we ramped it up a little.” Bucky knew exactly what Steve was doing; it wasn’t the work-out he was complaining about. He was trying to test Bucky, see if he’d bite, the asshole. Teasing him, which was interesting, because they had spent the past week running together, but they hadn’t really talked. This was Steve wanting to see if Bucky was willing to play with him. Bucky was surprised to find he was, but the bastard still didn’t have to be a little shit about it. Steve could dish it out like nobody else, but it seemed as if he’d forgotten that the one person, the only person, who had ever dished it right back was Bucky himself. And he may have been through a lot, and was still struggling to realign all of his pieces, but that didn’t mean Bucky was going to let him get away with pushing him, and not getting pushed back. Bucky was going to make him sorry he’d ever asked. And not in the way he thought.

“You want more of a challenge?” he asked, stopping mid-run.

“I’m just sayin’.” Steve turned around and the bastard was actually smirking at him, as he stood there, jogging in place.


It was true, what Bucky had told Steve; he ran every Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings in the park across the street from his house. But what Bucky hadn’t told him was that on Tuesdays and Thursdays, he went running with Sarge, not in the park, but along bike path and waterfront that lined Shore Road. It added a bit of variety to their exercise routine, and kept things interesting. Bucky usually pushed himself much harder during those runs than he did in the park, as there were fewer twists and turns to follow. And this was a new game, a new command, he had recently introduced to Sarge, one that allowed the both of them to go at full speed and challenge their limits. It was a lot of fun for them, and Sarge really seemed to love the new game. Steve hadn’t known that, but he was about to find out exactly how fast his dog could run.

“Wait a minute,” Steve said, taking a step back, watching as Sarge shifted his body weight in preparation to leap. “Just hold on a sec now…Shit! Shitshitshitshitshitshit!” And then he took off, Sarge very hot on his heels.

“Why is Sarge chasing that man around the park?” Janet asked twenty minutes later as she parked Eva’s stroller next to the bench where Bucky was standing, filming the entire thing with his phone.
“Because he doesn’t know when to keep his mouth shut, and somebody needed to teach him a lesson.”

“Shitshitshitshitshitshit!”

“Ah, okay,” Janet nodded, climbing onto the bench next to Bucky so she could watch, instead of doing her normal cool-down stretches. “Do you think you could get him to do that to my husband one of these days?”

“Is that jerk-off still bitching about your thighs?” Bucky glanced at her.

“Now he’s complaining that I’m spending too much time running, and not paying enough attention to him in the mornings.”

“Asshole.”

“Totally.” Janet nodded. “So, do you think I could borrow Sarge?”

“Sure, just let me know the time and place, and we’ll be there.”

“Perfect. Thanks.”

“Shitshitshitshitshitshit!…Augh!”

“Yeah…That’s probably going to leave a mark,” Janet winced.

“Yep,” Bucky nodded. “Bastard still deserves it though.”
“And what did we learn on Friday, ladies and gentlemen?” was the first thing Bucky said when Steve’s shadow fell over his lap as he sat on yet another bench, waiting for Steve to show up.

“You and that dog are a fucking menace, that’s what we learned. I take back every nice thing I ever said about either one of you,” Steve growled.

“Oh, that’s right. If you’re going to try to fuck with somebody, make sure it’s not with the person who taught you everything you know.”

“You wish.”

“Uh-huh. Tell me something Steve,” Bucky said, looking up from Sarge for the first time. “Did it hurt, when Sarge bit you in the ass?”

“Sam laughed at me for two hours when I finally made it back to the Tower.”

“Did he offer to kiss and make it better?”

“He couldn’t get off the floor, he was laughing so hard.”

“And that’s what you get,” Bucky said, rising to his feet. “Now say hello to Sarge. He’s missed you and has been waiting for ten minutes for you to come over and say hello.”

“He’s not going to try and bite me in the ass again?”

“Maybe. But only if you ask him nicely.”

“You are such a fucking asshole.”

“Yep. Now, are you ready to get going?”
“Yeah, I am.”

“Right then, lead the way, Mr.-You-Know-We-Could-Probably-Make-This-Run-More-Challenging.”

“I’m sorry I ever opened my fucking mouth.”

“Thought so. Now c’mon. Time’s a-wasting.”

***

“Hey, sorry I’m late.” It was Bucky who found Steve waiting on a bench for him the following Wednesday morning, when he showed up ten minutes later than usual for their run.

“It’s alright,” Steve assured him, ignoring Sarge for just a second to give Bucky a careful study. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, everything’s fine,” Bucky waved off Steve’s concern. “The muffins I was baking took a little longer than expected to cook all the way, that’s all.” Steve’s hand paused midair while he parsed through Bucky’s explanation.

“The muffins you were baking took longer than expected?” he finally asked.

“Yeah. Made a bigger batch than usual, took me longer than I thought to bake them all.”

“You bake?” There was something in the tone of Steve’s voice that told Bucky he was having a hard time believing what he’d just been told.

“Yeah.”

“You bake muffins?”

“No.” He still sounded doubtful though, and if Bucky was being honest, a bit mocking. “It’s just you never liked cooking before, and now you bake?”

“I’ll have you know, I’m a damned good cook these days.” Bucky crossed his arms and raised his chin. “And my muffins are to die for. People start fighting over them if I don’t bring enough.”

“Uh-huh. Whatever you say Buck.” Steve gave Sarge’s ears one last good scratch before he rose from the bench. “Are you ready to get started? Wouldn’t want you to leave your muffins unattended for too long. People might start fighting over them.” The sonovabitch was actually smirking at him. The fucking nerve of some people.

Bucky’d show him.

But only after he let Sarge take another bite out of his ass.

***

“Try this.” Bucky rose from his bench and shoved the cloth wrapped bundle he’d been holding at Steve.

“What the hell is this?” Steve asked, taking the still warm packet into his hands.

“Take a bite, and then tell me you still think I can’t bake,” Bucky urged.

“Oh my god!” Steve laughed, as he carefully unfolded the napkin. “Are you still mad because I said you couldn’t bake?”

“Try. It.”

“Oh my god, you’re such a-” His words trailed off, because he had indeed finally taken a bite.
Followed by another. And another. And one last one, because the muffin Bucky had given him was gone. Then he was digging through the cloth, desperately searching for any remaining crumbs. “Holy shit Bucky! You actually made that yourself?”

“Uh-huh.” Bucky snatched the napkin out of his hands. They were part of a set, and Bucky was pretty fond of them. “Remember that the next time you wanna make fun of my muffins.” And then Bucky turned and took off running, without even bothering to do his usual warm up stretches, leaving Steve behind to catch up.

***

“So, uh…”

“Yes?”

“Did you happen to do any more baking over the weekend?”

“Might’ve.”

“You didn’t happen to bake anymore of those muffins, did you?”

“Nope.”

“Oh.”

“I made coffee cake, with a raspberry swirl.” Five of them actually; one for Tara, who he knew was going to love it, and three for the MWs at their VA meeting tonight. And one for himself; he did need to sample anything he made before he was certain he could serve it to anyone else.

“Is there any left?”

“Nope,” Bucky lied. “Now c’mon, let’s get going. We ain’t got all day.” Steve’s sigh followed Bucky all the way down the path he had chosen for that morning’s run.
“What’s this?” Steve asked as he very carefully took the small Tupperware container from Bucky’s outstretched hand. “Is this another muffin? Please tell me it’s another one of those muffins.” He was practically salivating as he pried open the lid.

“Nope. Not a muffin.”

“Coffee cake with raspberry swirl?”

“See for yourself,” Bucky said, watching as Steve lifted the container to his nose to take a very deliberate sniff.

“What is it?” Steve asked, curiosity and delight simultaneously crossing his face as he took in the scents unfamiliar to him.

“Cinnamon pecan rolls with a cream cheese and caramel frosting.”

“What?”

“Cinnamon pecan rolls with a cream cheese and caramel frosting,” Bucky repeated.

“Oh. My. God.”

“That’s what she said.”

Steve didn’t even bother to respond; he was too busy stuffing his face with Bucky’s cinnamon pecan roll.
So this was Bucky’s life now. Still filled with its issues and all his struggles, but also all the treasures he had somehow managed to gather, fellows and friends, laughter and clothes, new things to learn, and a dog he was pretty damned crazy about.

And on Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings, running with Steve.

He didn’t know if it was helping either of them. They still had not talked much about anything really, and yet here they were, reweaving themselves together into a fringe at the border of their lives. Bucky worried over it sometimes, late at night when he couldn’t sleep. He had been afraid, was still afraid, that Steve would consume him, burn out the who of Bucky and how he had managed to grow with the supernova of Steve’s being. But he hadn’t so far. Then again, it was still early days between them, but Bucky couldn’t allow himself to forget that the last time it had left him heartbroken and forgotten, a shadow who could only follow as Steve blazed towards his new passion, his new goal, his never ending need to see justice done.

He had even brought it up in therapy, if in a roundabout way, saying only that he had a new running partner, and wasn’t quite sure how he felt about that yet.

“And it’s worrying you?” Dr. Callahan asked.

“A little bit, yeah.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know how it’s going to turn out, and that’s bugging me. But,” and here Bucky paused to look up from where he had been running his hand back and forth, back and forth, over Sarge’s brow, “I don’t want to talk about that right now.”

“Okay,” Dr. Callahan said, keeping to the promise she had made to Bucky during their very first session. “But can I ask why?”

“It’s not bad, I don’t think.” Bucky shook his head. “You just asked me if anything’s been on my mind lately. And yeah, this has. But it’s…It’s private right now, so I don’t want to talk about it.”
“Okay,” Dr. Callahan said again. “Then you don’t have to. Just know that if you ever need to, you can.”

“I know. And I appreciate it.” Bucky smiled at her. “Thanks Doc.”

“You’re very welcome. Now tell me how things have been going since our last session. Have you had anymore disassociative episodes?”

As to whether or not Bucky presence was having any effect on Steve’s life, positive or negative, Bucky couldn’t be sure. Steve always seemed happy enough whenever he finally found wherever Bucky had hidden himself in the park. And their runs were fun, Bucky couldn’t deny that. It was the after that worried Bucky. Because whenever Bucky’s alarm went off, letting them both know their time was up for the day, Steve changed. It was as if a light went out in his eyes, a tear in his gut had reopened and was starting to bleed again. Atlas taking the weight of the world back onto shoulders, and no one telling him he didn’t have to, he had choices, and if he was so damned miserable, why didn’t he just stop. But stopping had never been Steve’s way. Bucky knew that, had always known that about him. Yet that didn’t mean it was the only choice, or even the best one. It just meant it was the only one Steve could see right now, the only option he’d been told he could have. Something in him had dimmed, flickering like a candle’s flame in the wind. Because the Steve he had known, the Steve Bucky remembered, would have never settled for just one choice. His entire life had been devoted to making sure everyone had the freedom to make their own choices. Bucky just couldn’t understand why Steve didn’t seem to think that applied to him as well.

It wasn’t his business, he supposed, at least not anymore. And he had long ago learned not to bang his head against that wall; it never ended well for anyone. Bucky needed to be able to make his own choices, had fought for that right, and right now he was choosing to focus on himself, and his own healing. It might have been selfish, but Bucky figured after everything he’d been through, he had a right to a little selfishness if it helped him in his recovery. He needed to take care of himself. What would come would come, and Bucky would do what he always did; assess and adapt, assess and adapt. And no matter what, Sarge would still be by his side. As long as Sarge was there, Bucky knew he’d be okay in the end.

Still, that didn’t mean that they couldn’t spend any time together. Their runs were a lot of fun. Sometimes he brought Steve a snack, and sometimes he didn’t. Bucky baked and cooked because he enjoyed it, and for the expressions on the faces of the people he loved when he gave them something he had made with his own two hands. But not because it was expected of him. He was done with that. So if he didn’t feel like cooking, Steve would have to learn to live with that. Everyone else had, even the MWs (albeit somewhat begrudgingly). It was a pleasure, not an obligation, and Bucky wanted to make sure it stayed that way.

Still, he could admit that he enjoyed the look on Steve’s face whenever he handed him a container of something he’d made. The latest offering had been leftover chicken-pasta-pesto salad. Bucky wanted
Steve to understand that he didn’t just bake, but cooked as well. From the way Steve devoured it, it appeared it didn’t make a difference.

“Just start bringing the containers back, alright? Clean,” Bucky told him.

“Sorry.” Steve’s voice had been sheepish, but he did carry with him a bag full of clean containers when he arrived for their next run. Bucky made sure he was the one to hold onto it the entire time.

They were standing at the top of one the smaller hills, catching their breath when Bucky’s alarm had gone off, Steve still grumbling about being forced to jog with a plastic bag around his wrist.

“I cook, you clean. Dem’s da rules.” Bucky was completely unrepentant.

“We could have tied them to Sarge’s halter,” Steve actually had the nerve to complain.

“And make him look stupid? Pass.”

“Jerk,” Steve snorted, but his voice was fond. Bucky didn’t answer him, watching as Sarge took one last lap over the hill, waiting for him to finish before Bucky whistled to call him back to his side.

“Anyway, I gotta go,” Bucky said once Sarge was sitting at his feet.

“Yeah, I know,” Steve sighed, the fondness from just a second ago slipping away. Bucky didn’t comment on it, he never did. Instead, he stared past the short hill and across Sixty-Ninth Street, at his house, with its peach stonework and small yard, that wrapped around the side, the weeping willow proud and center. He’d never ended one of their runs this close to his house before, had made a very deliberate decision to end them near the dog run, which was on the opposite side of the park. He had been cautious, wary at first, of letting Steve catch even that small of a glimpse of the new life he had managed to build. But now, just a few short weeks later, it no longer seemed like such a big deal. And it really was a pretty house; Bucky loved living there, even if it was a little big for just one person. His neighbors were great, and Sarge now had plenty of room to spread out and grow. It had been a good decision, and a wise investment.

He must have lost a few minutes, smiling at his home, because when he blinked, Steve was standing at his other side, following his gaze, obviously wondering what Bucky found so fascinating.
“That one,” Bucky said, lifting his hand to point at his house. “That’s me, right over there.”

“The one on the corner?” Steve’s voice was now filled with curiosity as he leaned forward to get a better view.

“Yep,” Bucky nodded. “That one’s mine.”

“It looks nice,” Steve smiled, but there was something…*something* in his voice that had Bucky glancing at him out of the corner of his eye. But it was there and gone, as if Steve simply willed it away, as if Bucky didn’t know that Steve was and always had been a liar. “You even got a yard.”

Just once, just this once, Bucky decided to allow the deflection.

“I like sitting out there under that tree when the weather’s nice, and just read.”

“And it was in good shape, when you bought it?”

“It needed a bit of fixing up at first, couple of coats of paint, some new appliances. But I had a lot of help, and it came together quicker than I thought. I still haven’t figured out what I’m going to do with a couple of the rooms, but I’m working on it. I got time now.”

“Yeah, you do,” Steve nodded. “It looks really nice Bucky. I’m so happy for you.”

“Thanks,” Bucky said, and then leaned over to give Steve’s shoulder a slight nudge. “Anyway, I gotta go.”

“’Kay.”

“See you on Wednesday?”

“You will.”
“Don’t do anything stupid till then.”

“I’ll try my best.”


Once Bucky cut down the hill and made it to his front door with Sarge, he turned around to see Steve, still standing there, watching him. Bucky waved and Steve waved back, and then he was gone.

***

“What time is it?” Steve asked the following Friday, after they had completed their seventh run around the park, and then spent a good thirty minutes tossing a frisbee back and forth for Sarge to chase.

“Coming up nine, I think. Why?” Bucky asked from where he had knelt down to pick the leaves from Sarge’s coat. “I swear ta god Sarge, I don’t know how the hell you get all these leaves and sticks in your fur. Do you roll around in them when I’m not looking?”

“Your alarm didn’t go off today. Don’t you have to go, well, wherever you always have to go?”

“Nah, I don’t have any classes today,” Bucky shook his head. It was true. One of Jake’s cousins was getting married out in California, and as Andy and his wife were considered part of their family, they had decided to close Com-Paws-Sionate Training for a week so they could travel to the West Coast and celebrate with the rest of the family. It gave Bucky some extra free time, and he was looking forward to it. His life wasn’t overwhelming, but it was certainly much busier than it had been when he was on probation. Dr. Callahan was fully supportive of all the choices Bucky had so far made, as long as he didn’t feel like it was too much for him. He had promised if it did start to feel that way, he would talk to her so they could work on readjusting his schedule to more manageable levels. But Bucky had always enjoyed keeping busy, and as of yet, even with his darker days, things seemed to be working well for him.

“Classes?” Steve asked, which caused Bucky to realize Steve really did not have any idea how Bucky spent his days.
“Nine to twelve Mondays through Fridays I head out to Queens for Sarge’s training classes so he can get certified. I get an hour break for lunch, and then I work with Andy on my own certification.”

“Your own certification?”

“I’m working on becoming a dog trainer. Andy, who was the guy who ran the puppy training classes I took Sarge to, said he’d thought it’d be a good fit. And it is. I love it,” Bucky explained.

“You’re working on becoming a dog trainer?”

“Yeah,” Bucky nodded. “Keeps me busy, and I love working with all the dogs. Seems I’ve got a bit of a way with them. Or at least that’s what everyone keeps telling me.”

“I’m not surprised, or at least not really, the way with are with Sarge,” Steve smiled. “And you always did love animals. Always said you wanted a cat or a dog. We just couldn’t keep them back then…” Steve paused, as if he just realized he had brought up their past, and was feeling guilty about it.

“You can talk about it, you know,” Bucky assured him. “It’s okay. I don’t mind.”

“Do you – do you remember all of it? The doctors at SHIELD didn’t think you would,” Steve’s voice was very, very soft, and very, very careful as he spoke.

“The doctors at SHIELD knew jack shit,” Bucky snapped, but then shook his head. It wasn’t Steve’s fault, the way he had been treated. And he couldn’t help but wonder exactly how much Steve really knew. A lot, but probably not all of it. “And I do remember a lot of it, not all, but a lot. And my therapist thinks that I probably will, eventually, when I’m ready to.”

“Even…even…” Steve’s voice was shaking, as if he couldn’t even bear the thought of it, never mind saying the actual words.

“Yeah Steve,” Bucky turned to face him, making sure their gazes met. “Even my time with HYDRA.” A few months ago, maybe even a few weeks ago, Bucky would never have been to say that aloud to anyone. But he had come a long way, even if his journey was just beginning, and he
was stronger, so much stronger, than he’d been at the beginning of the summer.

“Jesus fucking Christ, of all the things you’ve had to go through, you gotta deal with that too,” Steve hissed.

“We call them the monsters in my closet,” Bucky said with a small smile. “And Dr. Callahan says I have to deal with them, pull them out and slay them. That if I don’t, they’re always gonna be there, and I’ll never be free. It ain’t easy, don’t get me wrong, and I still have some shitty days, really shitty days, but she’s a great therapist, and has been helping me a lot. And she’s right. Every time we slay one, it gets a little bit better.”

“Then I’m so happy for you,” Steve whispered.

“Your buddy Sam gave me her name. If you want to thank someone, you need to thank him.”

“I will,” Steve nodded. But he still looked fractured, distraught, nearly as bad as Bucky knew he sometimes did when he had spent an hour on Dr. Callahan’s couch slaying the latest monster that had come roaring out of his closet. And no matter who they were to each other, who they had been and who they were becoming, Bucky just couldn’t leave him like that.

“Anyway, Jake and Andy had a wedding they needed to go to, so they canceled all their classes for the week. That’s why there was no alarm today.”

“Ah,” Steve murmured, but he still didn’t look any better. Bucky needed something to distract him. And maybe, just maybe…it was time to take another step forward, and have faith that things would turn out all right.

“Do you wanna see the house?” he asked.

“Do I wanna what?” Bucky’s words had definitely caught his attention.

“The house?” Bucky tilted his head in the right direction. “Do you wanna come see the house? You’d be more than welcome, unless you have someplace else you need to be?” Bucky had to offer him the out, giving Steve the chance to refuse gracefully in case Bucky had been misreading everything that had happened between them so far.
“I’d love to see the house,” Steve smiled, before he shrugged and his expression turned sheepish. “I’ve been dying of curiosity ever since you pointed it out to me actually.”

“Well c’mon then,” Bucky said with another tilt of his head. “It’s just across the street. I’ll fix us some breakfast once we get there. Sarge, home.”

“Muffins?” the bastard had the nerve to ask as he followed Bucky and his dog down the hill and toward Sixty-Ninth Street.

“Don’t push your luck.”

***

“Go on,” Bucky held the door open and stood aside so Steve could walk past him into his entryway. Once he had, followed by Sarge, Bucky closed and locked the door behind him. “Take your shoes off. Sarge, wait.”

“You want me to take my shoes off?” Steve asked, while Bucky first entered the code into the security system he’d installed, and then hung his keys on the rack nailed to the wall by the door. It had been a gift from Teresa, to celebrate Bucky finally closing on his house; a small, wooden plaque, covered with brightly painted calavera skulls, and the words HOGAR DULCE HOGAR. Bucky loved it.

“Yeah, I want you to take your shoes off,” Bucky said as he toed his own sneakers off. “I spent a shitload of money getting the floors re-varnished. I don’t need them getting messed up by those roach-stompers you wear on your feet.” Never mind that the floors already had a few scratches due to Sarge’s claws. That was different; that was Sarge, and this was his home as much as Bucky’s, probably even more so.

“Okay.” Steve sounded amused. But whatever; Bucky had no idea who did all the cleaning at the Tower, but he doubted it was Steve, so he could deal with Bucky’s rule if he wanted any breakfast. Steve’s eyes had fallen on the key-rack, giving it a close scrutiny while Bucky slid his feet into a pair of velvet slippers (they were red with a black beaded butterfly on the surface. Bucky had found them one day in Chinatown, and they were another item he adored), and then reached for the rag he kept on the small table he had placed beneath the key-rack. “Sarge, sit. Good boy. Paw.” Steve watched as Bucky knelt so he could clean off all the dirt, mud and detritus that had gathered in Sarge’s paws, a smile on his face, until Bucky was finished, and tossed the rag back onto the table, saying, “Good boy. Done. Bed.” Sarge barked happily, before he rose to his feet, and trotted off to one of the many
dog beds Bucky had filled the house with, his tags jangling as he went.

“So,” Bucky began as he straightened. “You want the tour?”

“Yeah,” Steve nodded.

“Right, follow me.” Bucky led Steve through the small entryway and into his living room, letting Steve look his fill. While there were still some blank spaces on the walls, he was mostly done with the first floor, having decorated it with all the things he had found over the past couple months. It was a large space, with an open plan. He had a sizeable dining and living room, separated from the kitchen by an island he had recently purchased a few stools for. The walls had been painted a soft tan, to match the golden varnish he had chosen for the hardwood floors, the borders highlight with a deep maroon. There was a matching maroon throw rug, underneath the low apothecary chest he’d decided on for a coffee table. He had a huge, coffee-colored, L-shaped sectional couch he had covered with pillows and an afghan, (where he often settled with Sarge, his dog laying on one end, while Bucky either read or napped with his head on Sarge’s stomach), facing a sleek and modern cherry-wood entertainment center, where Bucky had placed his brand-new seventy inch flat-screen television, fully integrated with an, even Bucky had to admit, amazing sound system. He had just found his dining room table, during one of his many ventures to NYC’s various flea-markets, made of black-stained solid oak, with flowers and vines painted in bright pastels lining the borders. It cost him a pretty penny, but Bucky loved it, and was now in the process of trying to find chairs to match. On one of the walls perpendicular to the entertainment center was a large bookshelf, also made of solid oak, already mostly filled, that he had bolted to the wall. (He was not going go through that again.) On the other wall, hung a huge tapestry he found at a Renaissance Faire not too far from the city he had gone to, after Betty and Paige told him all about it. It was a deep, blood red, with a flock of ravens flowing across it in a diagonal wave that was also one of Bucky’s favorite items. There were the simple lamps he’d discovered at a flea-market, that now weren’t so simple, since he’d draped the shades in the sheer scarves Yuna had given him as her present in celebration of Bucky finally having a home.

And then there were the pictures; one of him and the MWs sitting at Nancy’s, that their waitress had taken for them. One of him with his arm draped over Tara’s shoulder, smiling at the camera, making the victory sign with their right hands, while in their left they each held a frappuccino from Starbucks. One of Teresa he had snapped on one of her first visits, sitting on the couch, smiling warmly at him. One of Timmy, with Fruit and Loop cradled against his chest, his face alight with laughter. And one, one of him kneeling on the floor next to Sarge, his arms around his dog, who had been caught mid-pant, his tongue hanging out. (That one was his favorite.)

Then there was the sketch Paige had given him, also of Sarge. It was an ink drawing, Sarge’s outline, his mask, and his left foreleg done in bold, black lines. But the interior she had filled with hundreds and hundreds of smaller drawings; stars, wings, clouds, and hearts, lots and lots of hearts. The universe of Sarge, all the things he was to Bucky, she somehow managed to capture on a piece of sketch paper. If Bucky could get a tattoo, that would have been the one he chose, across his back, so he could forever carry that mark wherever he went, instead of the metal arm he now had instead.
Steve took it all in, looking around him with a quiet wonderment, absorbing every single detail, paying particular attention to all the photos and artwork Bucky used to remind himself that this, this was who he was now. It was still a work in progress, just like he was, but he was proud of it, so fucking proud of it.

“It’s beautiful, Buck,” Steve said softly, once he finally finished his perusal.

“Thanks,” Bucky shrugged. “I’ve put a lot of work into it, and there’re still some things I need to do, but it’s home, you know.”

“It suits you,” Steve smiled sadly. (And why, why are you sad Steve?)

“Thanks, I think so.” And then Bucky looked down. “Oh, there you are Larry. Done for the day yet?”

“Larry?” Steve asked, glancing at the Roomba that had just emerged from beneath the couch and was gently tapping against Bucky’s slippered foot.

“Yeah, Larry. He’s one of the three.”

“One of the three?”

“Yeah, three Roombas. Don’t you know what a Roomba is?”

“I know what a Roomba is.”

“Just wanted to make sure.”

“Should I even ask?”

“Ask what?”
“What the other two are called?”

“Curly and Moe.”

“Curly and Moe?”

“Yeah, Curly takes care of the second floor, and Moe hangs out in the basement.”

“Bucky,” Steve sputtered, his eyes wide. “Are you actually telling me that you have not one, but three Roombas, and you named them after the Three Stooges?”

“Steve,” Bucky answered him flatly. “Have you seen how much fur my dog has? Unless you wanna come here yourself and vacuum all the time, I’m gonna use the fucking Roombas.” The first one, Larry, had been his housewarming present from Andy and Jake, given to him with a ‘Trust us, it’s going to make your life so much easier.’ It had, and less than a week later Bucky ordered two more online.

“So Larry, Curly and Moe?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh. My. God.” And then Steve hunched forward and started laughing so hard Sarge came trotting over from his dog bed to investigate what was going on.

“Shuddup,” Bucky growled at him. “Now c’mon. Lemme show you the rest of the place.”

Bucky led Steve upstairs with a pointed ‘That’s Curly. Be respectful Steve,’ leading him to the first room on the second floor, painted a warm, comforting yellow.

“Haven’t figured out what to do with this one yet,” he said, as he allowed Steve to look inside. He followed that by showing Steve the second room, the one Bucky had converted to his walk-in closet. Steve said nothing as he peered inside, taking in all the neatly lined clothing racks filled with all
Bucky’s newest clothes. He didn’t have to; his arched eyebrow said enough.

“Shuddup,” Bucky said again. “It’s my house, I can do whatever I want with it.”

“Didn’t say a thing.”

“Didn’t have to,” Bucky said as he closed the door behind them. “And that’s my bedroom down there.” Bucky waved at the door at the end of the hall. But he didn’t invite him in, or move any closer. Some things were still too private to be shared. Steve nodded, and didn’t say anything else. Then it was back down to the kitchen, where Bucky indicated Steve should sit at the table, (made of white wood, with a solid pale blue painted top, and four matching chairs), while he looked around and tried to decide what to make for breakfast.

Bucky loved his kitchen; it was probably his favorite room in the entire house. It was bright and airy, and big enough for him to experiment as much as he wanted. It had all the latest appliances; there was the steel-doored refrigerator, and the double ovens. He had installed a microwave over the sink, as well as a rack he could raise and lower, from which hung all his pots and pans. There was a dishwasher under the counter next to the sink, and plenty of cabinet space for all his plates, as well as his spices. There were several blocks of various knives, that he made sure to sharpen at least once a week, on the island, whose counter was his main cooking space. (Bucky didn’t feel the need to point out that there were at least three more knives hidden in every room that he also sharpened regularly, never mind the sixteen hand guns, and three rifles also stashed throughout the house. And the four fake IDs and passports. He may have escaped his days as the Soldier, but he was going to make damned sure he stayed free, by any means necessary.) He had even added a small shelf, where he stored the collection of cookbooks he started to gather, so they would always be in easy reach when he needed some inspiration, or just wanted to try something new. Sarge’s food and water bowls were tucked neatly in the corner, on top of a mat with paw prints lining the edges, and he’d positioned the table so he could look out through the back door and to his porch, feeling the sun on his face, while he drank coffee, and listened to music as he planned his day. It was his pride and joy, and after having so little for so much of his life, Bucky made sure to keep it spotlessly clean, just like the rest of his house.

Because it was his, and a man needed to take care of his home.

He wondered if Steve could see that; see all the care and effort he had put into the details, the love his once frozen and forgotten heart was now free to express. He thought so, if the way Steve continued to look around was any indication. Instead he asked, “Coffee?”

“The real stuff?” Steve had the nerve to snark.
“Yes, the real stuff, you Neanderthal,” Bucky snarked right back. “Now be nice, or I won’t share any of the waffles I was planning on making.”

“Waffles?” That perked Steve right up.

“With caramelized apples and whipped cream on top.” Bucky already had all the necessary ingredients on hand, and he’d been going through a bit of a waffle phase lately, since he’d purchased a waffle iron two weeks ago. Steve’s responding groan was the only answer Bucky needed. So Bucky turned on his coffee maker, (another wonderful advancement of the twenty-first century), dug around his small pantry for the ingredients he’d need, and went to work.

It was surprisingly easy, shockingly so, to be in his kitchen, cooking breakfast for Steve, chatting about this and that. They didn’t discuss anything too serious, or their pasts; mostly Steve asked him about the house, and what he still had left to do while he flicked through the textbooks on animal psychology Bucky had left on the kitchen table. But it was still easy.

And it felt familiar, standing in a kitchen, cooking something for the two of them to eat. (In spite of what Steve may have said, Bucky had always been the one who did most of the cooking when they’d lived together before.) Steve’s voice didn’t grow softer while Bucky mixed the waffle batter together, but something in it definitely loosened, lightened, as if the sunlight from outside was warming something deep within, just like it always warmed Bucky when he sat at that very table. So easy. So familiar. Just the two of them, like it had always been just the two of them, food and conversation one of the simplest things they had been able to share. And...and... Bucky realized he had missed it. Missed this. Just him and his Stevie, together like they had always been.

He was going to hate himself later for it. Because those days were long gone. And those two young men no longer existed. A war, a serum, a new body, and then a beautiful brunette, even more battles, a fall from a train, and finally HYDRA had stolen all of that from Bucky, and he was never going to get it back. So he was going to hate himself for wanting something that was no longer his, had maybe never been his, but had been one of his few treasures none-the-less.

But that was for later. And he would survive. He had before and he would again.

For now, he was going to make sure to cook the best damned waffles with caramelized apples and whipped-cream Steve had ever tasted. If the way Steve moaned with every bite, Bucky could definitely classify it as mission achieved.
Steve spent the rest of the morning, and most of the afternoon with Bucky in Bay Ridge. Once breakfast was done, Bucky showed him the rest of the house, pointing out the things he still needed to either fix or replace, and introduced him to Marlene.

“Dietrich?” Steve asked, eyeing Bucky’s cherry-red SUV.

“What? Dietrich was one of the most beautiful women out there, just like my truck. So why not?”

“Whatever you say, Buck.”

“Shuddup.”

Until finally, after a lunch of thick, cold roast beef sandwiches, (leftovers from the dinner Bucky had made for himself the night before), and another walk through the park with Sarge, it was time for Steve to go.

“Thanks for today Buck,” Steve said, right before they parted ways. “I had a really good time.”

“Don’t mention it,” Bucky smiled at him.

“And your house is beautiful.”

“Thanks.”

“See you on Monday?” Steve asked, once he finished giving Sarge his goodbye scratches.

“I’ll be here.”
Steve nodded at him one last time, and then straightened, shoving his hands into his pockets. Bucky watched as the Steve from that day slowly disappeared, replaced by the one Steve showed the rest of the world, with tightened shoulders and a lifted chin, as he started his walk toward Fourth Avenue and the train that would take him home.

This time it was Bucky who stood sentry, watching from the top of the hill, until Steve disappeared from sight.

And now, now, he could start hating himself.

Chapter End Notes

Sarge wants you to know...Steve's ass tastes like chicken.

(Sam is still laying on the floor of the Tower, laughing so hard he can't get up.)

EDITED TO ADD: For some reason, when I first posted this, a paragraph was missing (right before Bucky brings Steve up in his session with Dr. Callahan.) Sorry about that. The chapter has been updated with the missing paragraph.
Contrary to his words, Bucky didn’t go the park to meet Steve on Monday morning. When he woke up to get ready for their run, he looked out the window, saw the weather, and knew there would be no jogging that day. A storm had come through, with slate colored clouds, howling winds and pouring rain, that beat and thrashed against his windows. No way in hell was anybody going to be running in that, so he let Sarge out into the yard to do his business as quickly as possible (he would clean the mess up later, once the rain stopped), wiped him down, made himself some breakfast, and then settled on his couch with Sarge and a good book, to catch up on some reading.

He was in the middle of his third cup of tea and Tiffany Aching’s latest adventures, when there was a loud and relentless pounding on his door, louder than even the thunder, whose suddenness cut through the calm of Bucky’s morning.

Bucky rose from the couch, following Sarge as he dashed toward the entryway, wondering who the hell would be outside in the middle of all this. He checked the video on his security panel to see Steve standing out there, his hand lifted to start knocking again.

“What the hell Steve?” Bucky said as he opened the door. “What are you doing here?”

“You weren’t there.” Steve was soaked to the bone, his hair plastered to his face, his shoulders shaking, and his eyes wide and desperate, desperate, desperate. Bucky knew right then that something was very, very wrong.

“What?” he asked, staring not at the blue of Steve’s eyes, but of his lips.

“You weren’t there,” Steve said again. “You said you’d be there, and I was waiting for you, but you never came.”

“It’s raining cats and dogs, I wasn’t going to go out running in weather like this,” Bucky shook his head. “I thought you’d do the same.”

“It’s Monday. We always go running together on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. So I waited, but you weren’t there.”
Okay, okay, assess and adapt. Assess and adapt. Time to change his protocols.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Steve,” Bucky said, pulling Steve inside, where he immediately started to drip on the floor. “Stay here and take your shoes off. I’m gonna go get you a towel. Be right back. Sarge, stay. Protect.” Bucky dashed off, returning less than twenty seconds later with a large towel from his bathroom. Steve had just kicked off his first sneaker, and was blindly working on toeing off the second, when Bucky draped the towel over his head and vigorously started rubbing. “Good boy Sarge, release. Fuck Steve, you’re soaked to the bone. How long were you out there?”

“Dunno,” Steve eyes were frantic and his teeth chattering. “An hour maybe. And then I started worrying something had happened to you again. That you weren’t going to come back. I didn’t know what else to do, so I came here.”

Jesus fucking Christ, Bucky thought again, shaking his head. This was bad. Even worse than he’d thought. Steve was having a panic attack, something Bucky had never seen before, and Bucky had seen him at his worst. Thankfully, familiar with them himself, he knew how to handle it.

“Come on Steve, I want to look at me and take a nice deep breath. Come on, nice and slow, that’s it…That’s it. And another…Now hold it in for three, good, good, just like that, and slowly exhale…And again. I’m right here with you, and you’re safe. You’re in my house in Brooklyn….Another deep breath, that’s it, that’s good, and hold it…Now slowly let it out…And I’m okay now Steve. I’m back home, where I belong, and nothing like that is ever going to happen to me again. Look at me Steve. Look. At. Me.”

Maybe it was the tone in his voice. Or maybe it was the way Bucky had stopped rubbing the towel over Steve’s shoulders so he could kneel in front of him, holding Steve’s hands in his own, but finally Steve released one massive shiver, before his eyes cleared, and he was able to focus on Bucky.

“Back with me Stevie?” Steve nodded. “Good. And remember, you’re here with me right now and I’m okay. I’m safe now. You made sure of that. I’m never disappearing on you again, alright? And I’m sorry I didn’t show up today. I just didn’t think you’d expect me to, given the storm.”

“It’s all right,” Steve whispered. “I’m sorry I bothered you. I shoulda figured that out sooner.”

“You ain’t no bother Steve,” Bucky assured him. “Now c’mon. Let’s get you to the bathroom and dried off. I got some clothes that should fit you.”
Bucky led Steve to his bathroom, where he had him sit on the toilet so Bucky could work on getting him dry.

“Do you want to jump in the shower? The pressure’s great, and it’ll help warm you up.”

“I’m fine,” Steve shook his head. “Maybe just some dry clothes.”

*No, you’re not, but we’ll talk about that later.*

“Kay, give me three minutes. I’ll be right back with something you can wear.”

In less than two, Bucky returned carrying the baggiest sweatshirt and the softest pair of flannel pajama bottoms he owned. They were the same height these days, but Steve’s shoulders were a bit broader than his. And while Bucky had a slim waist he liked to show off with tight fitting jeans and low-slung belts, Steve’s was even narrower. (There was a reason Steve had an online meme calling him Captain Dorito.) But Bucky forgot all about that as he helped Steve change into his clothes, even slipping a pair of his fuzziest socks on Steve’s feet, before he stood and used one of his hair-dryers on Steve’s hair. Once Bucky was convinced he was as dry and as warm as possible, he helped Steve stand then led him to his couch.

“You plant your ass on that couch and don’t move,” Bucky said, but not unkindly, as he covered Steve’s shoulders with his afghan. “I’m gonna go get you something hot to drink. Sarge, sit with Steve. Help keep him warm.”

Bucky left the two of them in his living room so he could make Steve some hot chocolate. It took him a little longer than he may have liked, but Bucky, proud cook that he was, didn’t keep any of the powdered stuff. So he had to actually melt the chocolate before combining it with milk, careful with the mug as he carried it back to Steve.

“Here, drink this. It’ll help.” Steve accepted the mug from him, and took first one, then a second, and finally a third sip.

“It’s good,” he said after his fourth sip.
“Yeah, I know,” Bucky nodded. “That’s the good stuff. I use real chocolate to make it. Is it helping?”

“Yeah, it is. Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

They were quiet for a few minutes, Steve slowly making his way through the hot chocolate, until his eyes finally lifted and he turned them to Bucky.

“You called me Stevie,” was what he said next.

“What?”

“You called me Stevie,” Steve repeated, with a small, ever-so-small smile. “You haven’t call me that in years, decades maybe. Not since before the war anyways.”

“I did,” Bucky nodded, not remembering that he had, and wondering why Steve was bringing this up now of all times.

“It was nice,” Steve whispered. “I’ve missed it.”

*Oh Jesus.*

“You’ve always been my Stevie. You always will be. Now, are you hungry? Do you want some breakfast?” Bucky deflected. Because there were reasons why Bucky had stopped calling him Stevie. And he didn’t want to talk about them. Not now. Maybe not ever.

“I could eat,” Steve nodded, more and more of him coming back as he sat on Bucky’s couch.

“Right, I’m just going to the kitchen. I’ll be right over there, but call me if you need anything, okay?”
“‘Kay.’

After a few moments of consideration, Bucky decided to make oatmeal. It would be warm, rich and filling, especially the way Bucky now made it, with cream, honey and bananas. Steve greedily devoured three bowls of it, compared to Bucky’s one, before his eyes started to droop and his shoulders slumped. Bucky wasn’t surprised; he knew how draining a panic attack could be, even for a super-soldier.

“I should get going, let you get on with your day,” Steve actually tried to excuse himself.

“Don’t be an idiot,” Bucky growled at him. “You put your feet up, and lay down on that couch. You’re about to crash hard and I’m not letting you out of my sight. Don’t worry about it. It’s a good couch, and I don’t mind you taking nap.”

“I’m okay Bucky, you don’t need to fuss.”

“Yeah well, I’m gonna. Now just close your eyes. It’ll be alright. You’ll see.”

Steve didn’t even have the energy to argue, and in less than a minute he was sprawled out on Bucky’s couch, fast asleep.

“Jesus Christ, Steve,” Bucky whispered as he covered him with the afghan, making sure to tuck him in. “What the hell is going on with you?”

***

Steve slept for a solid ten hours.

While he did, Bucky kept himself busy. He did some housework, a couple loads of laundry, fixed himself lunch, let Sarge out into the backyard again, texted the MWs to let them know he wouldn’t be making it to tonight’s meeting, and started dinner cooking, before he eventually settled on the opposite end of the couch to catch up on some studying, Sarge taking up his usual position at Bucky’s side, with his head upon his lap. And never once, during all that time, did Steve stir.
Until sometime near six, Steve groaned and his eyes fluttered open. He took a quick look around at the unfamiliar surroundings, and in a flash, was sitting bolt upright, caution and wariness in every single line of his body.

“Hey,” Bucky said to him softly, not moving, giving him a chance to remember where he was before he dared to do anything else.

(And this was bad, this was so fucking bad, if this was how Steve reacted to waking up in someplace as safe and welcoming as Bucky’s home.)

Steve blinked at him once, twice, and then again, the franticness of a rabbit realizing the fox had discovered its den still in his eyes, before he seemed to finally come back to himself, and took another, slower look around.

“It’s okay,” Bucky assured him. “You’re in my house. You’ve been here all day, taking a nap on my couch. Sarge, go say hello to Steve.” At his words, Sarge jumped down from his perch, and walked over to Steve, his tags jangling as he went, to rest his head upon Steve’s lap and stare up at him with his soulful brown eyes.

“Oh, hey Sarge.” Steve automatically reached out to scratch at Sarge’s ear, more and more of him coming back with each curling of his fingers. It was inevitable; nothing in the world was more comforting, more soothing, could call someone back home from the forests of their mind, than Bucky’s dog. “Jeez. Sorry ‘bout that. How long was I out?” His voice was raspy, sounding like it used to, when Steve had just recovered from an asthma attack. Bucky hadn’t heard it sound like that in years, had never thought he would ever hear it sound like that again.

“You slept the day.” Bucky studied him as he spoke, with all the intent he used to when they were kids, with all the indifference he had been known for as the Soldier, looking for the multitude of signs and miniscule cues that would give him insight into his target. Steve certainly looked better than he had when he’d first shown up, drenched and shivering at Bucky’s door. Every breath was steadier, and his gaze more focused the longer he sat on the couch petting Sarge. But there were capillaries in his eyes Bucky could see, and the dryness of his throat, audible perhaps to only Bucky’s ears, as Steve sat there swallowing. Better than he’d been, but far from well. And that part of him, that part of him Bucky hated to admit was still there, would always be there, but Dr. Callahan told him he would have to accept as a part of himself if he ever hoped to tame and come to some sort of peace with it, told him that right now, Steve would be a very easy target. But, and this was the balance that came with that acceptance, Bucky could choose to not take the killing blow. Could just sit and watch, keeping his expression as calm as possible.

“Fuck,” Steve hissed. “Sorry ‘bout that.”
“Don’t be,” Bucky shook his head. “You look like you needed it.”

“Still,” now it was Steve’s turn to shake his head. “I shouldn’t’ve just shown up like that.”

“No worries. I don’t mind.” Bucky flicked his eyes toward Sarge. “And as you can see, Sarge sure as hell doesn’t.”

“He’s such a great dog,” Steve breathed out, now running both his hands over Sarge’s ears, while Sarge panted up at him.

“He is,” Bucky agreed, still watching, still studying. “Anyway, how’re you feeling? You okay now?” As if Bucky didn’t already know the answer to that question, but he wanted to see how Steve would react.

“Yeah Bucky, I’m fine now,” Steve said. (Liar. Liar. Liar.)

“Uh-huh.” Bucky was unimpressed with Steve’s latest attempt to bullshit him. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

Liar.

Liar.

Liar.

“You were having a panic attack, Steve. That’s not nothing.”

“It was not a panic attack, Bucky. I had a bit of a rough night last night, nothing major, and then the trains were a mess this morning, and yeah, I probably over-reacted a bit, but that was just me being
me. You know how I get.”

Uh-huh.

But just like Bucky had been experimented on, modified, trained, so had Steve. And Bucky could see all of that kicking in, Steve grabbing onto it, and using it to reconstruct his own shields, stronger than any that had ever been made of vibranium. Bucky knew from years, decades, of following this man that there was no way to push through once Steve raised them. But Bucky also knew from years, decades, of experience with this man how to work around them.

“In fact, I should probably get going. Get out of your hair.”

“Right,” he said easily enough, as if he were letting the subject drop, tilting his head towards Steve’s right instead. “Gimme your phone. It’s over on the table, right by you.”

“Why?” Steve was already reaching for it, but he hesitated before handing it over.

“Give me your phone,” Bucky repeated. “And unlock it before you do.”

“Why?” Steve repeated, but he tossed the phone to Bucky, who caught it in his right hand.

“Cos it’s the twenty-first fucking century, Steve,” Bucky answered, as he stared down at the SHIELD logo on Steve’s home screen. Bucky had a picture of Sarge as a puppy he used as his wallpaper. Steve didn’t even know how to change the one on his own phone to something different, something more him. Or he hadn’t bothered to. Or, even worse, that’s all he thought there was to him at the moment. As Bucky opened the text app to enter his own number, he also couldn’t help but wonder how many bugs and tracking devices had been installed without Steve’s knowledge. At least three, he would wager, but likely more. It was probably a risk entering his own details into Steve’s phone, but he had sideloaded enough firewalls and blockers into his own to mitigate the risk. And this, this was more important than that.

“What are you doing?” Steve asked, watching as Bucky’s thumbs quickly moved over the screen.

“I’m texting myself,” Bucky explained blandly.
“Why?”

“Cos just like Starbuck’s, it’s another great thing about this day and age,” Bucky said, just as his own phone dinged. “And that way, in case one of us can’t make it, we can text and let each other know, instead of standing out in the rain like a bunch of punks who really should be better at this modern living thing by now.” Bucky rolled his eyes at Steve, making it clear exactly which punk he was referring to. And that was the trick when dealing with Steve when he got like this; poke and distract, shift the tiles of the mosaic around so he was forced to look at something else, point out a smaller detail so Bucky could work on patching up the cracks in the bigger picture. “Sarge.” At the sound of his name, Sarge turned, and Bucky snapped a photo of his face, assigning it to his name in Steve’s contacts, (not very many, Bucky was unsurprised to see), before tossing the phone back to Steve.

“Big Dawg’s Daddy?” Steve asked, glancing down at still lit up screen.

“It’s the truth, ain’t it?” Bucky smiled at him for the first time. Then he shrugged, as if they had just been talking about what a pain-in-the-ass one of the sisters at Mary Catharine’s had been, and easily rose to his feet.

“Whatever you say, BDD.” And there it was, just a little bit of snark, the old humor, in Steve’s voice.

“Huh. BDD is it?” Bucky shrugged. “I’ll take it.”

“Anyway,” Steve was tossing his cell from hand to hand. “I’ve been here long enough. I should probably get out of your hair.”

“Up to you,” Bucky shrugged with an easy nonchalance. “But it’s still raining out, and I was just about to eat dinner. You could stay for that if you want.”

“Dinner?” Steve asked. And oh look, that had definitely caught Steve’s attention. Super-soldiers and their appetites; if you ever wanted to catch one, all you had to do was leave a little bit of food in a snare, and they’d be yours for the taking. Plus, Bucky knew Steve knew by now he was a damned good cook. “What are you making?”

“Roasted chicken with potatoes, and some green beans. I got some fresh bread and a salad too.” Bucky knew just what kind of lure to place in the trap if he wanted to catch a wild Steve. Roasted chicken and potatoes were a favorite of Steve’s, one Sarah used to make only during special occasions when she’d been able to scrounge together enough money.
“Really?”

“Yep. I use the drippings to baste the potatoes. I was just about to pull it outta the oven. I got plenty, if you wanted to stay,” Bucky offered as he brushed by Steve to make his way to his kitchen.

“Well, uh…I did miss lunch. And if…If you don’t mind sharing?”

Gotcha.

“Not at all Steve,” Bucky shrugged, as if this hadn’t been his plan all along. “Now go wash up while I get everything set up. There’s a spare toothbrush in the medicine chest, and the towels are under the sink. Once you’re done, we’ll watch a movie while we eat.”

***

When Steve returned from the bathroom, and was ensconced on Bucky’s couch with what even Bucky had to admit was a plate full of some damned fine roasted chicken and potatoes, Bucky scrolled through his movie selections, looking for one film in particular, knowing it would be the perfect choice to reel Steve in.

“What’s this?” Steve asked, around a mouthful of potato as the opening sequence began.

“It’s called Spirited Away,” Bucky answered, remembering to turn the subtitles on at the last second, as Steve probably couldn’t understand Japanese like he now could.

“Is this one of those Japanese cartoons?”

“It’s called anime, Steve,” Bucky said, wondering how the hell Steve was spending his free time if he didn’t even know that. Outside of teasing each other about Starbucks, they hadn’t spent any time talking about the new films, music, movies or books they enjoyed, and Bucky couldn’t help but worry if that was because Steve didn’t have any. Hadn’t anyone spent time introducing him to all the cultural wonders and advancements in this day and age? Bucky was beginning to think if they had,
all the choices were pre-approved and carefully monitored. He also couldn’t help but think not only was that on purpose, but find it strange Steve hadn’t sought things out on his own. He’d always been curious, as curious as Bucky, and eager to learn more. Why, why, why did it seem that this new Steve had decided to lock himself away? Discovering new things had been one of Bucky’s greatest joys in his new freedom, feeling all the curiosity he used to possess slowly unfurl itself and reengage. Then again, Bucky’s life was very different from Steve’s now. That didn’t mean Bucky wasn’t patient enough to spend some time luring the rabbit out of its den.

“Right.” Bucky could hear the doubt in Steve’s voice.

“Just give it a chance,” Bucky nodded at the screen. “You’ll see.”

It worked, just like Bucky thought it would. The beautiful designs, amazing illustrations, bright colors and poignant story-telling all captivated Steve, so that after his third serving of chicken, he was leaning forward in his seat, staring at the screen, enraptured. Until finally the credits rolled, and Steve leaned back into the couch with a contented expression on his face.

“That was amazing, Buck,” he breathed out. And he was smiling, actually smiling.

“I know,” Bucky nodded.

“I mean, seriously. I felt so bad for poor Chihiro at first, but she was so strong and brave. And that bit when Haku turns into the dragon,” and Steve was off, going over and analyzing every detail of the story, his excitement never fading, Bucky offering his own opinions whenever Steve gave him a chance. Until about ten minutes later, when he paused to take a breath, and glanced down at his phone, his face dropping.

“What?” Bucky asked.

“It’s getting kinda late,” Steve said, a sigh so subtle in his voice even a spider wouldn’t have felt the shiver of it on its web. “I should probably get going.”

“Don’t feel like you have to on my account,” Bucky shrugged, again with that easy nonchalance. “I mean, it is still raining outside. I was just gonna let Sarge out for one last bathroom break before I put the next movie in. But I don’t wanna keep you if you have someplace else you need to be.”
“There are more?”

“Buddy, there are a ton of Studio Ghibli movies. They’re like the MGM of anime. I’ve been making my way through them, and I haven’t seen one I haven’t liked yet.” It was true. Paige had introduced him to them during a casual conversation on Bucky’s back porch while Betty took another turn at Greg, after yet another phone call with her mother.

“Which one are you going to watch?”

“I was thinking Howl’s Moving Castle next,” Bucky said as he rose to his feet. “C’mon Sarge.”

“Is it good?” Steve asked.

“Dunno. Haven’t seen it yet.”

“What’s it about?”

“Tell you what,” Bucky glanced at him over his shoulder. “If you’re so curious, why don’t you clean up in here while I let Sarge out. Dishwasher’s next to the sink. Once the both of you are done, I’ll grab us some dessert, and then put on the next movie.”

“Dessert?”

“Peanut butter brownies.”

“Well, I guess I could stay for one more movie.”

“Uh-huh. That’s what I thought.”

Gotcha.
It wasn’t just one more movie. After *Howl’s Moving Castle*, it was *Princess Mononoke*, followed by a quick break so Bucky could make some popcorn, (as much as Bucky enjoyed the twenty-first century and all its advancements, he refused to allow microwave popcorn in his house. That stuff was *nasty*, and he insisted on making his the old fashioned way, in a large pot, topped with plenty of salt and freshly melted real butter) and then *Kiki’s Delivery Service*. By the time the credits rolled on that one, it was after midnight, and still raining. It was also pretty obvious, in spite of Steve’s mumbled protests, he wasn’t going anywhere that night.

“Really Steve? I got a perfectly good couch right here, that your ass has spent plenty of time getting to know. You can crash here tonight.”

“If you’re sure?” Steve hesitated.

“Don’t be an idiot,” Bucky said, thwumping him with the pillow he retrieved from his linen closet, before handing over the comforter he had also gathered. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

As he made his way upstairs, Sarge trailing behind him, Bucky wondered if Steve would still be there when he woke. Bucky had done his best to lure him in with food, easy company, and interesting movies, wanting nothing more than to give Steve a chance to just be, just breathe. But Steve had always felt as if the burdens of society were his own, and Bucky wondered how long Steve could resist the weight of that albatross around his neck, before he turned away and left Bucky behind (*yet again*) to face the world that had never truly appreciated him.

But, to Bucky’s surprise, and he had to admit pleasure, Steve was still there when Bucky came downstairs just as dawn bloomed the next morning, making his normal zombie shuffle toward the coffee machine. Bucky found Steve’s amused snort a lot less amusing before his first cup of coffee.

“And there’s the Bucky Barnes we all remember,” Steve teased him, sitting across from him at the kitchen table with his own cup of coffee, while Bucky stared blearily down into his own mug. Bucky growled at him. Steve just laughed again. And laughed some more when Bucky rose to pour himself a second cup. And then again when Bucky went for his third.

“What? No baking today?” Steve actually had the balls to cheerfully ask when Bucky snarled at him.

“Maybe,” Bucky grumbled. “After me and Sarge get back from our run.”
“You’re going for a run?” Steve asked.

“Because the running clothes don’t give that away?” Bucky glanced down at himself, feeling the cylinders in his brain finally starting to click on. He couldn’t help but wonder why HYDRA hadn’t ever given him coffee whenever they defrosted him from the cryo-tank. It would have made things so much simpler.

“But it’s Tuesday.”

“What?” Bucky wondered if it was good or bad that he had made a joke, actually made a joke, about being put in cryo. And then he remembered what Mel had said, how her and her cousin joked about her obsessive cleaning, and Marco saying how sometimes the only thing you could do was laugh about it, and that it wasn’t bad, it was a coping mechanism, and decided that maybe, just maybe, he had taken another tiny step forward in his recovery.

“But it’s Tuesday,” Steve repeated. “I thought you didn’t go running on Tuesdays.”

And that’s when Bucky realized he’d made a mistake, and forgotten the first rule of dealing with Steve, which was to never engage with him when you weren’t at your sharpest, because Steve could scent blood in the water better than a shark. He really should have remembered that. He was going to blame it on his lack of coffee.

“Me and Sarge go running every day.”

“But we only go running on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays,” Steve persisted, just like Bucky knew he would.

“That’s because we only go to the park on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays,” Bucky said, knowing deep in his bones where this was heading.

“And just where do you go running on Tuesdays and Thursdays?” Steve asked.

“Down by the waterfront,” Bucky admitted. “But, you know, it’s different than running in Owls Head. It’s more straightforward than the park, so we can go faster, for more of a challenge.” And
“Oh really?” Steve leaned back in his seat and stared at Bucky, his *I-Am-Captain-America-And-I-Am-Very-Disappointed-In-You* face in full effect. Bucky sighed; in for a penny in for a fucking pound it seemed.

“Steve, would you like to come running with me and Sarge this morning? I didn’t want to ask you before, because it’s more of a challenge, and I didn’t think you’d be able to keep up.” Bucky’s sarcasm finally decided to kick in.


“It’s in the dryer downstairs.”

“Perfect,” Steve chirped with a false chipperness as he rose from the table. “You sit here and finish having unearthly relations with your coffee while I get changed. Then we’re going to go for a run, and while I see for myself just how *challenging* it is, you can think about what you’re gonna make us for breakfast when we get back.”

“Don’t push your luck, punk!” Bucky shouted after him. But it was too late; Steve was already halfway down the basement stairs.

“I’m thinking pancakes! With blueberries! And fresh whipped-cream, if you’ve got any of it left.”

*Ugh.*

***

Bucky almost made Steve eat his words. Because as they ran together that Tuesday morning, Sarge at their heels, they were both surprised to discover that Bucky was actually the faster of the two. Granted, it was close, it was very, very close, and it may have only been by a hair’s breadth, but Bucky was the one who made it back to the entryway to the bicycle path ahead of Steve. Still, it had been a challenging run that left the two of them simultaneously gasping and laughing, while Sarge danced around and barked happily at their feet.
And that was how Bucky and Sarge started running with Steve not only during Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, but Tuesdays and Thursdays as well. Sometimes they met each other at the park. But sometimes, Steve would show up at Bucky’s house, either when Bucky was finishing his third cup of coffee, or just pulling whatever he had decided to bake that morning from the oven, dressed in his running gear, ready to go. The first time he’d done it, he looked a bit sheepish, and concerned, obviously unsure of his welcome. Fortunately, it had been on a day when Bucky had decided to bake some banana-walnut bread, easily flipping the fourth loaf from its tin. He’d shoved a hearty and still warm slice into Steve’s hands, locked the door behind him, and then used Steve’s contented moan as a distraction to take off, leaving a stuttering Steve behind.

A new routine, a new change in their dynamic, somewhat, where they now saw each other five times a week instead of three. There wasn’t a repeat of that day, when Steve had shown up frantic on Bucky’s doorstep in the middle of a storm, and they still hadn’t really talked about anything of significance. But it was enough, Bucky supposed, and he would definitely consider them friends again. Not what they had once been to each other, (Bucky knew they could never have that again), but something new, something different, just like Bucky’s life in the twenty-first century was. He was also pretty certain Steve felt the same way, because he was always there in the mornings, never late, never missing one, greeting Sarge happily, and Bucky with a smile that grew a little wider each time they saw each other. It was good for Steve, Bucky concluded, even if each time they saw each other it was Bucky’s heart that grew heavier, aching, longing for what once was, but could never be again. Steve needed care, and Bucky had always been the one to give it to him, until the day it hadn’t been enough anymore. And he didn’t want to fall into old habits, when his own recovery was still so tremulous and fresh, needing so much of his own energy and attention. He was going to have to talk to Dr. Callahan about it, and maybe even Marco, privately, for a different perspective. And then well, he’d see what he’d do from there.

But as of yet, he was enjoying the time they spent together, their shared mornings before they both separated to go back to each of their lives. All Bucky could do was enjoy it while he could, he supposed. What other choice did he have, really? It was what it was, and he would deal with it. He always had.

And then Bucky had a bad weekend, when a new monster came roaring out of his closest, and Steve became the farthest thing from his mind.

***

It started with a nightmare on Thursday night, that left him shivering and gasping in bed. Knowing he’d be unable to fall back asleep, he had gotten up and headed into his kitchen to bake the rest of the night away. But it was just a nightmare, only one, and he’d had them before. He could deal with it, he had the tools now, so he went about the rest of the day as he normally did. He ran with Steve in the park, took Sarge to his class with Jake, had his lunch break, and wrapped up his day working with Andy. He may have been a bit quiet, and more subdued than usual, but Steve either didn’t
notice or mind, and both Andy and Jake knew his moods could be mercurial, as well as the reasons why. Not his best day, but certainly not his worst, and he was able to manage.

And then he had another nightmare on Friday night. And one on Saturday. By the time Sunday rolled around, Bucky had had two dissociative episodes, and was relying on the instructions on the whiteboard in his kitchen. Intellectually he knew what this was; it was a backslide, a monster, and he would get past it. That didn’t mean it was any easier to handle. He was going on three nights with barely any sleep, exhausted as a result, but terrified to close his eyes. If not for Sarge, he didn’t know what he would have done. Because Sarge was doing everything he had been trained to do, following his amazing and intuitive instincts, and protecting his pack, protecting Bucky. He remained at Bucky’s side, never more than two feet away. When Bucky’s mind separated itself to shield him from the memories, he came to sitting with his back pressed against the wall, Sarge on his lap, licking his chin. He reminded Bucky when he needed to be walked by pressing his leash into Bucky’s hand, and always made sure to put himself between Bucky and any strangers they may have passed on the street. Such a good damned dog, and Bucky’s saving grace.

By Sunday night, when Bucky had his fourth nightmare in a row, he knew there was no way he’d be leaving his house, except for the barest essentials. He sent a text to Jake and Andy, letting them know he wouldn’t be making it today. They would both understand; they knew Bucky was a vet recovering from PTSD, and during their initial meeting they had discussed how sometimes there were just going to be bad days for him. All Jake was going to want from him was to know how Sarge had handled the situation, and if there were any areas they needed to focus on. And Andy would be warm and kind, sympathetic but never pitying, and only ask if there was anything he could do to help. Good people, part of his support network, who were willing to adjust and make room for Bucky, his well-being their most important concern.

He then sent a text to Steve, cancelling their run for the day.

From BDD at 2:45 am: Having a bad night. Won’t be able to make our run. I’ll text you when I can.

Then Bucky tossed his phone onto his coffee table, pulled his afghan around his shoulders as he buried himself in the corner of his couch, and tried to find something mindless on the television to stare at, while Sarge curled around him, and reminded him that he was home, that he was safe.

***

It was the knock on his door that pulled him from his fugue, Bucky had no idea how much later. Holding to his training, Sarge didn’t bolt off to the door barking like he usually did, but had taken Bucky’s right wrist into his mouth, pressing down with a steady but gentle pressure that didn’t break the skin, just reminded Bucky there was something he needed to attend to. When the knock came
again, Bucky groaned, rubbed his eyes, and slowly rose to his feet, feeling every one of his one-hundred-and-three years as he made his way to the entryway.

“Yeah?” he muttered as he opened the door, not bothering to check who it was, knowing Sarge would keep anyone who wasn’t safe away.

“Buck?” Steve was standing on his front stoop, his hand raised, but not moving, as if he were debating whether or not to knock again.

“Oh, hey Steve. Shit. Are you here for our run? I thought I texted you to tell you I couldn’t make it. Fuck. Don’t tell me I forgot.” Bucky rubbed at his temples. His head was aching, an endless throb that vibrated all the way down his spine. He thought he’d texted Steve, but the past few days were blurry, and he couldn’t be certain.

“No, you did,” Steve assured him in a soft voice. “You said you were having a rough night. But you’ve never cancelled a run before, so I just wanted to stop by and make sure you were okay. See if there was anything you needed.” It was then Bucky actually looked at Steve for the first time, and noticed that while it was definitely sometime in the morning, Steve wasn’t wearing his running gear. Instead he was dressed as a civilian, in his old man clothes, with a baseball cap and a pair of sunglasses hanging from his collar. If Bucky had the energy, if he could have roused enough energy to care, he would have given him shit for it. But he was so exhausted, it was a challenge for him to just stand there, squinting against the bright morning sunlight. “Jesus Bucky, you look like hell.”

“Shitty night. Shitty couple of nights,” Bucky admitted, ignoring the look in Steve’s eyes and choosing to focus on the warm pressure of Sarge against his shins instead, from where he had perched himself between the two of them.

“Yeah, I can see that,” Steve said. But he wasn’t mocking Bucky, or teasing him. In fact, there was nothing but concern in his voice. “Is there anything I can do to help? Would you mind some company?”

“Steve,” Bucky shook his head, and even that hurt, “I’m not going to be up for much. I just need to try to get through today.” And tomorrow. And tomorrow. It would pass, he knew that. It didn’t make it any easier though.

“That’s okay. I don’t mind,” Steve said. “And believe it or not, I can actually be quiet.”
“You were never quiet a day in your life,” Bucky managed to say.

“Things have changed,” Steve said softly. “They’re different now. We’re both different now.”

“They have,” Bucky agreed. (We are.)

“Let me come inside Buck,” Steve gently urged. “I won’t get in your way, and I promise to keep quiet. But it might help, to have some company. Know you’re not alone.”

“Yeah, yeah, okay,” Bucky finally agreed, stepping to the side to allow Steve to pass. “Sarge, release. It’s just Steve. He’s okay.” Hearing the command, Sarge shifted to the side and allowed Steve into the house. Once he was inside, Bucky closed the door and made a vague gesture toward the living room with his hand, and then headed into the kitchen, instead of returning to his nest on the couch. He had protocols for this, established routines he and Dr. Callahan had refined together, and the smartwatch on his right wrist was vibrating, reminding him there was a schedule he needed to follow, tasks to complete, in order to keep him from getting worse. Food and water for Sarge first. Then food and hydration for himself. There were sports drinks, containers of yoghurt and cups of syrupy fruit salad he kept for days like this. Easy to access with no preparation required, and the glucose, protein and electrolytes would help maintain his energy levels. Another glance at his watch, then the whiteboard, and Bucky started pulling together the ingredients needed for his dinner. A packet of cubed beef, a bag of frozen vegetables, a cup of rice and a can of cream of mushroom soup all went into his slow cooker, and then he set the timer so there would be a warm and filling meal for him when his watch again reminded him it was time for him to eat. Once those tasks were completed, he hit the confirm setting on his alarm and went back to the couch, where he huddled in his corner, Sarge pressing himself against Bucky’s thighs, while he tried to make himself as small and empty as possible.

Bucky had a list for days like this, a schedule he needed to follow, and no matter how bad he felt, it was vital that he made sure he followed it:

13:00 hours: Get up and eat lunch. A cold can of chicken soup, some crackers, and another sports drink would do for that.

13:30 hours: Take Sarge outside to relieve himself, and try to walk around the block a few times if he had the energy. It needed to be done, and both the exercise and exposure to sunlight would help. Bucky managed two trips around the block before he needed to go back inside and huddle on his couch.

16:30 hours: Try to write down what he was experiencing, and the feelings it was causing. That he
couldn’t do. How could he describe the nothing that were the few moments when the crown detached itself from his head and the Words hadn’t been spoken yet? It was nothing, he was nothing, just an endless, endless blankness with no sense of self, no sense of anything except an eternity of nothing. This monster was Nothing. How could he possibly describe that.

17:00 hours: Eat dinner.

18:00 hours: Call car service to take him to his VA meeting. The MWs took one look at him and just knew. They were calming, and compassionate, not pressuring him for anything, but supportive of the fact he had managed to make it to the meeting, even though each and everyone of them understood how it was almost impossible to leave the house when you were having a day like Bucky was. Marco had gently, kindly, asked him to list all his methods of coping and if they were helping, and then requested everyone else list theirs, which they graciously did, so Bucky would know he wasn’t alone. There would be no dinner at Nancy’s that night, but there were warm smiles and permission asked, and then granted, to give him hugs; one from Mel, one from Angie, and even one from Timmy, who was the one to make sure Bucky got back into the car service that would take him home.

21:00 hours: Sarge’s last walk for the day, and a small packet of Oreo cookies, before he turned the television back on, sat on his couch, and resumed hiding from the world.

23:00 hours: Head upstairs and into bed, to see if he could finally get some sleep. He didn’t.

Rinse and repeat the next day, until 16:00 hours and his appointment with Dr. Callahan, where in fits and starts Bucky told her what the past few days had been like for him, and tried to talk about this monster, before it ended with him huddled in the corner of her office, not the howl of a wounded animal, or an enraged beast, but sobbing, crying, trembling, shivering like a tiny child afraid, so very afraid, of the dark. She sat with him the whole time, never mocking him, nor making him feel small, just listening and telling him over and over again he was safe now, and to remember to breathe. Their session ran long that day, and ended in her kitchen, like all his really rough sessions ended, with a cup of warm lemon tea, and a plateful of cookies for them to share.

And through it all, Steve was there. He kept his word, and didn’t get in Bucky’s way, nor did he try to interfere with any of Bucky’s protocols. He had offered to drive Bucky to both of his meetings, and when Bucky refused, accepted that with a graceful equanimity, but was there when Bucky got home. Later, once Bucky’s equilibrium returned, he noticed how all his dishes had been washed, the garbage taken out, his laundry done, and his groceries replenished; Steve must have gone shopping while Bucky was out at both of his meetings. But until then, whenever Bucky had enough energy or self-awareness to take in his surroundings, he would look up and find Steve sitting there, not too far away with a book or magazine on his lap, a quiet, steady and constant companion. Steve, as if feeling Bucky’s eyes on him, would always look up and gift him with a small, but warm smile, and a nod of his head before saying, “Yeah Buck. I’m still here. You’re home and you’re safe and I’m not
“Going anywhere. Do you need anything?”

“No,” Bucky would shake his head. “But thanks for asking.”

“Don’t worry ‘bout it. Just let me know if that changes, all right?”

“’Kay.” Just getting those few words out used up what little energy Bucky had left. But Steve didn’t seem to mind, and he would simply nod before going back to whatever he’d been reading. And he never once left the house, other than to accompany Bucky when he went out to walk Sarge. Bucky had no idea what Steve’s days were normally like, but apparently he was able to rearrange his schedule without too much hassle, because not once, during those entire three days, did Bucky hear Steve’s phone go off.

Until finally, on Wednesday night, Bucky was able to get five hours of uninterrupted sleep, when he woke up with a moan from not another nightmare, but just the remnants of a disturbing dream. It wasn’t enough, but it was more than he’d been able to get in nearly a week, and he knew that meant the worst of it had passed.

He now had enough energy to take stock of himself, which he did, and realized with a disgusted groan that he could not remember the last time he’d taken a shower. He rose from the bed, and made his way to his attached bathroom, shucking his clothes as he did, turned his shower on to full power, and stood under the hot water for the next thirty minutes, allowing the pressure and steam to scour the remnants of the last few days down the drain. He felt well enough to both wash his hair and shave, before he returned to his bedroom, put on some clean clothes, changed the sheets on his bed, and then made his way down to his kitchen, where after a moment’s consideration, decided he really wanted to bake something.

It was as he was just pulling his third batch of lemon-poppy seed muffins from the oven that Steve’s head appeared over the back of the couch, blinking his eyes as they adjusted to the light coming from the kitchen until he was able to focus, and saw Bucky standing there.

“Hey,” he called out in a voice still raspy with sleep.

“Hey yourself,” Bucky answered him, filling his next tray with paper cupcake liners he used whenever he was making muffins.

“How’re you feeling?” he asked, as he untangled himself from Bucky’s afghan.
“Better,” Bucky nodded. “Not great yet, but better.”

“Good,” Steve said, with another fuzzy blink. Then he squinted again, finally realizing exactly what Bucky was doing. “And the baking?”

“Is actually a good sign,” Bucky explained.

“At five o’clock in the morning?”

“Yep.”

“’Kay.” Steve still looked a bit confused, and Bucky couldn’t help but wonder why it was Bucky’s baking, after everything he’d observed over the past few days, that he was finding the most difficult to accept. “D’ya want any help?”

“Nah Steve, it’s fine. You can go back to sleep.”

“’Kay,” Steve said around another yawn before his tousled head disappeared back behind the couch. But not for long. Five minutes later Steve sat up again, stretched and then made his way to the bathroom on that floor. Five minutes after that, he joined Bucky in the kitchen, where he sat himself on one of the stools, smiling gratefully when Bucky slid a mug of coffee in front of him, and tried to stealthily reach for one of Bucky’s muffins. Bucky allowed it. After everything he had put up with over the past few days, it was the least Bucky could do.

“So,” Steve began a few minutes later, after he had eaten two more muffins, and Bucky had put his last batch into the oven and was wiping everything clean. “You said you’re feeling better?”

“Yeah,” Bucky nodded. “I was finally able to get some sleep last night, and had enough energy to take a shower when I woke up. Sorry ‘bout that, by the way.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Steve waved him off.
“But yeah, the worst of it is over. I still got shit I need to work through, but seeing Dr. Callahan yesterday really helped. And I need to start getting back to my routines. It’s actually really important I do. Those help a lot with getting my rhythm back.”

“And that means what exactly?” His tone was curious, not accusatory, which for some reason he couldn’t explain, Bucky had almost expected. Steve had never been one for weakness, especially not when it came to himself, and Bucky had spent so much of his younger years making sure he was strong enough so that he never let Steve down when Steve needed something from him, that Bucky had been unsure to how Steve was going to react to seeing Bucky at his worst. He even found himself wondering, in a small and quietly aching part of his heart, if he would ever see Steve again after this, now that he knew. He wouldn’t be ashamed, he wasn’t going to allow himself to be, but they were, as they had both acknowledged, very different people now. And the Bucky of before hadn’t been enough for Steve in the end, so what would Steve make of the Bucky of today, now that he had finally seen the scarred and battered truth of him?

“So that means heading back to my classes, and not a run, but definitely a good walk for Sarge, let him have a chance to play. He’s worked hard these past couple of days. He deserves a reward.”

“He was amazing,” Steve said, glancing down at Bucky’s dog, who was contentedly making his way through the breakfast Bucky had set out for him.

“He is,” Bucky said proudly.

“I mean, I didn’t get it at first, when you said he was your service dog,” Steve went on. “I did some research, so I had some idea, but to actually see him in action…It was amazing. He never once left your side, and he kept you grounded. I could see it. See how he helped you.”

“He’s my boy,” Bucky smiled, as he carefully folded the dishrag he’d been using, before replacing it to its spot on his sink. “With that said, I’m gonna go take him for his walk. He’ll end up chasing Larry all over the house if I don’t.”

“Want some company?” Steve offered.

“Wouldn’t mind it, if you don’t mind watching this one chase squirrels around for the next forty-five minutes.”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Steve laughed.
An hour later, after Sarge had made sure to bark at every single squirrel in the park, and half an hour of gleefully chasing the tennis ball Bucky and Steve tossed for him to catch, Steve turned to Bucky, one last time, with his hands in his pockets, and asked, “Are you sure you don’t need me to stick around? I can manage another day, if you think it’ll help.”

“Nah, I’m good now. But thanks for asking, yeah,” Bucky assured him.

“Not a problem, Buck.”

“And thanks for everything.” The words weren’t enough, they would never be enough. So Bucky decided to be brave, to be the one to reach out, and pull Steve in for an embrace.

“Don’t mention it,” Steve said, as his own arms came around Bucky’s shoulders. “Just wish I coulda done more.”

“You did plenty Steve, believe me. Just having you there helped.”

“Then I’m glad.” Steve’s arms tightened for just an instant, before at the same time they released each other and stepped apart. “Take care of yourself Bucky. Call or text me if you need anything. I’ll see you soon.”

“You will,” Bucky nodded, before with one last study, and a small smile, Steve turned and slowly started to walk away.

As Bucky watched him go, he couldn’t help but wonder if this too was something else Steve was lying about.

***

Incoming message from Stevie at 6:00 am: Hey Buck. How’re you feeling? Up for going for a run today?
Response from BDD: Oh please. I’m already on my way over to the park. You got 30 mins to get here. Then I’m starting without you.

Stevie: Oh, is that how you think this is gonna go?

BDD: I don’t think. I know, ya punk.

Stevie: Yeah well, look up jerk, and then say that to my face.

Bucky paused in his texting, lowering his phone to glance up, only to see Steve standing there, less than twenty feet away, his hands on his hips and a knowing smile on his face.

Well, I guess that answers that question.

***

“I gotta say, I was surprised to see you here this morning,” Bucky admitted an hour later, as he threw yet another branch for Sarge to chase after.

“I could tell by your face,” Steve laughed, just as Sarge came bounding back and dropped the stick at Steve’s feet this time.

“No, it’s just, after the past couple of days, I didn’t think I’d see you again.” Bucky waited until Steve was in the middle of his throw before he spoke, causing Steve to actually stumble for a second before he caught himself.


“I mean,” Bucky pretended to be captivated by Sarge’s latest antics before he continued. “I know we run together and all every morning, and we always have a good time when we do. But that was kinda ugly, but that’s what life’s like for me these days, and I know you already got enough of your own shit you hafta to deal with, and you don’t come here just so you end up having to deal with mine.” Steve was quiet for so long that Bucky bent down to once again throw the branch Sarge had dropped at his feet in an effort to distract himself from the thick web of silence steadily growing
between them.

“You are a fucking idiot,” was what Steve said when he finally decided to rip the web apart.


“Is *that* what you think?”

“Oh come on Steve, you don’t gotta lie to me to preserve my feelings. I know the truth. You can admit it.”

“The truth? You want the fucking truth?” Steve hissed, stepping in front of him once he figured out Bucky wasn’t brave enough to look him in the eye. And there was a reason Bucky couldn’t. Because Steve was angry, furious, and even if Bucky hadn’t known him for most of their lives, he would have been able to recognize the warning tones in Steve’s voice. “I was fucking impressed.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I ain’t gonna lie to you Bucky, because it was horrible seeing you like that. Because you were suffering, and there was nothing I could do.”

“That’s what I’m saying! There isn’t anything anyone can do. It’s just something I gotta deal with.”

“And you did! And *that’s* why I’m impressed!”

“What?”
“Because you deal with it! You were suffering, and I could see how hard it was for you. But somehow you managed. You had all these lists and alarms set up, to make sure you ate and everything you needed to do got done. You fed Sarge, and walked him, and even managed to cook for yourself, and then go to your meetings and see your therapist, when I could tell what you really wanted to do was bury yourself in your couch. You kept yourself from getting worse, and then got yourself the help you needed, and are already looking a hell of a lot better than you were even just two days ago. Jesus fucking Christ Bucky, do you have any idea how much fucking strength that takes?”

“I’m just doing what I gotta do to survive. It’s not like I got any other fucking choice.”

“You always survive. You’ve always managed to survive and pull through. You were the one who somehow found a way to keep the both of us from starving to death back during the Depression, always kept food on our table, and made sure I had any medicines I needed. You think I don’t know that? That I wouldn’t remember?” Steve’s words shouldn’t have felt like a slap to the face, but they did, and Bucky found himself taking a step back.

“You had a bad couple of days, but you told me about those, right at the very beginning. And yeah, it was hard seeing you like that, because-“ And then it was Steve’s turn to take a step back, faltering mid-word with a shake of his head, as if he needed to take a breath and readjust his course. When he looked back at Bucky, his blue eyes were bluer than Bucky could remember them being, brighter and bigger than ever before. “Because you’ve already been through so much, and you didn’t deserve it. You didn’t deserve any of it. But still, somehow you managed to survive, even more than that, with your quirky little house, and your big dumb dog, and your peanut butter brownies and goddamned lemon-poppy seed muffins. And if you think I was going to abandon you just because you had a couple of shitty days, then you are even stupider than you look!”

They stood there on that hill in Owls Head Park, staring at each other, one silent because he’d said everything he’d had to say, and the other stunned into silence as a result. It was such a quiet morning, the only sound that of the leaves rustling like old whispers in the wind, and the panting of Bucky’s dog from where he sat at Bucky’s side, staring at the both of them as they stood there, both closer and farther apart than they’d ever been

“My dog is not dumb,” Bucky was the one to finally end their stale mate, with an insulted huff. “Big, I’ll give you. But not dumb.”

“You’re right. I apologize. Sarge isn’t dumb,” Steve admitted, shaking his hands out from where they’d been resting on his own hips. “He’s probably the smartest one outta all of us.”

“Well, he did pick me after all, is all I’m saying.”
“Even Einstein failed tests in high school. At least according to what Sam told me. And Tony’s got something like six hundred doctorates, and he still manages to blow something up in his labs at least once a week.”

“And you still live there? Now who’s the stupid one?”

“Yeah well, I did just say Sarge was the smartest one out of all of us,” Steve admitted.

“And you think my house is quirky?” Bucky pressed, unable to stop the upward curl he could feel at the corner of his mouth.

“Bucky,” Steve rolled his eyes at him, “you have a bunch of Roombas you named after the Three Stooges, an entire room you dedicated to your clothes, a sugar bowl shaped like a cow, and chicken salt and pepper shakers.”

“You uh, you noticed those did you?”

“Of course your fucking house is quirky,” Steve exhaled as if exasperated. But then his expression shifted, becoming both earnest and sheepish at the same time. “But it’s great. I love hanging out over there.”

“You know you’re more than welcome to hang out there, anytime, right? And not just when I’m having a shitty couple of days either,” Bucky said as a peace offering.

“Thank you,” Steve sighed, as if…As if he’d been waiting for Bucky to say that for the longest time.

“It’s just, I know you already have a lot of things you need to take care of. Important things. I don’t want to be the one to make your life more difficult than it already is,” Bucky shrugged, reaching down to scratch Sarge’s ear.

“You let me decide what is and isn’t important to me Bucky, okay?”
“Yeah, okay,” Bucky nodded. “And I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you feel like what you did wasn’t appreciated. It was.”

“Like I said Bucky, anytime. Don’t ever doubt that.”

“I won’t,” Bucky said, just as the alarm on his wrist went off, letting him know it was time for him to start the rest of his day. “Anyway, we gotta get going.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“See you tomorrow?”

“I’ll be here,” Steve nodded.

Bucky was about to leave, but then he stopped, turned around, and taking a chance, once again reached out to give Steve a hug.

“You’re still a punk though, you know that right?” he said into Steve’s hair.

“And you’re still a jerk,” Steve laughed as he slapped the back of Bucky’s shoulder.

“Yeah well, at least I’m a jerk with a big dog and a quirky house.”

The sound of Steve’s laughter followed him all the way home, keeping Bucky warm, and his heart buoyant for the next several days.

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Or at least it did until the middle of the following week, when the Avengers were called out, and Bucky got to see for himself exactly how shitty Steve’s days could be.

Chapter End Notes
HEY!!! Look over there! Is that Thor? **dives into her bush while everyone is distracted**
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Bucky had made some very deliberate choices in his life since he escaped from HYDRA, even before his recapture and deprogramming by SHIELD. The first and most important one was that there would be no more killing, no more murders, no more being a tool for someone else’s use. He’d been very good, the best, at what he’d done, but that never meant he’d wanted to do it. Even during the war, when his talents had first been noticed and then further developed, he had taken no joy from it. But it was war, and the only two options any soldier had was to kill or be killed, and just like everyone else, Bucky hadn’t wanted to die, hadn’t wanted anyone else he cared about to die. So he had followed orders, and then Steve back into battle time and time again.

But this was a different world, and there were different wars now, but also different choices, not just for him, but for everyone else. So, after eighty goddamned years of fighting everybody else’s fight for them, Bucky decided no more, and turned his back on soldiering for good, in spite of SHIELD’s nearly forceful attempts to recruit him.

Steve hadn’t made the same choice, and by making the choice Bucky had, it meant he was no longer in Steve’s inner circle. So he didn’t know where in the world Steve was, only finding out he and the rest of the Avengers had been called out when he received a text sometime before Wednesday morning, letting him know Steve wasn’t going to be able to make it to their run due to a matter that needed their expertise. Bucky sent him one back, telling him not to do anything stupid and to let him know when he was home safe, before he went back to his life and tried to pretend he wasn’t worried. It wasn’t that he doubted Steve’s capability, and it wasn’t that he regretted the choice he had made for his own well-being and sanity. But when someone you held dear to your heart was somewhere out there facing who knew what, it was hard to pretend life was normal.

Still, Bucky tried. He even went so far to check the newsfeeds to see if there were any reports on any battles going on somewhere in the world, only to find there was nothing. He went running by himself, and to his regular training and therapy sessions, visited Tara and Yuna, spoke to Teresa, and had dinner at Nancy’s with the MWs. He considered digging out his hidden HYDRA laptop to try logging into their old network to see what he could find, except they were gone. Steve had seen to that; prior to finally finding Bucky in Bucharest, and during Bucky’s recovery. He had other resources and skills HYDRA had left him with, but he had no desire to start on that path, knowing it would only force him to make choices he didn’t want to, and undo so much of his own mental health. He decided to sleep on it and come back to it in the morning, and was just about to turn in for the night, when there was a knock on his door, frantic, more of a pounding than a knock, and he was left trailing after Sarge to see who it was.

It could have been Paige or it could have been Betty, or it could have been the both of them. But somehow, Bucky knew who it was. That didn’t make it any less surprising when he opened the door and saw Steve on his front step.
Because it wasn’t Steve. It was a tall, blond man, with broad shoulders, wearing the same Captain America uniform as when they’d come face to face on the bridge of the helicarrier. His face was once again bruised, and covered in blood, but there was no light in his glassy blue eyes, no recognition as he stared and stared and stared at Bucky’s face, none of the fire burned from the core of who he had always been and always was. And he was shaking, not as if he were cold, but as if his very skin was struggling to hold the pieces of his soul together. He didn’t even recognize Sarge, whose happy barking quickly transformed into a quiet whimpering when Steve didn’t kneel down to scratch his ears and let Sarge lick his face like he usually did when he saw him. Steve just stood here, trembling, Hansel looking for the trail of breadcrumbs to guide him back home, and finding only the witch’s cottage instead.

Bucky was no witch, but he did have a cottage that could offer shelter and safety, and unlike everybody else in this goddamned motherfucking world, he had no desire to eat Steve alive.

“Jesus Christ, Steve. What the hell happened to you?” Bucky asked, pulling him inside and shutting the door behind him. Once locked, he stepped in front of Steve and placed his hands on his shoulders, running his eyes over Steve’s body, searching for any wounds he could see. “Are you all right? Are you hurt?” And why the hell did you come here? was what he really wanted to know. Not that he minded, or would ever turn Steve away. But it was obvious he had just come from his mission, and weren’t there people at the Tower who were supposed to look after him when he did?

“I-I’m n-n-not h-hurt.” Even though he stuttered each word, his voice was flat, empty, as if this was the response he knew he was supposed to give, and so he was giving it.

“Says you,” Bucky muttered, running his hands over Steve’s shoulders, arms, hands, chest and then legs, checking for any injuries or blood. There was nothing he could see or smell, the marks on his face hopefully the worst of it, and Bucky knew from personal experience how much head wounds could bleed. That didn’t mean there weren’t other injuries he’d need to deal with, and he was pretty damned certain that the wound Steve carried deep in his gut, the micro-fissure no one else had been able to detect was gushing, gushing, gushing the blood of Steve’s soul all over Bucky’s floor.

“Steve, Steve, I need you to focus right now, can you do that for me?” Bucky asked gently, coming around to stand in front of him. In response, Steve merely blinked. “Do you know where you are right now Steve?”

Another blink, and then a just as flatly murmured, “No.” Fuck, he had disassociated.

“That’s okay, that’s okay. Don’t worry about it,” Bucky assured him, and then decided to change tactics. “Do you know who I am, Stevie?”
“You’re Bucky,” Steve answered easily that time.

“That’s right, I am, I’m Bucky,” Bucky smiled at him, while his insides shrieked and roared in sympathetic pains. “And I’m going to take care of you. You’re in my house, and you’re safe, and I’m going to take care of you. Would that be okay, Stevie?”

“Course,” Steve nodded as if it were once again obvious. “Bucky was the only one who always took care of me. Always kept me safe, even when I told him I didn’t need it. But he always knew, even when I was lying, and he always took care of me.”

“Oh, Jesus Christ Stevie, you’re killin’ me over here.” Bucky closed his eyes, and shook his head, but only for a second. He had things he needed to do, and his heart was already broken enough. “Would it be okay if I touched you? If I was the one who looked after you right now? Would that be all right, Stevie?”

“Of course.”

“Okay good, c’mon,” Bucky said, taking Steve’s hand and leading him further into the house. “Let’s go get you cleaned up, and I’ll look after you, okay? You trust me to do that, right?”

“Yes,” Steve responded, and then that was the last thing he said for the rest of the night. Bucky knew it was a risk, to move someone and put your hands on them when they were disassociating, even if it was to do nothing more than undress them and try to make sure of their comfort. But Bucky needed to ascertain if there were any other injuries, and to do that he needed to get Steve out of his uniform and clean all the grime and blood from his face and matted in his hair. If Steve came to, and didn’t know where he was or who was touching him, it was very likely he would strike out. But then again, Bucky was probably the only person in the world who could take the blow and not suffer any major damage because of it. Better him than anyone else. And Steve, even in the state he was in, seemed to trust Bucky on some deep level. Steve followed Bucky as he led him into the bathroom, and was silent and submissive while Bucky undressed him and got him into the shower, using the handheld showerhead to wash his body clean, and inspect him for injuries. Apparently his uniform had been updated since his first one, and nothing was bleeding, nor were they any broken bones when Bucky examined him more closely. But that didn’t mean there weren’t bruises. Steve’s entire body looked like a musical composition, composed of purple and red notes and clefs of pain, curling down from the base of his neck, along his spine, over his hip and wrapping around his thighs. Some no larger than a handprint, others nearly the size of a basketball, a symphony of hurt, in the key of blood, marring Steve’s skin. And that was just his body.

Bucky had no idea what was going on in Steve’s mind, or where it was he escaped to when the
world was too much for him and he needed a place to hide. He was so placid, so loose and strangely uninhibited as Bucky carefully cleaned him, and then washed the soap from his hair. He just stood there, staring blankly in front of him, letting his arms be lifted or his head tilted back at Bucky’s urging, as if...as if Bucky were his handler, a realization that nearly made Bucky sick to his stomach.

But he couldn’t stop, or let the idea take him to someplace dark and deep. Because Steve needed him right now, and it was Bucky’s job to take care of him, just like he always had, just like Steve believed he always would.

So, Bucky washed and dried him, wrapping him in a towel and telling him to wait right there while Bucky dashed off to first switch out of his own wet clothes, and then bring dry ones to Steve. It was the fastest he had ever changed in his life, and in less than two minutes he was back in the bathroom, where Steve still stood, waiting for Bucky to return, just like he’d asked him to. Bucky got him dressed as quickly as possible and then spread some antiseptic ointment to the wound on Steve’s forehead, before he paused a second, trying to decide whether he should bring Steve into his bedroom, or back to the living room and his couch. He decided on the latter, since Steve had never been in his bedroom before, and when he finally came back to himself, Bucky knew from personal experience it would be helpful to be in a place familiar and recognizable. So Bucky settled him on the couch, and ran to his kitchen, coming back with a sports drink Steve wordlessly took from his outstretched hand and swallowed in less than three gulps. He was uninterested in any food Bucky tried to offer him, and it appeared as if drinking the Gatorade had used up the very last reserves of his energy. He slumped sideways, dead to the world, pliant and limp beneath Bucky’s hands as Bucky first carefully placed a pillow under his head, and then lifted his legs to stretch Steve out, before he tucked him in with the afghan.

“It’s because he loved you, you know, your Bucky. With all of his heart. That’s why he always took care of you,” Bucky whispered, sharing his secrets with the dark as he stared down at Steve’s outstretched form. “You were his entire world, and he would have done anything for you. Anything you asked, anything you needed. Because he loved you.” Bucky paused to wipe the tears from his cheeks. And to share one last, final secret with what was left of the night. “And I still love you. I never stopped. You were the one who stopped loving me.”

Then Bucky wiped the last of the tears from his face, and sat down on the opposite end of the couch, settling in to keep vigil over Steve while he slept and slept and slept.

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It was a long night, an even longer morning, and not once did Steve stir. If not for the rise and fall of his chest, Bucky would have worried he was dead. But Steve’s breathing was steady and stable, the bruises on his face fading before Bucky’s eyes. If there weren’t other things occupying Bucky’s mind, coursing through his veins, choking his lungs, he would have been fascinated, wondering if that’s how he looked when his own serum-enhanced body worked to heal itself.
But there were other things, and Bucky didn’t have an ounce of energy or concentration to spare. Because Bucky was fucking furious, and he wanted answers. And he was going to get them, come hell or highwater.

Steve was sleeping the sleep of the dead, and didn’t even stir when Bucky rose and headed into the kitchen to let Sarge out and start breakfast. The scent of food didn’t rouse him, nor did any of Bucky’s movements as he went back into the bathroom to gather Steve’s uniform, and then bring it downstairs to his basement and washing machine. He was sure it required some special handling, but there were no labels, and since he had some Tide and a spin cycle, that’s what it was going to get. He dug around through the pockets to make sure there wasn’t anything that needed to avoid getting wet, and that’s when he found it; Steve’s cell phone. As he stared down at it, Bucky decided enough was enough, and it was time for him to adjust his protocols, and start getting some of those damned answers.

Bringing the phone back with him into the kitchen, Bucky pulled his refrigerator away from the wall, and used his thumb print to unlock the small panel hidden behind the tile he had installed, to gather the supplies he needed. Carrying the kit with him to the table, he unzipped the bag, found the flash drive he was looking for, and inserted it into the data port at the base of Steve’s cell. Less than five seconds later he was in, with full access to all its secrets. With a few taps to the screen, he initiated a scan and found exactly what he expected; two tracking devices, and enough carefully concealed spyware that monitored not only every time Steve used his phone, but reported on any texts, incoming and outgoing calls, as well as any searches Steve conducted. He disabled them all, and then deleted the files, even the self-replicating ones, from the root directory. It was when he turned his attention to Steve’s inboxes he was truly surprised for the first time. Because there was one, and only one, incoming message, and it was from Sam Wilson. Bucky glanced over his shoulder at Steve, who still hadn’t moved an inch, and then down at Sarge.

“Sarge, Steve, pressure,” he told him, waiting until Sarge trotted off, laying down next to Steve so his weight would help ground him, and then quietly opened his back door, slipping out onto his porch, as he hit redial and lifted the phone to his ear.

“Steve? Oh thank god, where the hell are you?” Sam’s voice echoed down the line.

“What the fuck is going on over there?” Bucky hissed into the phone.

“Who the hell is this?”

“Answer the fucking question Sam. What the fuck is going on over there?”
“James?”

“Yeah, this is James.”

“Is Steve with you? Is he alright?”

“Yeah, Steve’s here.”

“Oh thank god.” Even over the phone, Bucky could hear the relief in Sam’s voice. It did nothing to quell Bucky’s anger. The dragon was awake, and it was looking for something to burn. “Is he all right?”

“You got questions Sam?” Bucky sneered, even though he knew Sam couldn’t see it. “Well so do I. And mine are gonna get answered. There’s a diner on the corner of Bay Ridge and Fourth Avenues, Lindy’s. Be there in thirty minutes, or I’m going to come looking for you. And you don’t want me to do that Sam. I remember the last time we came face to face, and it didn’t end too well for you. Trust me, you don’t want a repeat of that.”

“Woah, woah, woah, calm down James, just hold on a sec-“

“Thirty minutes, and come alone. If I catch a whiff of anybody else, it’ll be the last time any of you go anywhere. I can promise you that.” Bucky ended the call, and glanced back over his shoulder. Steve still hadn’t moved. It was chance he was taking, he knew. But he also knew, from past memories of Steve during the war, and his own experiences, that the price for the serum healing a body was a nearly comatose state while it did its work. He had at least a few more hours before it would be done, and he was going to use his time wisely, and start getting some of those fucking answers he so desperately needed.

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Sam was waiting for him when Bucky arrived at Lindy’s, Sarge in tow, wearing his service harness to avoid any conflict. Sam had on a pair of dark sunglasses, that did little to cover the bruising on his own face as Bucky slid into the booth across from him, Sarge settling quietly at his feet under the table.

“Jesus Christ man, will you calm your tits for a second and just tell me what the hell happened that’s got you this upset?” Sam countered, matching Bucky glare for glare.

“What happened? You wanna know what happened? I’ll tell you what happened. Last night, in the middle of the fucking night, right before I was about to head up to bed, Steve shows up at my house, still in his uniform, face covered in blood, not knowing where he is or how he got there, and barely even knowing my name.”

“Fuck!” Sam hissed, pulling his sunglasses off and tossing them on the table. The entire side of his face was bruised, his left eye nearly swollen shut.

“Yeah, fuck.” Bucky was still less than sympathetic. “So you tell me what the hell happened to cause all that.”

Sam pursed his lips, and was about to answer, but their waitress arrived, asking if they were ready to order. Bucky requested a black coffee, and Sam a full breakfast, waiting until the waitress left to put their orders in, before Sam leaned forward, drumming his fingers on the table.

“Look James, I can’t tell you any of the details of what we were doing, but let’s just say it was a bad job,” he began.

“No shit.”

“It was a lead we were tracking down, and we got there as soon as we could, but somebody must have gotten wind we were on our way, and they initiated a counter-strike as a distraction, and there were civilian casualties. A lot of them.”

“Fuck,” Bucky shook his head.

“Yeah, fuck. Big time. But Steve’s a master tactician, you know this, and he broke us up into two teams, and we managed to pull it off. But still, it was ugly, and we all came back with injuries. Steve’s because he was trying to save as many people as he could. He got a lot of people out in time, more than any of us would’ve expected, and then got hurt trying to save the rest.”
“And then what?”

“And then, I can’t tell you much more than that, but we did clean up as best we could, and headed back to New York.”

“And that’s it? You all just went your separate ways and left it at that? You guys are the fucking Avengers. Aren’t you supposed to be the best team in the world? Don’t you check in with each other to make sure you’re all okay?” Nothing Sam said had done anything to make Bucky feel better, helped to quell the dragon’s fires blazing in his guts.

“Steve is the best damned captain in the world—“

“I know that! Better than anyone,” Bucky cut him off.

“And he always makes sure that we’re all alright at the end of every mission, and get everything we need,” Sam went on as if Bucky hadn’t spoken. “Pulls us back together, and makes sure to remind us, even when the mission’s bad, that he’s proud of us, and couldn’t have asked for a better group of people to work with. But…”

“But?”

“Everybody’s got their own way of dealing with shit, you know this, and we all tend to go our separate ways for a bit in order to calm down and process. It’s how most of us cope.”

“And nobody bothers to check in with Steve first, to make sure he’s okay?” If Bucky thought he was mad before, it was nothing compared to the absolute fury he felt starting in his heart.

“You think we don’t ask?” Sam countered, starting to sound just as furious. “He just-“

“We or you?” Bucky cut him off. Sam froze.

“What?”
“You heard me. Is it we always check up on him, or just you?” Bucky paused to lean back in his seat, so their waitress could deposit their coffees on the table, and then leaned forward again. “Because I’ll tell you something Sam Wilson. It’s been at least ten hours since Steve showed up at my place, and you are the only one he got a message from.”

“Fuck,” Sam exhaled, his shoulders slumping.

“Yeah, fuck,” Bucky repeated. “So I’m asking you again, what the hell is going on over there in that Tower of Tony Stark’s?”

“Look-“

“You want to know what I think is going on?” Bucky interrupted him. “You all are the Avengers, and yeah, you’re the best at what you fucking do, and unstoppable out on the field. But your team consists of Natalia Romanova, the Black Widow. And she’s a fucking mastermind at close combat and manipulation. I know this because I helped to fucking train her. But just because she knows how to manipulate someone’s feelings doesn’t mean she understands what that actually means, or understands her own. You’ve got a kid from Queens, who’s a fucking child and shouldn’t be responsible for the emotional well-being of the adults around him who are supposed to protecting him and not dragging him into battles-“

“Peter wasn’t on this mission. Steve refuses to ever call him in, it’s Tony who-“

“And yeah, Tony fucking Stark. Everybody’s heard about him, the playboy, billionaire alcoholic. I’m sure he’s got a great bunch of coping strategies under his belt. And I knew his father, and Howard liked to collect all the pretty things in one place, but that didn’t mean he knew jack shit about taking care of them. And if he’s anything like his old man, well then, that explains Peter. And then there’s the Scarlett Witch, practically still a child herself, who was another one of HYDRA’s playthings. And let’s not forget about Barton, another who’s a bit too fond of the drink, but he’s also the one who has to take care of Natalia. We’re not even going to talk about the Hulk, because I think the fact that he even exists already says more than enough about Banner’s mental health. Last, but not least, there’s Fury, and I can tell you from personal experience that that asshole doesn’t give a damn about anybody, as long as he thinks they’re following his orders. And the only one, the only one standing between you all and him is Steve, and not a single goddamned one of you is looking out for him!”

“He doesn’t let us! You think we don’t try?”
“I’m gonna ask this one more time Samuel Wilson, and you better tell me the truth. We or you?” Bucky countered, his voice as sharp as a knife, as poisonous as a cobra’s venom.

“You don’t think I’ve tried?” Sam relented. “I keep trying to get him to talk about it, after every mission, but he just brushes me off and tells me he’s fine. Refuses to ever talk about any of it.” At Sam’s admission, Bucky could release some of his anger, just a little bit of it. Because he did know, had known this about Steve all his life, and it hadn’t changed. It in fact appeared, for all intents and purposes, to have only gotten worse. And Bucky was still the only one in possession of the Rosetta Stone that could translate Steve’s language.

“This has happened before?” Bucky asked instead. Sam’s sigh was all the answer he needed.

“And no one’s tried to talk to him about it? Set him up with a therapist to help him deal with all the shit he’s been through?”

“Yeah, they sent him to counseling once they finally got him out of the ice.”

“And?”

“And who do you think they sent him to?”

“Are you fucking kidding me? McAdams?” Bucky could not believe what he was hearing, although he knew he really shouldn’t have been surprised.

“Yeah, McAdams,” Sam shrugged, and then winced, rolling his shoulder in obvious pain. “So you can guess how well that went.”

“Yeah well, I’m sure everyone at SHIELD thinks it went perfectly well. Fury got what he wanted out of it after all.”

“Fury is-“

“Steve’s got PTSD almost as bad as mine. And he had disassociated by the time he got to my house. He should not be out in the field.” Bucky was getting tired of cutting Sam off, but nobody was
paying attention, or if they were, they were ignoring what they didn’t want to see, what didn’t suit their plans.

“I agree with you,” Sam interjected. “But try getting Steve to stop. The world looks up to him, and he feels he has a duty to help keep it safe.”

“He already died for the world once. And he’s a human being, who lost everything and everyone he knew. You think that’s easy? To wake up one day, and realize everything’s different? Because I can tell you right now, it’s not. And I don’t know if Steve ever got over that, if anyone ever gave him the time to, because he’s suffering and is in pain, and everyone just keeps expecting more and more from him, and I don’t think he’s got very much more left in him to give. And I will be damned if you think I’m going to let you fuckers take what little he has left.”

Sam sat there, blinking his un-swollen eye at him, not saying a word. Bucky met his brown-eyed gaze with his own, still furious and unafraid.

“He didn’t lose everyone,” Sam finally said, cocking his head in Bucky’s direction. “You came back from the dead, and it took you a while to get your shit together, but I get it now. Why Steve always talks about you the way he does. You’re pissed, not at Steve, but for him.”

“Oh I’m pissed at that asshole too.”

“Yeah, you are. And you have a right to be,” Sam acknowledged. “But you were the one person in the world he turned to when he needed help. And even though you’re pissed off, you still took care of him. And then you came here to rip me and everyone else at SHEILD new asshole. So he wasn’t wrong about you. You always did have his back, you still do. Steve’s in good hands.”

“Yeah well, you just make sure to let everyone back at that Tower of yours knows that,” Bucky said, rising from the table and digging into his pocket for a few bills to toss on the table. “And you also make sure they all know, especially that asshole Fury, that while I might not be HYDRA’s bitch anymore, that don’t mean I’ve forgotten anything they taught me. If Fury sends anyone anywhere near my house, the next shot I take will be at his head. I ain’t never missed a shot, even before HYDRA. And I gotta dog more than big enough to help me hide a body.”

“I’ll let him know that,” Sam acknowledged with a nod of his head.

“See that you do.”
“Will you keep me in the loop? Let me know how he’s doing?”

“When he’s ready, I’ll give him his phone back. I’ll make sure you’re the first person he calls.”

“Fair enough.”

With those words, Bucky gave Sam one last nod, and then turned on his heel, and left the diner, Sarge right where he belonged, at Bucky’s side.

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Steve hadn’t moved from his position by the time Bucky returned to the house. He wasn’t surprised; after his talk with Sam, Bucky now knew they were dealing with a lot more than just the physical. He’d had his suspicions, but hadn’t known how bad it really was. He was going to have to assess and adapt, re-evaluate his protocols, and try to find a way to get through to Steve.

Therein lay the problem. Steve had always been the most stubborn son of a bitch in the world. Bucky knew this about him, knew it was Steve’s defense mechanism against the world. As of yet, Steve was refusing to admit to anyone, especially himself, there was a problem. And you couldn’t help someone, begin the difficult journey toward healing, if they refused to admit they had a problem. He’d talked about this with Dr. Callahan, discussed it with the MWs. Healing wasn’t easy, but admitting you needed help, that was usually the first hurdle, the highest one that needed to be overcome.

And Steve, well…Steve could build walls bigger and longer lasting than the Great Wall of China.

But then again, Bucky did have a metal arm, and who knew what would happen if he ever went back to China (as he wouldn’t be under HYDRA’s control this time.)

Baby steps, and rearranging the tiles. And he and Steve were definitely going to have a conversation when the self-sacrificing idiot finally woke up. Until then, there was food to prepare, and a present for Steve he needed to personalize.

It was a little after four when Bucky heard a groan and shuffling from the other side of the couch,
looked up from the book he was reading, and saw Steve starting to stir. Bucky clicked his tongue to call Sarge over to him, just in time apparently, because between one second and the next, Steve went from being a lump on his couch, to a deadly super-soldier, alert and searching his surroundings for the next threat. Instantly awake, instantly aware, his eyes frantically scanning his surroundings for any clue as to what his current situation was.

“Easy there Steve,” Bucky said calmly, softly, soothingly, taking a firm hold of Sarge’s collar in case he needed to protect his dog. “You’re safe. The battle’s over. You’re in my house in Brooklyn, and nothing else has happened in the interim. You’ve been here for the past sixteen hours, and you’re safe.”

It still hadn’t clicked yet. Steve’s shoulders were tight, his breathing ragged, and he kept looking around him in a desperate attempt to put things into context. Bucky knew he faced a very big risk of having to fight Captain America in full battle mode. He hoped it wouldn’t come to that; he really loved his living room. And Sarge, Sarge was starting to shift beneath his hand, his hackles raising, his muzzle curling back into a snarl. Because Sarge adored Steve, absolutely adored him, but everything in Steve’s posture was screaming threat, and violence, and attack. While Sarge may have adored Steve, Bucky was his person, his pack, and his instincts, in spite of his normally cheerful nature and all his training, were to protect what was his. His dog was over two-hundred pounds at this point; it would be ugly and bloody if the situation escalated any further.

“Sarge,” Bucky said in that same calm voice, that had guided and led Sarge through thick and thin, with love, with care, without ever delivering punishment or a harsh blow. “Heel.” Bucky glanced down at his dog, vibrating under his hand, as he struggled with himself, but then remembered all the love and trust they shared, and reigned himself in, trusting Bucky’s judgement. If only Steve would trust in him the same way.

“Steve,” Bucky said again, turning his attention back to the other creature on the verge of turning rabid in his living room. “I need you to look at me Steve, and take a deep breath. Can you do that for me? Please, Stevie.”

And there, there was the clicking, the realignment of all Steve’s pieces, the return of his self.

“Buck?” he asked, taking another look around, slower this time.

“Yeah Steve, it’s me,” Bucky nodded.

“Where am I?”
“You’re in my house.”

“I am?”

“Yeah.”

“How’d I get here?”

“You showed up last night,” covered in blood, shell-shocked, barely knowing your own name, never mind mine, “and I cleaned you up and put you to sleep. You’ve been on my couch ever since.”

“Shit,” Steve hissed, raising a hand to rub at his temple, wincing when his fingers pressed against what was left of the wound. “Sorry ‘bout that.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Bucky said. “Now come on, deep breath in, nice and slow, just like that… And exhale. Good…And another one, nice and slow, hold for three…And exhale….Good. Can you wiggle your fingers and toes for me? Good, just like that…Now take another look around and tell me what color the walls are.”

“Tan…And you’ve got that red scarf thing, with all those blackbirds on it.”

Okay, he was coming to, getting a better sense of himself and surroundings.

“It’s called a tapestry, you ignoramus,” Bucky smirked at him, knowing humor and teasing could also sometimes help. “And they’re not blackbirds, they’re ravens. Smart fucking birds.”

“Okay?”

All right, he wasn’t quite there yet. But then again, Bucky had more experience dealing with the aftermath of a hard mental crash, and knew what to expect. The thought almost made him smile, and if he had any energy to spare he would have again thought about how sometimes humor really was the only way to get past certain things. But he didn’t, and there were other things he needed to focus
“How’re you feeling?” he asked instead. “How’s the pain? You were pretty banged up when you got here, but except for your head you weren’t bleeding anywhere, and I didn’t need to stitch anything up.” He watched as Steve took an accounting of his body, seeming to notice for the first time he was wearing Bucky’s clothes.

“You cleaned me up?” Steve asked.

“Don’t worry ‘bout that right now. How’re you feeling?”

“Sore,” Steve admitted with a roll of his shoulders.

“Figured. You hungry?”

Steve took a few seconds to consider Bucky’s question before he nodded. “Starving.”

“‘Kay. I’ve got some food waiting for you, but two questions first.”

“All right,” Steve answered, suspicion in both his eyes and voice.

“Make that three.” Bucky could play this game, play it all day, but it really wouldn’t be fair to Steve. But there were things he needed to know.

“Okay.” That same tone, that same wariness in Steve’s eyes.

“If I let go of Sarge so he can come say hello, are you going to hurt him?”

“What?” Steve looked shocked by Bucky’s words. “Bucky, I would never hurt Sarge.”

You almost did, Bucky didn’t say. Instead, he let go of Sarge’s collar with a, “Go, Sarge. Say hello
“Hey buddy, hey Sarge, how you doing big guy?” Steve rumbled at him, his voice losing all its wariness as Bucky’s dog reminded him he was loved, so very loved. It was exactly what Steve needed, and Bucky was the one who smiled now, small and bittersweet, when Steve curled over and buried his face into Sarge’s fur. Touch-starved, lonely, and desperate. So very desperate. Bucky could relate, or at least remember, how awful that felt. So he let them love one another, one holding on and ravenous for love, and the other warm and soft, overflowing with his abundance of it.

“Second question,” Bucky asked a few minutes later when Steve finally lifted his head. “Do you hafta piss?”

“Yeah.” Steve glared at him, as if annoyed Bucky had reminded him of the state of his bladder.

“Right,” Bucky nodded, unsurprised or repentant. “Last question. Can you make it to the bathroom by yourself, or are you gonna need my help? And I want the truth, not what you think the answer should be.” There were reasons why Steve had come to him, instead of going to anyone else. And while Steve might never recall the words he had said to Bucky when he showed up at his door, Bucky would never forget them. If Steve wanted Bucky to be the Bucky who had always looked after him, then he needed to remember that there were rules, and the Bucky of old (of new) had never believed any of Steve’s bullshit.

Steve was going to lie, they both knew he was, but then he glanced down again, at his hands still buried in the fur of Sarge’s ruff, where they could both see they were trembling.

“I think…I think I might need some help,” Steve finally admitted. “At least getting there.”

“Kay,” Bucky nodded. “I’m gonna make this real easy for you. Sarge, floor.” Once Sarge was standing in front of the couch, Bucky slowly rose from his seat, keeping his eyes on Steve the entire time. “Grab a hold of Sarge’s halter, and don’t let go. He’s going to help.” Bucky came to Steve’s side, making sure Steve had a steady grip on Sarge’s collar, and then nodded. “Sarge, pull.” With an ease Bucky could tell surprised Steve, Sarge stepped forward, hauling Steve to his feet, allowing Bucky to step in at his other side in order to wrap an arm around Steve’s waist. “Good boy, Sarge.”

After some initial awkward shuffling, Bucky managed to get Steve to the bathroom, where he stood
outside the open doorway and waited for Steve finish his piss –

‘Any blood?’

‘No.’

- and brush his teeth. Once that was done, Bucky half-led, half-carried Steve back to his couch, where he made sure he was as comfortable as possible, before he went to the kitchen to gather the food he had known Steve would need once he woke. It wasn’t anything fancy, but as Bucky watched Steve wolf down the three huge heroes filled with eggs scrambled with onions, peppers and cheese, on top of thick slabs of sausage, Bucky could see the calories doing their job, giving Steve’s body the nourishment it needed to finish healing. His color returned, and with each swallow his posture relaxed, his eyes growing clearer and clearer.

“Better?” Bucky asked, once Steve finished licking the last of the crumbs from his thumb.


“Still hungry?”

“Maybe.” The man actually had the balls to look sheepish about that as he sat there on Bucky’s couch, when there were so many things Bucky was going to rip him a new asshole about. But now wasn’t the time for that. Shift the tiles, change the pattern, distract Steve’s focus, and then see if he could get Steve to admit the truth.

Bucky just nodded, went back into his kitchen, and came back with four of his chocolate chocolate-chip muffins. The look on Steve’s face when he saw them almost, almost made the past eighteen hours worth it.

“So here’s the deal,” Bucky said casually once there was nothing left of his muffins but the scent of chocolate on Steve’s breath. Steve immediately straightened, and tried to glare at Bucky. As if that had ever worked in the past. “You came to me last night because you were hurt and wanted someone to take care of you.”

“I’m sorry-” Bucky lifted a hand to cut Steve off.
“It’s not a problem Steve. I meant it when I said you were always welcome here. But that means, for what it’s worth, I’m the doctor on call.”

“Bucky-“

“Which means you are not leaving this house until I’m convinced you’re not going to collapse as soon as you walk out the door.”

“I’m fine, Bu-“

“You’re staying over tonight, and sleeping on that couch, since your ass has already built a nest in my blankets. I’m going to feed you, and we’re going to watch some TV, and do nothing more than that.”

“Bucky-“ This guy was unbelievable. All these years later and he still didn’t know when to shut up.

“I will sit on you if I have to. I will have my dog sit on you if I have to. He was two-hundred-and-three pounds at his last check up-”

“Two-hundred-and-three-pounds?”

“And you just felt for yourself how strong he is. So whatever dumb ideas you got rolling around in that pea-sized brain of yours, just stop them right now. Because I am not letting you outta my sight until I’m sure you’re okay. Capisce?”

“Buck-“

“Capisce?” There had been times in the past when it was obvious to both of them that Steve had gotten on Bucky’s very last nerve. They were rare, because Bucky had loved Steve, loved him with his every breath and drop of blood, and he knew who it was his heart had devoted itself to. But it had happened on occasion, and when it did, even Steve, tempest in a teapot that he was, had known he needed to stop. This was one of those times. Thankfully, Steve recognized it, and for once in his life, made the right decision.
“Yeah, capisce.”

“Good,” Bucky nodded. “And we’re going to talk about this Steve, just so you know. But not tonight. Tonight we’re going to plant our asses on this couch, stuff our faces full of as much lasagna as we can stand, and watch anime until the cows come home.”

“Studio Ghibli?” Steve asked, looking hopeful for the first time since Bucky began speaking.

“Oh no,” Bucky shook his head. “Despite my charming demeanor and infinite patience, I’m still pissed at you. I’m making you watch Sailor Moon.”

***

“Got a present for you.” Without looking up from his textbook, Bucky nodded toward the kitchen table when Steve shuffled in a little after eleven the next morning. He was looking better, so much better than he had just twenty-four hours ago. His color was back to normal, his eyes clearer than they’d been so far, and he moved with the steady tread of a soldier, so much a part of who he was now.

“Is it coffee? Please tell me it’s coffee?” Steve whined as he rested his forehead against the tabletop.

“Coffee’s on the counter, help yourself.” Bucky flicked the page in his book. The differences between the human, canine and feline nervous system really were amazing, as were the similarities.

“Is there breakfast?” Steve had the nerve to ask once he resettled himself, now with a large mugful of coffee.

“Breakfast later, presents first,” Bucky said with feigned indifference. There was breakfast; a mixed vegetable frittata, cornbread with jalapeños, and three pounds of bacon, all being kept warm in the oven. But Bucky wanted to have this conversation with Steve first, preferably before he set any knives out on the table.

“What is it?” Steve finally asked. Rolling his eyes, Bucky turned another page. He thought it was pretty obvious. He waited a beat, then another, until, “Why did you get me a cell phone Bucky? I
already have one.”

“Yeah, I know. But this one’s better.”

Steve snorted. “Are you trying to tell me this one’s better than my Stark phone?”

“Yep,” turn another page, “has more games on it for starters. A couple of really cool music apps,” one more page before he said this next bit. “And no tracking devices or bugs.”

The silence in the air grew as heavy and thick as treacle, opaque as fog, elusive as waves crashing against the sand.

“I found three of them, when I hacked into your phone. Never mind the spyware.”

“You hacked into my phone?”

“Told me less than thirty seconds. I deleted the bugs, pulled all the tracking software. But it’s SHIELD issued, so who knows how long that will last. That new one is more secure. I installed a couple of firewalls, and a few security apps that will keep anyone from being able to track your location. Keep it safe, and don’t let anyone see it. Especially not Natalia. If she gets her hands on it—“

“Natasha is a friend of mine Bucky!” Steve cut him off. “And she helped me when I was trying to find you!”

Slowly, very slowly, Bucky closed his textbook and slowly placed it on top of the table.

“Natalia may be a friend, but she’s also Nick Fury’s creature. Don’t ever forget that Steve,” he said lowly.

“What? Are you trying to make me doubt my own team?” Steve snarled at him.

“I’m trying to make sure you’re seeing the bigger picture here. Did it ever occur to you that Nick
Fury didn’t seem all that surprised when you brought me in? Did you ever think of that?” Bucky asked. Steve’s sudden silence told Bucky more than enough; that he had, and he wasn’t surprised by anything Bucky was saying. It made Bucky wonder why Steve was putting up with all this crap, when he obviously knew it wasn’t his best interests everyone else was looking out for. Bucky decided to press on. “And if she’s such a good friend, how come the only message I found on your phone was from Sam. He’s worried about you, by the way. You should give him a call when we’re done here.”

“You spoke to Sam?”

Really, it was as if Steve didn’t know Bucky at all.

“Course I did. Like I said, he was worried.” They’d actually texted several times over the past twenty-four hours. Bucky’s last text had been ‘I’m going to talk to him about it today.’ To which Sam quickly replied with a, ‘Godspeed.’ Sam really wasn’t such a bad sort, once you got to know him. Bucky could see why he was the one who Steve was closest to out of all his teammates. The guy had to have nerves of steel if he was willing to put up with all Steve’s bullshit.

“Bucky, you had no right-“

“You show up at my house, in the middle of the night, covered in blood and not knowing where you are. Of course I had the fucking right,” Bucky said coldly. He was watching Steve, studying his reactions, and came to a sudden realization. “You don’t seem too surprised about the bugs.” Steve grimaced, his mouth opening to say something else, but instead he looked away. “Uh-huh. Keep the fucking phone.”

“I can’t believe you had the balls-“ Apparently the reprieve was going to be short. Steve was turning to his old friend, righteous indignation at what he thought were the injustices of the world. As if Bucky didn’t know about injustice, about being both fucked with it and by it for the past eighty years of his life. Steve could don his mantle of righteous fury; Bucky would slit its throat with the oily truth about the lives they led.

“There were others, you know,” Bucky said, pulling out one of his sharpest and most hidden of blades.

“Other whats?” Steve asked, caught off guard.
“Other Winter Soldiers,” Bucky went on, realizing that since he had gotten on this train, there was no getting off. “I wasn’t the only one. They were even better, stronger, faster than me. But they were uncontrollable, and had to be put down. Me, I never failed a mission once in my life. Cos it’s like you said the other day. I’m a survivor. But that’s not the only reason. It’s because I’m smarter than most people usually give me credit for, because I know how to think my way around any protocols or barriers, and complete my mission. You should know that better than anyone. When you showed up here last night, you gave me a new mission. To watch your goddamned back. I know shit about you no one else does, all your fucking tricks. And I know quite a bit about people like Fury too. If you think I’m gonna let them fuck with you, after everything you’ve done for me, you’ve got another think coming. And I’m not gonna disrespect your momma like that either. She’d kick my ass from the grave if she knew I was letting you get away with any of your bullshit.”

“How. Dare. You-“

“You don’t get to pull the how dare you card with me Steve. That shit don’t work on me no more. And while we’re at it, get your ass into some fucking therapy. You need it.” Bucky was unmoved, and strangely unafraid. There were things Steve needed to hear, that no one was saying to him, because the truth ran contrary to their goals. The only goal Bucky had, had ever had, was making sure Steve was safe. Over a hundred years later, and that hadn’t changed.

“I don’t need it.”

"Is that what you think?"

“What? You think because it helps you, it works for everybody? We’re in very different situations Bucky. I’m glad you found someone who’s been able to help you, but I don’t need it. I’m fine.”

“Having panic attacks and disassociating isn’t fine Steve, no matter what that shithhead McAdams may have told you, if he even knew. I ain’t the only one in this kitchen with monsters in my closet. Except I think yours are hiding underneath the bed.” Hello Stevie, my name is Winter. It’s nice to meet you. And you can kiss my ass with all of your bullshit.

“It’s not the same,” Steve growled.

“If you say so,” Bucky shrugged, but then he leaned forward for the first time. It was time to shift the tiles, alter the pattern, redirect Steve’s attention. “But before you go off on some other tangent, just remember this. I am your friend Steve, and I will never, never turn my back on you. If you don’t want to talk to somebody, you can always come here and talk to me. I’ll listen, and try to help you best I can. But to do that, you gotta promise to keep that phone on you, and swear to me that you’ll
call when you need me.” That stopped Steve dead in his tracks. Because it was a truth, one of their truths, and even in the middle of his rage, that Bucky knew really wasn’t directed at him, Steve could not deny that. “End of the line, pal. Don’t you ever forget it.”

Steve stared at him, and Bucky stared right back. He could see it in Steve’s eyes how he was trying to find a counter-argument, a work-around. But the truth was…the truth was, there was no work-around. Bucky wasn’t lying, had laid his cards out on the table. It took Steve several long moments of study, before he finally, finally reached for the new phone, curling his fingers around it as if it were the only thing in the room, the world, Steve’s life right now that made any sense. Bucky almost wanted to take it back, just so he could shove it up the asses of every single manipulative bastard who had put that wariness in Steve’s eyes.

“I won’t,” Steve eventually said around a swallow. Bucky accepted it for what it was. It was all he was going to get at the moment, and he knew it. But baby steps would have to do for now, and then he could work on shifting around the rest of the tiles in the mosaic.

After another moment of that strange, new, timid silence from Steve, he eventually looked down at the phone, tapping the touchscreen to turn it on. He did a double-take, his brow furrowing, before he looked back up at Bucky.

“Wait a minute…Did you set a picture of Larry as my wallpaper?”

“Tch,” Bucky clicked his teeth as rose from the table. “Don’t be an asshole Steve. That’s Moe.” Humor, it was another weapon in his arsenal.

There was a puff of air that may have been a huff, a chuff, or maybe, just maybe, the smallest of laughs.

“Can I ask where my other phone is?” Steve queried, once he was done with his tittering little breaths.

“By the door with the rest of your gear. I washed your uniform while you were sleeping.” Bucky started to pull the trays out of the oven, placing them on the stove before he reached into the cabinets for some plates. He figured it was safe enough to take out the knives. “How are you feeling, by the way?”

“A lot better,” Steve said, smiling another one of those small, hesitant smiles that broke Bucky’s
heart, once Bucky placed the platter towering with bacon on the table. “I probably should get back after I eat though. Check on everyone else.”

“Figured you would,” Bucky nodded as he set everything out, and sat down. As he did, he looked at Steve, making sure to catch his gaze before he continued. “But, before you decide that I’m right, that I’ve always been right, and you should listen to me, but you won’t, so instead you’re going to ignore me until you think I’ve forgotten about everything I just said, you better make sure your ass is at the park bright and early tomorrow morning for our run. You don’t want to test me on this Steve, I’m telling you that right now.”

“Or else you’ll what?” Steve challenged. Bucky smirked at him.

“Or else I’ll show up with Sarge at Stark Tower and let him take a dump in the lobby. My dog is over two-hundred pounds now. Imagine the size of his shits, never mind the smell. There are people in the Himalayas who call me up whenever Sarge takes a dump, to complain about the smell. You don’t want me letting him do that in that fancy tower of yours.”

“You wouldn’t,” Steve looked mortified.

“Watch me.”

And then, just because Bucky had the absolute best dog in the world, it was at that exact moment Sarge decided to bark his agreement.

Chapter End Notes

Bucky wants to let you know that he WOULD show up at Stark Tower with Sarge too. (Fortunately, Steve knows that.)

Also, once more, ALL HAIL THE MIGHTY BETA MERRY_RF!! They have been working super hard these past few days to help me beat my posting deadline, and deserve all the wine, cookies and chocolate! Seriously, MIRACLE WORKER thy name is Merry_rf!
Steve was there, bright and early, as promised (or as Bucky demanded) the next day.

“Hey, how’s it going? How’re you feeling?” Bucky asked, studying Steve carefully as he knelt down to greet Sarge, who was wagging his tail and once again eagerly inspecting Steve’s face with his tongue to see if he’d eaten anything interesting since Sarge had last seen him. Steve seemed to be doing okay; his eyes were clear, his color had improved, and there was barely a neat line of raised pinkish flesh, surrounded by yellowing skin where the bruise on his face used to be. There was a carefulness to his movements though, the slightest hitch of breath, that told Bucky there was still some residual pain, which of course, Steve was choosing to ignore. Typical, but not surprising, and Bucky could work around that. But, he had come, instead of trying to avoid Bucky for as long as possible, and Bucky considered that progress.

“Better, a lot better,” Steve said through a scrunched nose while Sarge continued to bathe his face with his tongue. “Jesus Sarge! Lay off. It’s not like you didn’t just see me yesterday.” But there was laughter in Steve’s voice, relief altering the angle of his shoulders as he knelt there adoring Bucky’s dog.

“And the rest of your team? They alright?”

“Yeah, they are. Some bumps and bruises, a few broken bones, but Stark has got the best doctors in the world working for him, and everyone’s gonna be okay, thank god,” Steve nodded, before he finally rose from his crouch. “Sam wanted me to thank you for keeping him up to date, and, um…”

“Yes?” Bucky arched an eyebrow at Steve.

“And I wanted to, uh, apologize, for showing up the way I did. I shouldn’t have done that and I-“

“We talked about this, Steve,” Bucky cut him off, while sighing internally. It was time to initiate Plan B. Fortunately, Bucky had come prepared. “It wasn’t a problem. I’m just glad you still trust me enough to turn to me when you need to.”

“Yeah, well…Still.”
“Yeah, well, still,” Bucky mocked, reaching into the canvas bag he’d brought with him. “Did ya eat yet?”

“I grabbed something before I got on the train.”

“Oh kay,” Bucky nodded. “Guess that means you don’t want any of the sandwiches I made for breakfast. No worries, I can just give them to Sarge.”

“Sandwiches?” That had definitely caught Steve’s attention.

“Scrambled eggs, cheese and sausage on a croissant.” Bucky had actually used three types of cheese, and homemade croissants, fresh out of the oven. “Brought a couple with me, as well as a thermos of coffee. But like I said, no worries. Sarge can take care of the rest.”

“Now let’s not be too hasty,” Steve interjected.

“Uh-huh,” Bucky said, heading toward the nearby bench. Gotcha.

And that was how Bucky kept the idiot from trying to over-exert himself when it was obvious he wasn’t in any shape to go running. Shift the tiles and change the pattern, and food, especially Bucky’s food, was one of the best tools in his arsenal. They spent the next thirty minutes sitting in the park, eating breakfast, Bucky deliberately choosing to discuss nothing of great importance, while keeping a close eye on Steve, watching as in slow increments he relaxed even further.

Then it was another thirty minutes of playing with Sarge, tossing a tennis ball back and forth, allowing his dog to play and Steve to just be. That was something else Bucky realized yesterday afternoon once Steve left, and after he spent a good hour taking the remains of his rage out on Greg the Second. There was probably no one in Steve’s life, with perhaps the exception of Sam, who just let Steve be. And even Sam, as decent a fellow as he was, had never really known Steve from before. He knew Sam was trying his best, but Steve was a living legend brought back from the dead, and Sam, just like everyone else in the past eighty years, had grown up learning all about the myth of Captain America. It was inevitable that knowledge had tainted his perspective, and no matter how hard he tried, Bucky knew that mythos influenced how he viewed and interacted with Steve. Bucky was the only one left who had known Steve before the mantle, shield, and red, white and blue of his uniform came to replace who he really was. It was both a privilege and a burden, but it meant he was going to have to tread in ways both careful and consistent if he wanted Steve to ever admit he needed help.
So a relaxing morning, with food, easy conversation, sharp sunlight and cool breezes, just like they used to have when they’d both been kids, and Steve had finally overcome his latest round of sickness. Back then, Bucky used to drag Steve down to Coney Island or up onto their roof where Bucky would ramble on and on about the latest pulp novel he had read, and Steve would listen, sketchbook on his lap, attempting to capture all the images Bucky so carefully tried to convey.

It was just a few minutes before Bucky’s alarm was set to go off (he had been paying careful attention to the time), Steve having just thrown the tennis ball for what must have been the thousandth time, when Bucky glanced up and saw a familiar figure running with her pram, making her way over the crest of a hill on the path not too far away.

“Looking good there Janet!” Bucky encouraged her with a wave.

“Beating my own time by two minutes!” she answered, without breaking her stride.

“Damn!” Bucky called back. “Go you!”

“I decided me and Eva are going to run in the NYC marathon in November!” She wasn’t even panting. “And once I cross the finish line, I’m gonna run right up to my asshole of a husband and hand him divorce papers!”

“No shit?”

“No shit! That motherfucker had the fucking balls to tell me that I’m starting to look like a body-builder, and that’s not the woman he married! Well fuck you Edwin! You can kiss my runner’s ass goodbye, you self-centered tub of lard!”

“If you do, me and Sarge will be waiting to congratulate you at the finish line!”

“Good! Then Sarge can bite that fucker’s face off!”

“It’s a date!” Bucky laughed, happy for her. Bucky had Greg the Second; apparently Janet used her running to work out her anger and clear her head.
“Who’s that?” Steve asked, cutting into Bucky’s field of vision.

“That’s Janet,” Bucky smiled, with another wave. Janet waved back, all the while maintaining her steady stride.

“And who’s Janet?” Steve pressed, glancing over his shoulder to where Bucky had been looking, with what Bucky could have sworn was narrowed eyes and a frown, before he turned all his attention back to Bucky.

“She’s another early morning runner. We cross paths sometimes. She started running cos her asshole of a husband started complaining about her weight after she had Eva. And then she kept running because she loves it. Looks like she loves it more than she loves her husband. Can’t say I blame her. From what she’s said, the guy’s a dick.”

“Huh.”

“Haven’t you ever noticed her before? I know she’s been here a couple of times we’ve been out running.” Bucky wondered.

“Can’t say that I have,” Steve said, tossing Sarge’s drool covered tennis ball from hand to hand. Bucky had to lift his head to catch a final glance of Janet over Steve’s shoulder, giving her one last wave before she disappeared from view. Jesus Christ, the guy really was built like a tank these days. “But then again, I’m usually too busy looking over my shoulder to make sure you haven’t fallen too far behind.”

“Oh really?” Bucky asked, all thoughts of Janet completely forgotten.

“Yes really.” The bastard was actually smirking at him.

“Yeah well, you make sure your ass is here bright and early tomorrow morning, and we’ll see who beats who,” Bucky said, just as his alarm went off. “Don’t worry, me and Sarge’ll go easy on you, considering you’re still recovering and all.”

“Bring it, jerk,” Steve smiled, tossing the tennis ball so Bucky was forced to catch it. “And make
sure you bring some of those chocolate chocolate-chip muffins of yours so we can celebrate me kicking your ass.”

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Steve didn’t end up kicking Bucky’s ass the next morning. It was close, it was always close, but Bucky ended up finishing half a second before him.

Bucky brought the muffins anyway. And eventually, after much pouting and begging from Steve, he ended up sharing them.

He was magnanimous that way.

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Over the course of the next week and a half, their lives, such as they were, went back to normal. Bucky knew it was only temporary. There were things Steve needed to deal with that he was still refusing to, and Bucky had to be careful not to push too hard, or else Steve would shut himself down, and lock even Bucky out of his life. And Bucky, well, Bucky had his own life as well; Steve was definitely a part of that now, but Bucky had learned, had forced himself to remember that this time, it couldn’t be all about Steve. There were still the issues he had to deal with, not only his own recovery, but his friendships, hopes and dreams. They were what helped nurture him and replenish his reserves when his own monsters came out of his closet, ready to attack. He could not, would not, forgo that for anyone else, not even Steve. He had done that before, and he knew that way only led to madness. He had fought hard for it, with bloodied teeth and nails, and nothing was going to make him give it up.

That didn’t mean he would turn his back on Steve; in fact, he watched him even closer than before. It just meant he had to find the balance, one that was manageable and didn’t consume him like so much of his past had consumed him. Or make the same mistakes he had before.

Easier said than done, Bucky knew. And Bucky also knew, as Dr. Callahan had once told him, that the biggest lies were often the ones a person told themselves. He just didn’t know which one of the two of them were lying to themselves more, him or Steve. Bucky didn’t want to think about it, even though he knew he needed to.

Instead, in his mind, mornings became Steve and Bucky (and Sarge) time. Sometimes they would
meet in the park, and sometimes Steve would knock on his door, so Bucky could feed him before they set out for their morning run. There wasn’t a repeat of Steve showing up so out of it he barely recognized where he was, but that didn’t mean Bucky had forgotten. But he never asked Steve about it, changing his tactics instead, trying to give him more avenues of expression and release. So he asked Steve questions and tried to determine what did and didn’t engage his interest. What color did Steve think he should repaint his basement walls, since it was the one floor of the house Bucky hadn’t finished yet, (after taking a careful look around, Steve recommended a golden, buttery brown.) When Bucky answered his knock one morning, pretending to be engrossed in a book, and Steve asked him what he was reading, Bucky oh-so-casually told him he could borrow it. (It was Good Omens, by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman. Steve came back the next day, having read it from cover to cover, asking if Bucky had anything else he could read. Bucky lent him the first volume of Gaiman’s Sandman series, knowing both the storylines and the artwork would fascinate Steve.) Bucky also started texting him on a semi-regular basis; usually pictures of Sarge and his latest antics, which always got him a smiley face in return, but sometimes pictures of flowers from the latest gardening catalogue he was looking through, asking Steve what he thought Bucky should plan on planting when spring finally rolled around again. Or, when Bucky was especially feeling like a shit, a photo of his latest meal; the one of prime rib with baked potatoes, garlic bread, and cheesecake for dessert earned him a string of curses. Bucky retaliated by including a video of Sarge licking his plate clean, with the message ‘Whoops. I was saving that for you, but it looks like someone else got to it first.’ Bucky had to push himself extra hard the next morning to make sure Steve didn’t kick his ass when they ran. It was worth it though.

Baby steps. Miniscule shifting of the tiles, not to distract Steve so much this time, but to show him there were other things, an entire world out there for him to explore and embrace, more than what SHIELD expected (demanded) of him, more than what Steve expected (demanded) of himself. He hoped it helped, that it loosened some of the valves on the pressure cooker of Steve’s life. The world could live without Captain America; it had for over eighty years. But Bucky, well, Bucky didn’t want to live in a world without Stevie in it, even if he knew admitting that made him the biggest liar of them all.

And Steve seemed to be doing better, whatever better meant for him these days, always with a smile on his face when Bucky either first opened his door, or snarked at him when Steve finally found wherever he and Sarge decided to hide themselves that morning before their runs. His posture still shifted and changed whenever they were about to part ways, especially two Fridays later, when it meant they weren’t going to be seeing each other for the next two days.

“Plans for the weekend?” Bucky casually asked as they stood side by side, watching Sarge chase the same squirrel up the same tree for the tenth time.

“Not really,” Steve admitted. Bucky swore he could hear each and every fiber of each and every muscle in Steve’s body tightening. “What about you? More classes?”

“Nope,” Bucky shook his head. “No classes. Even apprentice dog trainers get days off.”
“Days off?”

“Yeah, you know. Weekends, holidays… You do know what days off are, don’t you?” Bucky asked, secretly wondering if Steve did know what days off were, and the last time he’d allowed himself to have one.

“Yeah, I do know what days off are, you jerk,” Steve responded in a tone that answered all of Bucky’s questions.

“Uh-huh,” Bucky grunted, and then forced himself to shake off all the anger and rage at the lack of care from those who were supposedly responsible, at the lack of Steve’s own sense of self-preservation. “Anyway, Saturdays Sarge and I usually get up early, and after breakfast, hop into Marlene, head out of the city, find a trail and go for a hike.”

“A hike?” Steve asked, disbelief in his voice.

“Yeah a hike. You gotta a problem with that?”

“No,” Steve shook his head. “It just surprised me, is all. You were always such a city kid, growing up, even more than me. And then, during the war…” Steve faded off, as if realizing he had ventured into dangerous territory. Bucky sighed.

“Yeah well you know, trees and shit are actually pretty nice when there aren’t any Nazis around trying to shoot at you. Or when you don’t have to sleep out in that shit for months at a time,” Bucky said. “This time of year especially, when the leaves are all turning, and you aren’t getting eaten alive by mosquitoes. It’s quiet, and the fresh air’s nice. I love it. It’s good exercise, and helps clear my head. Sarge really enjoys it to. He gets to explore and play, and get even more goddamned leaves in his goddamned coat. Dammit Sarge. Did you hump a bush when I wasn’t looking?” Bucky finished with a grumble, kneeling down to once again start picking at all of the detritus caught in Sarge’s fur.

“Huh.” There was so much in that simple word. Longing. Hunger. Both hopelessness and hope. And loneliness, so much loneliness. A forestful of it that Bucky could hear, and see when he finally looked up at Steve, to find him staring into the trees, as if trying to imagine all of what Bucky had just described to him. Bucky felt himself sighing again, silently this time, knowing what he had to do. He picked one last leaf from Sarge’s ear, before he rose to his feet, dusting his hands on his pants.
“Be at the house by seven a.m. sharp. Pack yourself a good lunch and bring plenty of water. Make sure you wear some good hiking boots too. We’re gonna be there all day, and I don’t want to hear you bitching about your feet.”

“Bucky, you don’t have to-“

“Oh-seven-hundred-hours Rogers. If you’re not there by then, me, Sarge and Marlene are leaving without you.”

With that, Bucky turned and started walking away, Sarge falling in step at his side, leaving Steve standing there, gaping at his back, five minutes before his alarm was scheduled to go off.

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The thing about it was, Bucky really loved his Saturday hikes with Sarge. For all the reasons he had shared with Steve, and for others he couldn’t even begin to verbalize. There was something simultaneously energizing and calming about them, where no matter what else was going on in his life or who he was sharing the trails with that particular day, in the end he was just a guy and his dog, feeling the sun on his face and enjoying the scenery. Sometimes he chose the more challenging hikes, and others times more easy-going ones, but no matter which trail he chose, he always ended up enjoying the fresh air, and the illusion that the city was so far away. Sarge seemed to enjoy them as much as he did, if not more, some part of him reconnecting to both the puppy he still was and the wolves he had descended from. They could spend hours together, and often did, simply exploring the unfamiliar terrain, marveling at what they discovered.

He wondered (and worried) if Steve would be able to appreciate it the same way he did, but whatever the outcome, Steve arrived at his house, bright and early, five minutes before Bucky told him he needed to be there. After feeding him a hearty breakfast, and making sure Sarge had a chance to go to the bathroom, Bucky piled them all into his SUV and they were off.

It wasn’t just the hiking itself that Bucky enjoyed about his Saturdays. There were other factors as well, lots of them, and Steve was about to witness what Bucky was like these days, when he was truly at his best.

The first was a trip through the drive-thru of a Starbucks at the first rest-stop once they had crossed the Verrazano Bridge, where in spite of Steve’s protests, Bucky ordered two venti strawberry frappuccinos, and a large cup of whipped cream; nothing else, just whipped cream.
“Is this the hot guy with the awesome dog?” the voice over the speaker asked.

“Hey Dawn,” Bucky smiled. “Is that you?”

“Is it,” the voice laughed. “Is Sarge with you today? You guys going for another hike?”

“He is and we are. Say hello Sarge,” Bucky said, at which point Sarge, who had pushed his head through the gap in the front seats, barked. He knew what was coming, and as much as he loved Steve, loved Bucky, at this particular moment Dawn was his favorite person in the world.

“Heya Sarge, see ya in just a bit. That’ll be thirteen-ninety-five. You can pull on up.” Bucky drove to the pick-up window, Steve grumbling the entire time about over-priced drinkable ice cream, where a round-face, young blonde woman with red spectacles was standing next to a dark-skinned woman who was maybe a year or two older, Bucky’s order already prepared.

“Hey, Hot Guy. Hey Sarge,” the second woman said as she started to hand Bucky’s drinks over.

“Hey Lia, hey Dawn, how’s it going today?” Bucky smiled, watching as they both leaned over to take a turn at scratching Sarge’s ear.

“Better now,” Lia grinned back, and then noticed Steve in the passenger seat. “And oh my god, now there’s two of you. Hey, Hot Guy Number two.”

“Um…hello,” Steve blushed.

“Two Hot Guys and A Dog. Somebody should definitely make that into a movie,” Dawn chimed in from over Lia’s shoulder. “Are you taking Hot Guy Two with you hiking today?”

Bucky chatted with them both for a bit, but not too long, aware of the line behind him, before he thanked them both, placed a generous tip in the jar, and pulled into a parking space. It was a small diversion, one that wouldn’t take too long, but it was also part of their routine, and Sarge was vibrating with excitement. Bucky reached for the cup of whipped cream, un-popped the lid, and said, “Sarge, heel.” When they had first started taking these day trips out of the city, it could be hit or miss as to whether or not Sarge would obey. But that had been several months ago, and Sarge’s response to his training had only improved, so while he was obviously interested, Sarge sat back on his haunches, and waited. Bucky made him hold for two minutes, while Steve watched curiously, until
with a happy smile, Bucky praised, “Good boy Sarge! *Release,*” and held the whipped cream up for Sarge to devour. Which he did, with three greedy slurs of his long tongue. Both Bucky and Steve laughed at his antics, and then it was time to hit the road again. Flicking his sunglasses back on, Bucky opened all the windows, selected a music list from his phone, and did exactly that.

Because this, *this* was also a part of their Saturday adventures, and probably the one Bucky enjoyed the most. Nothing but him, Marlene and Sarge, and the open road, wind in his hair, and whatever music he was in the mood for that day playing over the speakers. He was going through a bit of a funk/hip-hop phase these days, so while George Clinton sang about *Atomic Dogs,* Bucky crooned along, bopping his head, while from behind Sarge went from side to side, sticking his head out of the window, barking at all the appropriate moments in the song. In spite of it being a weekend, it was still early enough that there was barely any traffic, and Bucky was generous with the speed, allowing Marlene a chance to do what she was made for. Until what seemed like only a few minutes later, but was really an hour and fifteen minutes, just as Notorious B.I.G.’s *Hypnotize* wrapped up, Bucky was pulling off Route Eighty, and into the parking area right outside the entrance to the Appalachian Trail.

“You all right there Steve?” Bucky asked as he shut off the ignition. Steve had been surprisingly quiet, even though his mouth had been open the entire time. But Bucky didn’t fail to notice, despite his earlier protests, he had finished his strawberry frappuccino.

“No, I’m,” Steve paused to take a blink and then shook his head. “I’m fine. That…That was just one of the weirdest things I’ve ever experienced.”

“Seriously?” Bucky rolled his eyes in disbelief as he stepped out of his truck. “You’ve fought aliens, and *this* is one of the weirdest things you’ve ever experienced?”

“No, it’s just…” Steve paused to rest his forearms on the roof of Bucky’s SUV, staring at him. “It was just so *you.*”

“What?” That caused Bucky to stop mid-motion at the back of his truck, where he had opened to door to let Sarge out. Sarge didn’t immediately jump down, waiting for Bucky to give him the command; this was another behavior he had to master, if he were to pass his certification, and one he had learned very quickly. “What do you mean it was just so me?”

“You were the one who always loved music, outta the two of us…Before.” Steve stopped to swallow and again shake his head. “You always knew the latest songs on the radio, and whenever you had any spare cash you would come home with the latest records. I remember coming home sometimes, and you would be in the kitchen, singing and bopping along to whatever was playing, on the wireless, just like today.” Steve looked away then, and Bucky could have sworn he saw the slightest flush rising on his cheeks. “That’s how I always knew you were home. I could hear it all the
way down on the second floor, and I knew that meant you were already there, waiting for me.”

“Oh,” Bucky said. He hadn’t remembered that, hadn’t known Steve remembered that. It wasn’t that the memory wasn’t there; it was, he just had to go looking for it. It took him a few seconds, his hand automatically sinking itself into Sarge’s fur, while he searched, trying to follow the trail Steve had laid down, until he found it. Distant, grey around the edges, but there. The heat of the summer, the heat of their stove, wearing his shirtsleeves and suspenders, dancing around their small, cramped kitchen while…

“Count Basie,” he blurted suddenly. “I used to love Count Basie.”

“You did,” Steve nodded. “And Billie Holiday. You used to love listening to her too.”

“Huh.” And then it was Bucky’s turn to duck his head in order to hide his own blush. Because the memories were becoming clearer, more of them now than even just a second ago, and he could remember it, just like Steve said. Except…except, he also remembered how once Steve had closed the door behind him, he would take Steve into his arms, and spin him around, dancing to whatever song had been playing, their day apart forgotten as they laughed and laughed while they danced and danced. A beautiful memory, now a bittersweet one, that Bucky didn’t want to linger on.

“Well,” he said instead, deciding it was his turn to be the one who deflected. “I didn’t have a car back then either. I probably woulda been even worse if I did. Down, Sarge.”

“Thank god you never had a car,” Steve decided to play along. “You’d have given your mother, every mother in our old neighborhood, a heart attack if you did.”

“Hey! Are you criticizing my driving?”

“I didn’t say a word,” Steve chuckled as he finally closed his door and joined Bucky at the back of his truck, where Bucky was strapping Sarge into his service-dog harness.

“You better keep not saying a word, ya punk, or me and Marlene will leave your ass up here when it’s time to go home.”

“Uh-huh. I’m quaking in my boots over here. Now come on Nature Boy. Show me why we had to drive an hour and a half outta the city to take a walk.”
“Yeah, just you wait.” Bucky straightened, and ran his fingers through his hair, before he pulled a bandana out of his pocket and tied it around his head. He slung his backpack over his shoulders, looped Sarge’s lead around his wrist, and grinned what he knew was a Cheshire cat grin. “You’ll see. Now do you have to go to the bathroom before we get started? ‘Cos they kinda frown on anyone pissing on their trees out here.”

Bucky paid for his parking, and they made a final pitstop, before Steve finally popped a baseball cap on his head, slid on his own pair of shades, and they were on their way.

Bucky had chosen the Appalachian trail for today’s walk, because it had a seemingly endless number of trails at a variety of difficulty levels, and there was always something new to see. There were rivers and streams, waterfalls and lakes, historic buildings and stunning views. There were fewer people on the more difficult trails, and he could let Sarge off his lead, allowing him to scamper ahead and sniff the world to his heart’s content, while he took the time to admire all the colors and sounds you could never find in the city. With autumn in its full glory, there were reds, yellows, oranges, a kaleidoscope of leaves kissing their goodbye to summer, and the soft sound of gravel and dirt beneath their feet, as he and Steve did what they had always done, always had been so good at doing, and found their own way.

And for all of Steve’s initial doubt, it quickly became apparent he was just as captivated as Bucky always was whenever he went out for a hike, allowing the magic of Nature to embrace him, hold him in her arms that were cool, calm and welcoming, quieting all the storms he carried within.

They barely said a word to each other as they walked, Bucky being the one to break the silence from time to time, to either call or whistle Sarge back if he had wandered off just a bit too far. Sarge always came trotting back, panting happily, his coat covered in even more leaves and brambles that Bucky knew he’d have to spend a good twenty minutes brushing out before they could climb back into his truck. Two hours later, they reached a crest of a hill, where there were several logs they could sit on, and Bucky called for a break, so they could eat their lunch and Bucky could feed Sarge.

“Really Steve?” Bucky eyed the bag of granola and apple Steve had packed suspiciously, once he pulled his own Tupperware bento box out of his backpack. The bento boxes were a find he had discovered on one of his many trips to Chinatown. They were large enough to carry plenty of food for a man of his size and appetites, with sections to keep everything from getting soggy.

“What?” Steve asked around a very loud crunch of apple. “You said bring food. I brought food.”

“You brought bird seed,” Bucky groused, as he assembled his sandwich of a hearty pre-sliced baguette, thick slices of roast beef, and then drizzled it all with an au jus sauce from a separate
container, all of it homemade. There was also the macaroni salad he had made, along with a dark chocolate and raspberry brownie for dessert. Steve watched him the entire time.

“I mean, it’s not like I don’t have plenty to eat now, most of the time,” he went on, staring meaningfully at the other half of Bucky’s sandwich. “And it’s not like I had any idea we were going to be gone so long.”

“I told you we were going hiking, and that it was going to take all day,” Bucky countered around a mouthful of sandwich.

“Yeah, but you never said we were going to be in the middle of nowhere either.”

“I’m going to leave your ass in the middle of nowhere if you don’t stop looking at my food like that.”

“Really Buck? You’re just gonna let me go hungry like that? Your oldest friend?”

“You got your granola.”

“Which I would share with you, if you asked.”

“Ain’t gonna. ’Cos unlike some people, I came well prepared.”

“Really Buck?”

“I told you to pack plenty of food. Not my fault you still don’t know how to listen.”

“Fine,” Steve sighed, picking morosely at his granola, while casting shy glances at Bucky out of the corner of his eye. Bucky could not believe the nerve of him, and decided to ignore him while he continued to eat his sandwich. Steve sighed again, this time with an actual pout, the motherfucker, before he went back to poking at his granola.

“What kind of sandwich is that anyway?” he quietly mumbled less than thirty seconds later. “It looks really good.”
“Oh my god! I can’t believe you!”

“What? I’m just saying is all.”

“All right fine! Fine! You win!” Bucky reached for his backpack again. There was only one way this was ever going to turn out, and they both knew it. “Here!” Bucky tossed the second container he had packed at Steve’s chest, knowing this was going to happen. “But you’re paying for gas on the way home.”

“Deal,” the smug bastard smiled, the lid already pried off from the container.

“Jerk.”

“Oh my god! This is amazing Bucky!”

“Uh-huh,” Bucky grunted at him, before, at the exact same time, they both broke out into a round of snickers. “You’re such an asshole.”

“Yep,” Steve agreed easily enough and went back to eating his (Bucky’s) food. They fell quiet after that, enjoying their lunch in a companionable silence. Once Bucky was done, he used a wet-wipe to clean his hands, returned the container to his back pack, and leaned back on his hands, staring down into the valley below. It really was a perfect October day; warm in the sun, cool in the shadows, the same breeze that tickled the grasses far down below running her fingers through the ends of his hair. Sarge was laying contentedly at his feet, and the air crisp and clean as he took deep, steady breaths to
satisfy the hunger for it in his lungs. He loved days like this, when once upon a time not so long ago he never thought he’d ever have them. A gift he could give himself, that didn’t cost anyone anything, because he was still here, still alive, and he would never take days like this for granted again. Peace, he supposed it was, and knew it was fleeting, temporary, and there were still plenty of difficult days ahead of him. But he could always come back here, even during his darkest moments, especially during his darkest moments, and recapture this, this feeling, and remember that life was always worth living if it meant sunlight on his face, wind in his hair and Sarge at his feet.

When the moment passed, once he was ready to let go of it, he opened his eyes with a smile, turned his head and found Steve staring at him. There was an expression on his face, a look in his eyes Bucky didn’t understand, couldn’t remember ever seeing on him before.

“What?” he asked softly, still feeling warm, still feeling content. Steve shook his head.

“Nothing,” he said, turning his attention to the valley below him. “Just,” he shrugged, “you were right. It really is beautiful. Wish I brought my sketchpad with me.”

“You still draw?” Bucky had been curious, but hadn’t asked. Steve had always loved to draw, but he hadn’t mentioned it once since they’d started talking again, and Bucky worried it was something else he’d lost.

“Not much.” Steve kept his blue eyes trained on the view. “But every once in a while, when inspiration strikes, I go back to it.”

“You should bring them, the next time, your pencils and your sketchbook.”

“There’s going to be a next time?” Steve asked, turning away from the landscape he’d been so absorbed in.

“If you want,” Bucky smiled at him. He liked this Steve, hadn’t seen anything close to it in far too long. He would do anything in his power to allow Steve to have this, this moment, this magic, for as long as possible.

“Yeah, okay. I’d like that. I’d like that a lot.”

“Good.” Then Bucky kicked at his ankle. “Anyway, you finally finished eating my food? You’re
welcome for that, by the way. Cos there’s a few more miles to go before the trail circles back.”

“Yeah, I’m good.” Steve handed Bucky his container. “I definitely want to see the rest of this trail.”

They spent the rest of the day hiking together, sharing periods of easy conversation with moments of just an easy quiet, until the sun finally began to set and they returned to the parking area, where Bucky’s truck was one of the last vehicles left in the lot. This time Sarge, who had been well exercised, spread out in the back seat to doze, and instead of putting on any music, Bucky selected a podcast he’d downloaded to his phone. He sometimes listened to audio books, or one of the podcasts he’d started following on his drives home. There were a few on cooking he really enjoyed, as well as a couple on gardening he’d begun to follow. But that early evening, with Steve there, he decided to try a new one he’d been recommended.

“What’s this?” Steve asked as Bucky pulled out of the lot.

“It’s called Welcome to Night Vale.”

“Is it any good?”

“Dunno,” Bucky shrugged. “Angie, one of the members of my VA group, told me about it. According to her, it’s a classic, and she couldn’t believe I’d never heard of it. Said she’d thought I’d get a kick out of it, so, we’ll see.”

Ninety minutes later, as he pulled into his driveway, Bucky had to admit Angie was correct, because that had been one of the weirdest and strangest podcasts he’d ever heard. And he had absolutely adored every second of it.

“Are there more of those, or is that the only one?” Steve asked, his voice telling Bucky he felt the same way.

“There’s supposedly a whole bunch of them. I’m going to download the rest of them tonight,” Bucky said as he unhooked his phone.

“Yeah well, you better not listen to any of them without me,” Steve proclaimed.
“What?” The balls on this guy. The absolutely, bossiest, pain in Bucky’s ass, balls on him.

“You heard me. We’ll listen to the next one next week when we’re driving back.”

“Seriously, you try to be nice to someone, and this is the thanks I get?”

“Oh please,” Steve waved him off. “Consider this payback for all those stupid episodes of Flash Gordon you used to make me listen to.”

“Flash Gordon was not stupid.”

“Bucky, take it from the one person, the only person in this car who has actually fought aliens. That shit was stupid. It was stupid then, and it’s still stupid now.”

“Get outta my truck!”

“Get outta your own truck.”

“That don’t even make any sense.”

“Yeah well, neither did Flash Gordon.”

“Oh my god! I’m gonna call Sam and tell him what a pain in the ass you are.”

“Trust me, he already knows.”

“And then I’m gonna send him the video of Sarge chasing you all over the park before he bit you in the ass.”

“You recorded that?”
Whoops.

“Bucky,” Steve growled at him.

Assess and adapt. Assess and adapt. It was time to change his protocols. So that’s exactly what Bucky did. He pulled the keys from the ignition, popped open his door, and with a brisk “Sarge, house,” jumped out of his truck. Sarge climbed over into the front seat, his fluffy tail in Steve’s face enough of a distraction before they were on the ground, slamming his door shut, when Bucky used his remote to turn on the child safety locks. It would take at least two minutes before Steve figured a way out, and by that time both Bucky and his dog would be safely inside, and most importantly, out of Steve’s reach.

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The following week started in much the same way. Once Steve had spent the first half hour of their Monday run complaining about Bucky and his unsavory phone habits, they finished their run as they always did, playing with Sarge.

But it quickly became obvious there were small, tiny changes, at least in Steve. Or at least in regard to how Steve began to interact with him.

For the first time, Steve was the one who initiated one of their text conversations, sending a message to Bucky asking him what was the name of the song Bucky had played when he first pulled out of Starbucks. Bucky not only told him, but sent him a link to a Spotify playlist with George Clinton’s entire discography. When he showed up for their run on Tuesday, he was absolutely beaming, laughing as he shared with Bucky the story of how Sam had walked into the gym in Stark Tower to find Steve lifting weights and humming along to *Do Fries Go With That Shake*, and froze, unable to move for a solid ten minutes while he tried to process what he was seeing. Bucky had wondered why he’d gotten a text from Sam asking ’What the hell did you do to him?’ the night before, which he hadn’t answered, but now knew the reason for. Steve also asked Bucky that day if he could borrow the next three volumes of the *Sandman*, as well as the first two books in Terry Pratchett’s *Discworld* series, which Bucky happily lent him, along with the first *Harry Potter*. That book was all Steve could talk about during their Wednesday run, when he followed Bucky back to his house so he could borrow the rest.

The rest of the week passed as they had normally been, until Saturday, when Steve showed up at Bucky’s house bright and early, sheepishly smiling as he handed over a bag full of groceries, including some of the sweetest smelling apples, pears, bananas, and organic peanut butter, of all things, because Bucky really was feeding him a hell of a lot these days. It was only fair that he
contributed, since he did have a very well-paying job now (as well as even more money in his bank account than Bucky, although Buck never asked). He didn’t want Bucky to think he was trying to take advantage, and ‘Oh, by the way, what did you make for lunch for us today?’ (Jerk. But Bucky had prepared healthy portions of fried chicken, potato salad, and cranberry oatmeal cookies which he’d packed into two of his bento boxes). Once they’d pulled away from Starbucks, Steve still grousing about Bucky’s strawberry frappuccino obsession, while he slurped from his own, Bucky, feeling in the mood for a bit of blues fusion, had played Treat Her Right, The Cowboy Junkies and Mazzy Star on the drive up to the Denton and Mullet Brook Falls trail near the Neversink River. It was a less challenging hike, but more scenic, much more isolated and wilder than their previous one. They were both smiling at the end of the day, when the three of them piled back into Marlene, and Bucky turned on the next episode of Night Vale before he started the drive back to Brooklyn.

The following Tuesday, when Bucky came home after he was done helping Andy with his class at Petco, and a lovely half an hour just chatting with Tara, he pulled into his driveway, and was surprised to find Steve sitting on his front stoop, a plastic bag hanging from between his hands.

“Hey,” he said, after he’d locked up his truck and followed his overjoyed dog, who was already licking Steve’s face.

“Hey,” Steve laughed, his eyes closed while Sarge bathed his cheeks with his tongue. But there was something weary in it, something heavy, in spite of the way Steve had been smiling at him a little over twelve hours ago.

“This is a surprise,” Bucky continued, as he rested his leg on the first step in order to give himself enough distance to continue his study.

“Yeah, sorry ‘bout that,” Steve said, finally opening his eyes to peer up at Bucky. “It’s just…” And Bucky suddenly understood.

“No, not too bad, just…”

“Not too great?” Steve’s silence was answer enough.

“It’s just,” Steve tried again, and then decided to change tactics mid-sentence. “I read the rest of the Harry Potter books. And they were great, I loved them, even if they were written for kids. Then I
looked them up online, and did you know there were movies? And I figured, since you were the one who gave me the books, maybe we could watch them together.”

“Yeah, I know. I got ‘em all on Blu-ray.”

“Oh.” Steve’s posture slumped even further. “I probably shouldn’t have just shown up here without-” And Bucky couldn’t have that.

“C’mon,” he said, nudging Steve’s shoulder with his own before he rose. “Let’s go inside, and I’ll heat up some leftovers, and we can watch them.”

“Are you sure?” But Steve’s voice, his eyes, his posture had all changed from one instant to the next, hope replacing wariness, energy when he’d looked so drawn just a second ago. “I don’t mean to impose.”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Bucky chided him as he slid his key into the lock. “And besides, Moe’s missed you. You need to say hello.”

The next morning, after their run, before they went their separate ways, Bucky reached into his pocket, and tossed the keys he’d stashed there toward Steve, who caught them in his right hand.

“Buck?” Steve asked, staring down at them.

“The security code is zero-seven-zero-three-zero-four-zero-one-zero,” Bucky said instead. “I meant it when I said it, that you’re always welcome here. This way, you can let yourself inside whenever you get here, instead of sitting on my porch like a punk, fucking up the property values. Just text me to let me know you’re here. If I come home and somebody’s in my house that I haven’t been expecting, well, they might not see me coming. And if they do, it’ll be the last thing they ever see.” Bucky paused to shrug. “I still don’t do all that well with surprises, but as long as I know you’re here, it’ll be fine.”

“Understood,” Steve nodded, still staring down at the key ring in his hand. “And thanks, for this.”

“You helped me get here Steve. If not for you, I never would have gotten this far, or gotten a chance to get that house you think is so quirky.” Bucky lifted his hands to make quotation marks in the air as he spoke the last word.
“Bucky, you know I didn’t do that because I ever expected something in return,” Steve began to protest.

“No, I know you didn’t,” Bucky agreed. “But the reasons why you did, those are all the same reasons why I’m giving you those keys now. It was never tit-for-tat between us Steve, it was love, and the other half of my heart, and a bond so tight that everything you felt rumbled twice as hard in my own damn bones, at least for me, “it was just us, yeah?”

“Yeah, it was Buck.”

“So you keep those keys, and you use them whenever you need. Just text me whenever you’re on your way, and make sure you remember to take your shoes off before you come inside. Do you know how much money I spent to get those floors re-varnished?”

“As if you ever let me forget,” Steve rolled his eyes.

“It’s ‘cos you got them big damned feet. You and Paul Bunyan. Anyway, me and Sarge gotta go. I’ll see you later.”

When Bucky finally reached his door, he turned around to wave at Steve like he usually did. But this time, Steve didn’t wave back. Instead he stood there, tall, silent and still, staring down at his hand, his fingers curled around the keys, as if they were a talisman.

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Maybe it was a mistake, giving Steve those keys. Maybe Steve would use them. Maybe he never would. Bucky would never get the chance to truly wonder about it, because on the Saturday after that, the third since they started hiking together, everything, everything changed.

Chapter End Notes

I will have you know that there is a pool and a pizzeria in my bush! So I can hide in there for a long time, and you'll never get me out!

XD XD XD XD
Bucky had decided to drive out to the Black Mountain Loop trail that day. An hour’s journey from the city, it was an eight-mile hike Bucky and Sarge had never done before, but the website claimed it was challenging with plenty of spectacular panoramic views to make it worthwhile. Concrete Blonde was the chosen soundtrack that day, flavored with the creamy sweetness of two strawberry frappuccinos, that Steve still bitched about, even as he eagerly took the condensation lined cup from Bucky’s hand. Once Sarge finished his requisite treat, Bucky pulled onto the highway, and they were on their way.

It was another gorgeous day, bright and clear, cool but not quite brisk yet, despite setting out early, and it only got better once they reached the trail. It was indeed a perfect hike; varied enough to keep it interesting, but with plenty of places they could stop and enjoy the views. Steve’s was in turns both quiet and talkative, discussing the latest book the both of them had been reading, *The Da Vince Code*, which neither of them were particularly fond of. Bucky generally preferred sci-fi and fantasy, with some modern history thrown in, so it wasn’t to his taste. And while Steve had always enjoyed a good thriller, he found the logic non-sensical. They slid into their normal rhythm as they picked apart the plot, pausing when Nature demanded their attention, or one of them simply wanted to stop and take a deep breath of the glorious air around them. Steve had brought his sketchbook and pencils along with him this time, which he pulled out when they paused for lunch on the top of a high cliff, overlooking the Hudson Valley. Bucky had prepared homemade sausage rolls, asparagus and almond salad, iced tea, and lemon shortbread cookies for their lunch for this particular hike. A memorable day, simply for its simplicity, and the hours passed quickly, as they usually did whenever the two of them were together. They were making their way back, a few miles out from where Bucky had parked his car, Bucky telling Steve about Meghan’s most recent attempts to kill Tara via a green-tea cleanse, when Sarge, who had disappeared around the next bend in the stream their path ran along-side, let out a high-pitched yelp, followed by a pitiful whimper.

“Sarge!” Bucky dashed forward, Steve at his heels, worried, terrified for his dog, only to find Sarge crouched in the reeds by the riverbank, shaking his head with a continuous, mournful whine. “What happened, buddy? Are you okay?” Bucky crouched down and immediately began to run his hands over Sarge’s fur, checking for any injuries, his dog continuing to make that heartbreaking sound, before he lunged forward to press his face against Bucky’s abdomen, knocking him back onto his ass.

“What is it? Is he okay?” Steve asked. It was then Bucky saw it; a teeny, tiny turtle, no longer than three inches, quickly waddling its way back into the grasses.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Bucky exhaled with a shake of his head. Against his stomach, Sarge kept up his helpless whimpering. “Did he bite you on the nose? Aw buddy, come on, let me see. Let me see.” Bucky cupped Sarge’s muzzle in his hand, and there it was, sure as day, a bright red spot,
that thankfully wasn’t bleeding, on the very tip of Sarge’s nose. Sometimes, Bucky couldn’t believe his life. “Oh man, he got you good, didn’t he?”

“What happened?”

“That motherfucker over there bit Sarge on the nose,” Bucky hissed, while his dog continued to make his pathetic sounds.

“What motherfucker?” Steve was looking around angrily, his shoulders back, ready to *Have Words* with anyone who dared to hurt Bucky’s dog.

“That one.” Bucky tilted his chin toward the grass, while still trying to soothe his dog. There was a heavy, weighted pause, that lasted for a beat, and then another, before Steve said,

“The – the turtle?”

“Yes, the turtle,” Bucky hissed. “That bastard must be related to Chico or something.”

*Who?*

Bucky never got to answer Steve’s question, because at the mere mention of his nemesis, Sarge let out one, long, mournful howl, and then curled around himself, trying to hide, as if he were a three-pound kitten instead of a two-hundred-and-four-pound dog who was strong enough to take down a bear.

“Alright, alright, I’m sorry buddy, I’m sorry. I know, I know, I shouldn’t mention *his* name.” Bucky slid to his knees, bent over and wrapped his arms around Sarge, and then slowly rose to his feet, while Sarge rested his heavy paws on Bucky’s shoulders and pressed his face into Bucky’s neck.

“Bucky, what the hell is going on?” Steve asked, falling into pace behind Bucky as he carried his dog back to the trail.

“It’s the fucking T-words, man,” Bucky grumbled.
“What?”

“Turtles,” Bucky repeated, as Sarge made another pathetic little noise. “Sarge both loves and is terrified of them. He just wants to play with them, but those bastards always end up biting him on the nose. He never remembers that, *ya big mook,* Bucky pressed a kiss into Sarge’s fur, “and then gets all upset and scared, because he forgets that he weighs over two-hundred pounds, and could eat those fuckers for lunch. And then I have to carry him home, which, let me tell you buddy, makes the *both* of us look bad, cos he’s so upset.”

“Are you telling me that your dog has a history of turtles biting him on the nose?” At the word *turtle,* Sarge let out another whine, his nose cold against Bucky’s pulse point.

“We try not to say the T-word, Steve,” Bucky chastised him with a glance over his shoulder. “It makes Sarge upset. But seriously Sarge, you should know better by now. I know you think they’re cute, and just want to play with them, but they’re nasty motherfuckers, and I don’t know why you gotta keep sticking your nose at them.”

It was a two-and-a-half-mile trek back to the parking area. A two-and-a-half-mile trek during which Bucky carried Sarge in his arms as if he were nothing more than a babe, and Sarge curled against him, whinging the entire time. His bomber jacket, a rich indigo satin he had purchased with Yuna’s approval just last week, was now covered in muddy pawprints and fur, the right side of both his neck and hair were wet with dog drool, and the knees of his jeans and his new combat boots, which he’d tied with laces that matched his jacket, were now smeared with whatever muck had been on the bank. To top it all off, it was all going to get all over the inside of Marlene once they made it back, and Steve was being absolutely no help at all, following Bucky and his dog from five paces back, a bemused expression on his face the entire time.

So Bucky did what he had always done, what his mother always threatened to wash his mouth out with soap over, and the Howling Commandos knew meant keep a twenty foot radius away from their Sergeant, and *complained.*

“Goddamned, motherfucking, shit-sucking T-words.”

“This is why we can’t have any nice fucking things. Fucking T-words.”

“And you, yeah, *I* love you and you’re the best goddamned dog in the entire world, but seriously Sarge, you’re an idiot. What do you think your girlfriend Crystal would say if she could see you
now? She wouldn’t be interested in sniffing your balls, that’s for sure, now would she? But that’s why I cut those bastards off, because knowing you, those shit-sucking fuckers would go after those next, and I’d have to climb up a tree to get you. Yeah, yeah, I know, I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Your balls were very nice, I like mine too. But you tried to hump Tara’s legs sixteen times, sixteen times Sarge, and I ain’t never met Meghan, but tits-out-to-here or not, I don’t need that whack-a-doo showing up at my house trying to convince me that cauliflower is the way to save my colon. I got enough shit I gotta deal with, I don’t need any cauliflower in all that when I also gotta deal with those terrorist T-word motherfuckers.”

“We sure as shit ain’t gonna tell the MWs about this. Timmy would probably try to come back and find that fucker too, so he could bring it home as a pet for Fruit and Loop. Seriously, fuck my life.”

Until finally, they made it around the last bend in the trail, where Marlene was waiting for them, and with a final, few frustrated stomps, Bucky turned around to ask Steve to help him unlock the door, only to find him hunched over himself, hands resting on his knees, howling. But unlike Sarge earlier, he was howling with laughter.

“What?” Bucky snapped. Steve couldn’t even answer him, was barely able to shake his head, as he held himself in the same position, and shook in a vain attempt at control.

“Oh my god. Oh my god. Oh my god,” Steve was finally able to gasp, before he gave up entirely, dropped his backpack to the ground, and stumbled the last few feet to Marlene, where he buried his face in his arms, and laughed and laughed and laughed. He laughed like a child only just discovering the sound. Like a bird singing its first song. Like the initial ray of sunlight peeking out through the clouds after a thunderstorm. And he laughed like joy was a lover thought long lost who had finally returned to him after decades of being away.

Be that as it may, Bucky was not amused.

“What the fuck Steve?”

“Oh my god. Oh my god. Oh my god,” Steve repeated through his gasps.

“You better not be getting snot all over the hood of my truck!” That only made it worse, and Bucky was sure Steve’s knees would have gone out on him, if he hadn’t already been leaning on Marlene for support. “Are you done? Are you done? ‘Cos I need you to grab the keys from my pocket and
unlock the doors so I can get this dumbass inside.”

“Why…why can’t…you put him down…and get…and get them yourself?” Steve managed to pant.

“Cos if I put him down now before I get the door open, he’s gonna think he’ll get attacked by the motherfucking TMNTs.”

“The-the what?” Steve rasped through his laughs.

“The motherfucking Teenage Mutant Ninja T-words.”

“Oh my god. Oh my god. Oh my god.” Apparently that was the wrong thing to say, because with another howl, Steve was off again.

“Shut up, Steve. It’s not funny.” Steve answering snorts told him otherwise. “Are you gonna help me or not?”

“All right…all right…just give me a sec.” Bucky had to give him ten, then another twenty, and then another forty-five after that, Sarge still cradled like a newborn baby against his chest, until, with a last wipe to his cheeks, Steve was finally able to straighten, his face flushed with mirth, and something in his eyes sparkling like diamonds. “Where are they?”

“Front pocket of my jeans, left side,” Bucky said, shifting Sarge slightly and turning to give Steve easier access.

It happened between one instant and the next. A change in Steve so sudden, so swift, if Bucky blinked, he would have missed it. His gaze both sharpened and grew soft, humor transforming into determination, as he stepped forward with his soldier’s tread, as steady as a man going off to war, as hopeful as the lover that soldier had left behind, who was waiting, waiting, always waiting for his return, even if it was only for his ghost, so they could embrace one last time.

It was with all of that, with none of it, that Steve took another step forward, and reached out, not for the pocket of Bucky’s jeans, but for his face, where he slid his fingers into Bucky’s hair, and leaned in so he could press his lips to Bucky’s own.
It was a kiss that tasted of dog hair and drool. River muck and indigo satin. Sausage rolls and iced-tea. Bucky’s complaints and Steve’s laughter.

It was a kiss that tasted of a million memories, more than a million memories, all rushing home. Of even more possibilities than that.

It was a kiss of hunger and yearning. Of loneliness and desperation. Of years and years of longing.

It was a kiss of heartbreak, and things never to be. Of promises broken and what might have been. And sorry, sorry, sorry.

It was a kiss of hope and home. Of welcome, and missing you, I’ve missed you, I’ve missed you so much, please, please stay.

It was a kiss that said I love you. I love you. I love you.

It was a kiss that said all of that and none of it.

It was a kiss.

And as Bucky stood there, his dog cradled in his arms and his cheeks cradled in Steve’s warm hands, Bucky didn’t know what to do with any of it. He could only close his eyes, and yearn and hope and hurt. Because he had been kissed like this before, once, twice, a billion times, and in the end, it still hadn’t been enough to make Steve stay.

But it was a kiss, and even the sweetest of kisses, the most bittersweet of ones, had to end. Which eventually this one did, with Steve pulling back, but only half an inch, so he could press his forehead to Bucky’s.

“What the hell was that?” Bucky whispered, knowing Steve would feel his words against his skin, just like Bucky could still feel the burn of Steve’s lips against his own.

“I think it was a kiss, Buck,” Steve whispered back.
“Yeah, I know, but…” Steve words answered his question, but still somehow managed to not give him any actual answers. “Why?”

That caused Steve to jerk, and he stepped back, suddenly nervous, ashamed, the complete opposite of what he’d been less than a second ago.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized, running a nervous hand over the back of his head, his shoulders slumping inward. “I know I shouldn’t have done that, and I didn’t mean to take advantage of you Bucky, I swear to you I didn’t, but-“

“Steve,” Bucky cut him off. Thankfully Sarge had finally come to accept he wasn’t going to be attacked by any more turtles, and didn’t protest when Bucky gently lowered him to the ground. “It’s okay, I swear to you it’s okay. But I just don’t understand why.”

“You haven’t figured it out?” Steve stared at him as if Bucky were the one who had just done something completely unexpected. Bucky shook his head, and Steve ran his hands through his hair, taking a deep breath, before he continued. “I mean, I just spent the past half hour watching you carry your dog back to the truck, after he’d gotten bit on the nose by a turtle,” Sarge whimpered at the word, “Sorry Sarge, by a T-word. And it was one of the silliest things I had ever seen. And you were pissed off, but you still carried him all the way back here, like it was nothing, complaining the entire time. And you sounded exactly like you used to…like you used to when I’d gotten into a fight, or done something stupid you were mad about, but just like Sarge, you always used to carry me home. It was just you, so you, and how you used to be. And I don’t know if you remember, but we used to…We used to be…”

“I remember,” Bucky said softly.

“You remember?” Steve asked, frozen as if he’d just been struck by lightning. Bucky nodded.

“It was one of the first things that came back to me,” Bucky admitted.

“But you never said anything.”

“Why would I?” Bucky shrugged. It was time, Bucky supposed, finally time for the words to be said, to finish the conversation they had never even started. To cut the thread and tie off the last knot of who they had once been to one another. “I wasn’t the one who wanted it to end. You were the
“one who stopped loving me.”

“What?”

“It’s okay Steve,” Bucky said, shifting so he could lean back against the truck for support. “I’m not mad about it. Not anymore. I wasn’t even then. I understood. You finally got your chance to get everything you always deserved, and I wasn’t going to hold you back.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Where Steve had been unsure and apologetic, confused and uncertain before, he was suddenly alive, no longer a ghost of himself, but all he had ever been, and all the rest of the world had come to admire and respect.

“Oh come off it, Steve.” Bucky shook his head, already tired, already exhausted, when they hadn’t even begun. “I was there. I remember that too.”

“Remember what exactly?” Steve demanded to know.

“After Azzano, after you got me outta there, you never looked at me the same again.” It was difficult, so difficult to speak the words. But Bucky had fought so hard to get to where he was, and he had been told, time and time again, by Dr. Callahan, the MWs, Teresa, Andy and Jake, that he was brave, stronger than he could have ever imagined for making it this far. He would cling to that, force himself to believe it, even though his heart trembled with its own whimpers, innocent and young, old and scarred. “And then when we got back to base, Carter was there,” beautiful, stunning, brilliant Margaret Carter, “and she smiled at you. And you smiled back, just like you used to smile for me. And it was okay, I understood it then, that this was your chance. You deserved it, you deserved all of that and more. It was your chance for the world to finally see who you really were, and I wasn’t going to hold you back.”

“Is that what you think?” Steve hissed. When Bucky risked a glance at him, his eyes were wide and his skin pale.

“You never touched me again, not once, after that,” Bucky shrugged, as if the truth had been clinging to his shoulders all this time, and the movement would finally set it free.

“You never let me!” Steve nearly shouted, his voice startling the birds from their nests in the surrounding trees.
“What?” Bucky asked, stunned.

“When I finally got you outta there, and things got organized, got settled, every time I got near you, or tried to reach for you, you would flinch, and turn away, like you thought I was gonna hit you or something.”

“What?” Bucky asked again, stunned, because that’s not how he remembered it.

“You wouldn’t talk to me about it, no matter how many times I asked, just kept telling me you were fine before you would head off to check on our gear. Eventually, I just stopped asking. I finally had this new body, was finally strong enough to take care of and protect you like you always did for me, but you kept looking at me like I was a stranger.” It was Steve’s turn to shrug, as if there were truths, heavy ones he needed to discard as well. “I thought it was because I didn’t look like one of the fairies anymore, that you didn’t want me, cos I wasn’t little and pretty like a dame like I used to be.”

“That’s just stupid Steve,” Bucky snarled. “It never mattered to me what you looked like. Big or small, that was never what I saw. I didn’t care. You were always the most beautiful thing in the world to me.”

“Then why did you stop letting me touch you? Why did you stop trying to touch me? I couldn’t figure it out. ‘Cos you were there, you were always there, watching my back like you always did, making sure I had everything I needed, but you never felt so far away either.”

“I…” Bucky faltered, looking down at his feet, where Sarge had pressed against him. Because there was something there, something he wasn’t seeing, and he needed to find it, if any of this, any of it, was going to make sense. He was going to have to reach, to search for it, and that meant opening his closet door and digging through his boxes. And that wasn’t going to be easy. He sighed.

“I need you to step away from me Steve,” he finally said.

“Bucky, I’m-“

Bucky raised a hand to cut Steve off, before he looked at him, hoping this would be the one time Steve didn’t argue.

“There’s something I’m missing here. Something I think I’ve forced myself to forget. And I’m gonna
have to try to find it. But to do that, I’m gonna have to go back, dig deep, and it’s usually not pretty when I do. Sometimes I have a panic attack, and sometimes I disassociate. But I have to find it. And if I come back, and you’re too close, I might not remember who you are and strike out. I don’t want to do that Steve, so you’re going to have to step back. Sarge knows what to do. It’s his job. Let him do it and let me do this.”

“Bucky, are you sure?” Steve asked, and it was obvious from both his posture and his tone that he didn’t want to let Bucky do this, that all his protective instincts were kicking in, conflicting with his need to respect Bucky’s request, his boundaries.

“Yeah Steve, I’m sure,” Bucky told him with a single nod. “Now step back, at least five feet. And don’t come near me until I tell you it’s okay.” Bucky met his gaze, waiting until with a brief jerk of his head, Steve took him at his word and moved away. Bucky slowly lowered himself to the ground, leaning his back against the tire of his truck, and with a deep breath said, “Sarge, help. Pressure.”

***

Deep breath in, hold for three, deep breath out.

He had done this before. He could do it again.

Wiggle his fingers, wiggle his toes, feel the air on his face, warm from the sun, and smell the crispness of fall in the air.

They were just memories. He wasn’t there. They were shadows from his past, and they couldn’t hurt him anymore, Dr. Callahan had assured him of that. But if he didn’t face them, didn’t bring them into the light they would always be there, and he would never be free.

Sinking his fingers into Sarge’s coat, into that softness, he felt a steady warm heartbeat against his own. Sarge was here, Sarge would always be here, would protect him, keep him safe, remind him where he was. Sarge would let him go, but not abandon him, patient, calm and steadfast, so when Bucky needed him, he would be there, ready to guide him home.

It was with that in his heart that Bucky took another deep breath, wiggled his fingers, wiggled his toes, let go, and looked…
Through the grey, that sometimes was a door, solid and over a thousand feet high. Or sometimes a gaping maw, with glistening teeth and bitter breath. Or sometimes, like today, an endless ocean, slate and slick and still, but all the more terrifying for it, until he found it, a ripple, darker than all the others, yet with something glistening, shivering as if alive, the serpent of this memory, waiting for Bucky to find it.

So with one last breath, one last wiggle of his fingers and toes, he reached out for it, where the snake curled it scales around his arm, and sunk its fangs into his wrist.

*Cold air, shivering in his lungs, slicing his throat, rancid and putrid.*

*A table. Hard and unyielding against his back, no matter how hard he struggled.*

*Burning, burning, burning, in his left arm as they pulled the syringe away, its blue contents now mixing with the red of his blood.*

*And then the screams. A symphony of them. A tsunami. Others, he had thought at first, but then realized were his, as his body convulsed while tears streaked down his face and his own blood now choked his throat.*

*Voices then, in the dark. From nowhere. From everywhere.*

*“Specimen one-four-nine is still alive. Its body is exhibiting signs of cardiac arrest, like the others, but its heartbeat is staring to regulate itself, incorporating the serum into its circulatory system.”*

*“Excellent. Which version was he given?”*

*“He was injected with version two-six-four.”*

*“Separate that one and mark it for further study.”*

*“It seems to have killed all the others injected with it.”*
“No matter. He is the most successful subject so far. It may have something to do with his DNA or his blood type. We won’t know until we conduct further tests.”

Opening his eyes to see two men, their features blurred, obscured by the sudden brightness assaulting him.

“Ah, there you are Sergeant Barnes.” A round, pallid face, staring down at him from behind an innocuous pair of spectacles. Zola. Armin Zola, he could recognize him now. “I cannot begin to tell you how happy I am that you are awake. You are the only one to have made it this far. And now I need to see just how successful this version of the serum has been, so I can report back to Schmidt.” Pulling away, disappearing from view, giving him a chance to look around, to try and understand where he was, what was happening. The brace on his head preventing him from rolling his head all the way to the side, but allowing him enough movement to glance to the left, and see the other tables in this dank, grey room. And on top of them…On top of them…

The corpses.

His brothers. His fellow soldiers, all of them prisoners in the end. Dead eyes staring endlessly into a nothing, their faces locked into rictuses of agony.


It had been a mistake, to look away, because when he turned back, Zola was once again over him, this time with a scalpel in his hand.

And that was when his agony truly began…An endless stream of it.

Tests, they said. Of endurance. Of his regenerative abilities. Disappointment in some of the results, excitement with others, but endless, endless, endless pain, until all he could do, the only way to reclaim his sanity was to chant his serial number over and over and over again.

32557038, 32557038, 32557038

Until, for what he would have sworn was one last time, he opened his eyes and there…And there was…
When he opened his eyes this time, it wasn’t to the endless, fathomless blue of Steve’s, but the warm, golden brown of Sarge’s, who was licking his chin, his long tongue scraping against the rasp of Bucky’s five o’clock shadow. There was warmth in his lap, fur against his cheek, and the air was crisp and clear, not heavy and dank with the scents of death and decay. It was just a memory, he wasn’t there. That had been over eighty years ago, and he had escaped, he had finally escaped and was free now.

He wiggled his fingers and his toes, and then stared at his hands, searching for the cuts, the cigarette burns and incisions that had healed way too quickly, most of them gone by the time Steve freed him. They had both been made of flesh back then, the left the one he had been born with, not the one of metal he carried with him everywhere he went now. It was going to take him time to process that, to remember this was who he was now. Time and probably a few nightmares, and definitely a phone call to Dr. Callahan.

Fuck. His next therapy session was going to suck balls.

But that was for later. Right now, he needed to take a few deep breaths, which he did, and let Sarge know he’d done his job.

“It’s okay, Sarge.” It felt as though the words were the first ones he had spoken in over a century. In many ways, they probably were. “I’m back now. I’m okay. You did your job. Good boy Sarge, good boy. Release.” Sarge stopped licking his chin, but he didn’t go far, settling himself in Bucky’s lap, knowing in that way he did, that Bucky still needed him, that this was part of the aftercare, and just as vital for Bucky’s recovery. Bucky couldn’t help but smile at him in spite of the ache in his bones and the sweat he could feel dripping from his hairline. He took another deep breath, then one more, and finally looked up, searching for Steve.

He found him, standing exactly where Bucky had last seen him. But where before, when his eyes had been filled with laughter and sunshine when he had first kissed Bucky, they were wide and nearly grey instead of blue. Grey like the door Bucky had just walked through, grey like the ocean had been, grey like all the time and space Bucky had just travelled, so he could come back here with the answers he’d been looking for.

“Steve.” His voice was raspy, dry, rattling like old bones disturbed from their rest. Steve startled at the sound of his name.
“Are you…are you…?” Bucky could see the way Steve struggled to form the words, the muscles in his neck rolling as if he had his own serpents he was trying to swallow.

“They tortured me, Steve,” Bucky began, knowing he had to get it out as soon as possible, before his subconscious tried to shove this particular box back into his closet.

“What?” Steve asked, as if he hadn’t known, hadn’t seen Bucky’s file. But then again, the memory was before his time as the Soldier, and he doubted there had been any records of what he had just remembered, Zola as possessive of his knowledge as Erskine had been.

“They tortured me,” Bucky said again with a nod. His head, his entire body ached. But he also knew, from months of experience, that talking about it would help, would ease the sting and lift some of the weight. It would help him at least. And, just like always, he could only go forward.

“When you found me, in Azzano, me and my company had been there for at least a month. But then one day, I don’t know why, I think because I hit one of the guards that was saying some nasty shit about Gabe, they brought me to Zola’s lab, and they tied me to a table, and started experimenting on me. I was there for maybe a week, I think, maybe,” Bucky shrugged. “Time got funny. But they injected me with things, I dunno, maybe Zola’s version of the serum. I was the only one that survived, and then they started doing all these tests on me. Cutting me up, and burning me with cigarettes to see how I would heal.”

“With that word, Steve fell to his knees, five feet and an eternity away from Bucky, as they sat there in the field where Bucky had parked his truck, and stared at each other.

“Didn’t you ever wonder how I was able to walk out of there when you found me, after having been there for a month?” Bucky said, but not unkindly. How could Steve have known? His own body had been so sick, so ravaged by illness, Bucky always the healthy one, seldom even succumbing to a cold. What would he have known of normal endurance, except for what he had hungered and wished for desperately during his worst days. “How I survived the fall from the train? I already had the serum in me then, or at least part of it.” There had been more injections, more tests, but that had come later, so much later. “Whatever they gave me, it already started to change me. But they had to run tests, lots and lots of tests, to prove it. And they were…They were not fun.” Bucky again looked down at his arms, searching for the cuts, the scars, the crooked knuckle that had not been crooked the way it should have been by the time Steve found him. Not so crooked the way his and Steve’s paths had twisted ever since that day. He shook his head and sighed, understanding so much more now.

“They tortured me,” he said again, not to hurt Steve, but to make him understand. “And we didn’t have words for it then, didn’t talk about stuff like that.” There were plenty of words for it now, plenty of words Bucky had learned and understood. Severe trauma. Repression. PTSD. “But I was scared shitless at the thought of anyone coming near me, touching me after that. You were so big, but
so were a few of the bastards that had worked on me, and after everything, I think I was terrified I was gonna get hurt again.”

“I would have never hurt you Bucky.” And for the first time, Steve sounded insulted, as if the thought, the very implication was the worse thing he had ever heard.

“It wasn’t your fault.” It was important Steve knew that. And then this, this was the hard part, but just as important to Bucky’s recovery. “It wasn’t mine either. But I didn’t know that then, couldn’t have put any of it into words, and there was a war going on, and you had Carter, so…” Bucky finished with a shrug.

“So me and Peggy never-“

“I was there Steve, I saw how you looked at each other,” Bucky cut him off.

“Are you asking me if I loved Peggy?” Steve volleyed, the grey that had been in his eyes vanishing beneath the vibrant storms of his usual blue. “Yeah Bucky, I did. But it wasn’t like that. It was never like that. It was more like I had a crush on her, the way you had a crush on Sister Josephine in second grade. She was a teacher, a mentor, and we shared all the same goals. I loved her because I saw in her all the things I could be, wanted to be. She was my moral compass Bucky, still is in a lot of ways. But you…You were always my heart Bucky. My home. The only one I ever loved like that, still love like that. And it killed me when you wouldn’t let me touch you anymore, because I never stopped loving you. And I knew something was wrong, but I didn’t think, didn’t realize what it was. I thought we would have more time, that once the war was over, I would get a chance to fix it.” There were tears on Steve’s face, tears on Bucky’s own. A million tears between them, and a dog who loved them both.

“But then you died,” Steve continued in a whisper. “And when you did…when you did, you took my heart with you. It was my fault-“

“What?” Bucky was suddenly cold, but not with the iciness of a ravine where his bones should have been buried, the freeze of a cryo-chamber where his body ultimately ended up.

“And I knew I wouldn’t ever get my chance, and I couldn’t live with that. So I did what I had to do to make sure the world was safe. But if you weren’t in it, it wasn’t a world I wanted to live in, so I said my good-byes, and prayed you still loved me enough to be waiting at St. Peter’s gate.”
“What?” And the cold, the endless bitter cold of Bucky’s bones was suddenly replaced by a scalding hot rage, hotter than the sun, hot enough for blisters to form on his soul, in his veins, the metal of his left arm as he pushed Sarge from his lap, in spite of his protests.

“Oh, come off it, Bucky. Don’t look at me like that,” Steve said, as if it were obvious, as if Bucky was the idiot sitting in the parking lot. “I broke orders to come looking for you when I found out your unit had been captured. Defied Philips and risked getting thrown in prison when I got back ‘cos I was so desperate to find you. Insisted I needed you as part of my team when the SSR wanted to drag you back for questioning. You were the only thing that made that fucking war bearable, and then you were gone, and I had nothing left, and—”

“You fucking idiot!” Bucky hadn’t realized he’d lunged forward until Steve was on his back beneath him, Bucky’s hands shaking his shoulders. “What the fuck is wrong with you? You goddamned motherfucking idiot! The shit that comes out of your mouth! Nothing left to live for? The fuck you say!”

“Jesus Christ Bucky! Stop it, knock it off!” Steve cried out from beneath him, trying to curl away. But Steve wasn’t the only one who was a super-soldier, and while he may have had an inch and at least twenty pounds on Bucky these days, Bucky had a metal arm, and knowledge of all Steve’s weak spots.

And he wanted to hit him, he really did. As Steve sputtered and cursed beneath him, trying to shove Bucky off, Bucky wanted to curl his left hand into a fist and pound some sense into the dumb fuck’s face. But he had never hit Steve, not once in his life; at least not when he’d been in control of his mind, his choices. And he would never, ever do that again, not when he had choices now. Instead, he grabbed the closest thing he could reach, a pile of leaves that had gathered by Marlene’s tire, and shoved it in Steve’s face.

“You idiot!” A fistful of grass. “You asshole!” A cluster of twigs. “You mule-fucking bastard! What the hell is wrong with you? I leave you alone for five fucking minutes, and that’s the shit you pull!” Mud was next, a generous handful that Bucky smeared over Steve’s face and into his hair.

“Stop! Stop Bucky! Knock it off! Get offa me!”

“No!” Bucky roared. “Not until I shove some sense into your pig-fucked pickled brain! Nothing left? Nothing left? You’re worth ten of me! A hundred! You always were! And I turn my back on you for one goddamned minute, and what the fuck do you do? I’ll tell you what! Something so goddamned motherfucking stupid, like crash your fucking plane into the goddamned ice because you don’t have the sense god gave a fucking flea! Goddammit Rogers! What the fuck? What. The. Fuck!”
While Bucky continued his assault, and his shouting, Sarge started dancing around them, trying to wedge his nose in between them both. There were twigs, there were leaves, and Bucky’s energy levels were back to normal, so in Sarge’s mind, that meant it was playtime.

And worst of all, worst of all, beneath him, Steve had somehow managed to roll over on to his side, and instead of cringing, or trying to shield his face from Bucky’s dirt assault, the bastard, the motherfucking bastard that Bucky wanted to push off a cliff was laughing.

“You think this is funny? You think I’m joking over here, you asshole? What the fuck is wrong with you?” Bucky shoved him onto his back, debating whether or not he should use his fists for real, when as sudden as a sniper’s shot, as quick as a scorpion’s strike, Steve reached up and grabbed Bucky’s wrists in his hands, holding them immobile. He was panting, they both were, Steve with stuttered gasps of laughter, and Bucky with the lingering flashes of his rage. But when Bucky looked down at Steve’s face, he could see the tears in his eyes, and the glistening tracks they left in the dirt Bucky had smeared on his face.

“What? What is it now?” Bucky snapped.

“It’s just…It’s just…” Steve began, as his eyes grew soft, grew sad, grew grateful. “You’re yelling at me again. You were the only one who ever used to yell at me like that, whenever I did something you thought was stupid. You were never afraid to yell at me, even after I became Captain America. You were the only one, and that’s how I knew you loved me. Because you yelled at me. I never thought I’d hear it again. And yet…Here you are, yelling at me again.”

The words caught Bucky off guard, trapping him in the moment, like an insect trapped in amber. Because they were fucked up, the both of them, in so many ways, too many to count. But it was who they were, who they had always been, and Bucky supposed, in some twisted way, they were each a gift the other had been given.

Still, Bucky couldn’t let Steve off that easy, no matter how pretty his blue eyes were.

So he wrenched his hands free and crossed his arms, leaning back to rest his weight on Steve’s stomach, from where he had straddled him in his rage.

“You got some weird fucking notions in that head of yours, Rogers,” he grumbled, looking away.

“I know,” Steve laughed quietly with a nod, extending his arms out to his side, leaving himself
helpless and vulnerable, almost exactly how he’d been when Bucky dragged his body to the shores of the Potomac. “Don’t mean they’re not true.”

“Tch,” Bucky shook his head. “Should yell at you some more. Not that it’s ever worked in the past. For all the shit the serum fixed, I don’t think it did a thing for your damned ears, ‘cos lord knows, you never listened to a single thing I said.”

“Please do,” Steve laughed again, as if he expected nothing less. Or maybe because, in some twisted way, he had gotten everything he wanted and Bucky’s yelling at him had just proved his point, granted him his greatest wish.

And Bucky was tired, exhausted really. He’d been kissed when he least expected it, forced to reveal his own secrets, dealt with one of the very first ghosts from his closet, and then fought with Steve. It had been a really long and exhausting day, and they still had to drive back to Brooklyn. He thought that maybe, just maybe, it would be all right if he lowered some of his last remaining shields and revealed a truth.

So he uncrossed his arms, and shook his head, before he lowered himself enough to rest his forehead against Steve’s chest.

“How can I?” Steve said, just as softly, just as hopeful and hopeless. “You’ll just yell at me again if I do.”

“Damn straight,” it was Bucky’s turn to snort. Because really, what other answer could he give.

“And I love you too. I never stopped. Even if your five-hundred-pound dog is afraid of turtles.”

He was such an asshole.

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Bucky had no idea how much time passed with them in that position; maybe the sun rose and set. Maybe another year and all her seasons rolled over them. Maybe it was another eighty years of them waiting to find each other. But eventually, slowly, they drew apart so they could lean back against the wheel barrow of Bucky’s SUV while they tried, and failed, to reclaim what little dignity they had left. Then they stumbled to the public restroom at the entrance of the park to wash as much of the dirt, mud, leaves and grime from their bodies and faces as they could. Bucky didn’t even bother trying to brush Sarge’s coat, figuring since he was going to have to bring Marlene to a car wash for a deluxe cleaning package anyway, it didn’t much matter. He was exhausted, worn down to the marrow of his bones, and it could wait. And as they trudged their way back to the truck, Bucky knew he was going to have to ask Steve for a favor.

But that was okay. He had learned it was okay, both brave and mature of him to admit he needed help, and ask for it when he needed to.

“Do you think you can drive us back to Brooklyn?” he asked, reaching in his pocket for the damned keys that had started everything (or maybe it was the turtle; Bucky didn’t know and couldn’t have cared less at this point).

“That bad?” Steve wondered aloud, eyeing Bucky.

“I mean, I could get us home if I had to. But digging deep like that takes a lot outta me, and I’d rather not push it if I didn’t have to, but if you don’t want to-“

“Gimme the keys, Buck,” Steve ordered, holding out his hand. Once he unlocked the doors, Bucky tossed the keys to him, and then, instead of walking around to the passenger side, climbed into the backseat, Sarge on his heels.

“You all right?” Steve asked, studying Bucky through the rearview mirror after he’d settled in the driver’s seat.

“Like I said, it takes a lot outta me. I’ll probably end up crashing, but having Sarge as close as possible will help,” Bucky sighed. “If you can’t remember the way back, there’s a GPS app on that phone-“

“I can get us home,” Steve huffed.
“Just sayin’. Haven’t ever seen you drive before. I just wanted to make sure.”

“Jerk.” Steve rolled his eyes, but Bucky could feel his gaze settling on him again. “Is there anything I can do? Do you wanna stop for food? Listen to Night Vale?”

“Nah, I just wanna get home. But here,” Bucky reached between the console to hand Steve his phone. “There’s a playlist on there call Spanish Guitar. If you could plug it in and turn that on, it’ll help.”

“Kay Buck. You just close your eyes and try to relax. I’ll get us home.”

It didn’t take long, and Steve was a good driver and quiet companion on that journey. Before he knew it, Bucky opened his eyes to Steve gently calling his name, telling him they were back in Bay Ridge. It took Bucky a few moments to reorient himself, blinking in the backseat, before he rubbed his eyes and with a groan climbed out of the truck. It was dark out, colder than it’d been when they initially set out, but the sky was still clear and as Bucky looked up, he could make out few stars.

“Do you want some company?” Steve offered as he handed Bucky back his keys.

“Nah, not tonight,” Bucky shook his head. “I’m just gonna let Sarge have one last go, grab something quick to eat, maybe take a shower if I have the energy, and then hit the hay.”

“If you’re sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. But thanks for the offer.”

They fell quiet then, less than two feet of space, and Bucky’s dog, between them, beneath those stars, on that night Bucky was sure he’d never forget. It was Steve who finally broke it, with a small flush on his cheeks as he lowered his head and ran a hand over the back of his neck.

“You know, uh, when I kissed you, before, I didn’t think the day was going to end like this,” he eventually admitted.

“What? Covered in mud and me dead on my feet?” Bucky didn’t have much energy left, barely any
at all. But there was enough, just enough, for him to be able to tease Steve just a bit.

“Yeah, no, I definitely didn’t picture it like this.”

“Pretty par for the course for us, I’d say,” Bucky shrugged. Steve snorted in agreement and then fell quiet again. He needed a nudge, Bucky could tell, which was also so strange. Steve had never held himself back from voicing his desires before. And especially never around Bucky. “How did you picture it?”

“With uh, me maybe asking you out on a date.” The blush on Steve’s cheeks grew even darker. “We can do that now, you know. Two fellas, on a date. We never could before, and I’d like to take you someplace nice. Show my best guy, my only guy, a really nice time. He deserves it, for putting up with me, after all.”

“You want to take me out on a date? Even after today?” And this man, this pain in the ass, was going to be the death of Bucky, he really was.

“Especially after today,” Steve said, and then straightened. And there, there was the Steve Bucky remembered; bright eyed and full of determination, his eyes ready to devour Bucky whole. “I mean, you did put mud in my hair after all. Back when we were eight years old, that meant we was going steady.” Bucky couldn’t help it, he laughed.

“Yeah well, my hair’s a lot nicer now that it was back then.”

“It is,” Steve admitted, the blush grower even darker. “It’s pretty. Even with all the leaves in it. I like it.” He shoved his hands in his pockets and shrugged. “So can I?”

“Give me a few days,” Bucky told him. “I have to call my therapist, so we can work through all the shit I just remembered. I need to sort through it so I can process it all. It’ll take me a few days. I’ll call you once I have, and then yeah Stevie, you can take me out on a date.” With the last little bit of energy he had left, Bucky smiled and stepped forward so that he could press a kiss, just one, to Steve’s cheek, before he turned around, and with Sarge at his side, walked into his house.

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It did take a few days, but Steve was patient. His only caveat was that Bucky text him when he could
to let him know how he was doing, and if he needed or wanted any company. He didn’t, and he let Steve know that. In regard to this, especially for this, he needed to sort through everything on his own.

Because Steve still loved him. Apparently, had never stopped. And all of Bucky’s memories from before he fell were wrong, or had been tainted somehow, and he needed to sort through all the wheat and chaff to find out how he had gotten it so mixed up.

He knew the trauma played a large part of it; the torture, and the accompanying loss of autonomy. The changes to Steve’s body, and reversal of their roles. The changes to his own, that he hadn’t understood and tried to ignore, forget, hide from everyone. If that hadn’t been enough, it had all happened in the middle of a war, one of the most brutal the world had ever seen, with weapons and technology wielded by madmen, that none of them could have ever imagined. He supposed it made sense that his perceptions, his memories, had been so distorted, but he needed to process it, hold it up to the light and see what he needed to save and what he could discard.

He called Dr. Callahan the very next morning, after a rough night, telling her what he remembered. She readily agreed when he asked her if she could see him that afternoon, waving off his apologies and informing him that’s what she was there for.

Their session lasted four hours that day, and then another four hours the following afternoon. Because this, this was important. It was the oldest monster in his closet, one of the biggest ones, and the catalyst that laid the groundwork for how he had dealt with so much of what followed. It often got ugly, and was definitely painful. But to Bucky’s shock, he didn’t disassociate once, nor did he spiral down into one of his grey periods. He was able to go to his morning training sessions with Sarge and Jake, his biweekly VA meetings, and while he didn’t have the energy for his normal morning runs, he didn’t feel the need to hide in his house, buried under a pile of blankets, clinging to Sarge and praying for all of it to stop.

“It’s because you’re learning how to process it better,” Dr. Callahan told him when he revealed this to her. “Not only that, but you’ve started to trust the process itself. I’m not saying you still won’t have dark days, or things we’ll need to work through. But you’ve been through this before, and now know you can get through it, that it’ll pass. You’ve built up a good support network, and are using it. That might not make it any easier, but it does make it less overwhelming, and that helps. That helps a lot.”

She was right; it did. So while it was a lot, he could breathe through it, and trust that he would emerge on the other side, shaken yes, and definitely with some scars, but now standing on two feet, instead of crawling through it all on his hands and knees.

So much so, that by the time Friday rolled around, he was ready to go out on his first date ever with
Steve.

Chapter End Notes

* *leaves on bush rustle*

Is it OK for me to come out of the bush now? Please let me know in the comments.

* *winks*
“Oh…um…Wow.”

Assess and adapt. Assess and adapt. Work with what you had, adapt your strategies, and always, *always* play to your strengths.

Which was why, when Bucky opened the door in response to Steve’s knock that Friday night, he was wearing thin-fitting black trousers, a blood-red button-down shirt, and a black jacket, cut in a Victorian style, so that it was fitted at his waist, with a bit of a flare before it ended just above his knees, and a collar and cuffs embroidered with black velvet. Knowing Steve apparently had a thing for his hair, he had left it loose and free, parted on the side, its ends brushing his shoulders with a bit of a wave he’d enhanced with a touch of volumizer. He’d debated highlighting his eyes with a smudge of eyeliner, knowing the black would make their color pop, but decided against it. It was a bit vampish overall, he knew, but from the way Steve stood on his doorstep, gaping like a fish out of water, he could definitely consider the hour he’d spent fussing over his appearance worth it.

“Hey Stevie,” he grinned, while at his side, in a matching red service halter, Sarge eagerly wagged his tail, waiting for Steve to acknowledge him.

“Wow.” Steve, the poor dear, had actually worn a suit, dark grey, with a white shirt, and a black tie in a neat Windsor knot. It fit him well, even if it was a bit boxy, and he looked more like a school principal than a man about to go on a date with someone he’d known for most of his life. Yet Bucky couldn’t help being charmed, because it meant Steve had tried, was taking this seriously, treating both Bucky and their upcoming evening with the respect he felt it deserved (Bucky was still going to drag him to see Yuna the first chance he got).

“Like what you see?” Bucky arched an eyebrow, feeling somehow both cocky and shy, pleased with the knowledge that he could still, even all these years later, have this kind of effect on Steve. Steve blinked a few more times, before with a swallow he closed his mouth and shook his head.

“You look great Buck,” he finally smiled, and then blushed. “Um,” he lifted his hands, “these are for you.” There were a dozen, long stemmed red roses in Steve’s hands, that he held out for Bucky to take. “I mean, I know, it might be kinda silly, but I thought… I thought it would be nice.”

It was Bucky’s turn to blush. Roses. Steve had brought him roses. Bucky couldn’t recall anyone ever
“You used to bring me dandelions.” He suddenly remembered the days back in their old crappy apartment, when Steve would sometimes come home with a fistful of wilted flowers he had somehow found, handing them to Bucky. Weeds to most, but Bucky had always loved the bright yellow blooms, carefully arranging them in an empty coffee can, while Billie Holiday played from their wireless.

“I did,” Steve admitted shyly. “But I can afford better now. And I thought you might like ‘em.”

“I do.” Bucky took the bouquet from Steve’s hands. They were beautiful, not quite at full bloom, a crimson even darker than his shirt, neatly held together with a long red ribbon. Bucky couldn’t have stopped himself from leaning in to press a soft kiss to Steve’s cheek, even if he’d wanted to, which he didn’t. “Now say hello to Sarge while I put these in a vase, and then we can get going. Where are you taking me anyway?”

“It’s a surprise,” Steve called back from where he was kneeling on the floor, running his hands over Sarge’s ears.

The surprise ended up being an elegant steakhouse on the Brooklyn side of the East River, just beneath the bridge that Steve drove them to in a black Lexus. Steve had even gone so far as to call ahead, to let them know there’d be a service dog accompanying them, so there would be no need for explanations once they arrived.

“It’s illegal for them to turn Sarge away,” Bucky felt it necessary to add.

“I know,” Steve nodded. There was something a bit gruff, a bit Captain America in his voice as he spoke. “But I didn’t want you to have to worry about it.” He was being so considerate, so kind in his concern, and that told Bucky, even more than the suit, the roses, how seriously he was taking this.

They were led to a quiet table in a private corner, with plenty of space for Sarge to settle beneath at Bucky’s feet. The service was attentive but unobtrusive, and their food delicious and beautifully prepared, including the plain steak Bucky requested for Sarge. While they ate, they talked, and it was as easy as it had ever been between them, flowing freely, with snarks and barbs, and gentle teasing that ended in mutual laughter.

“Do your teammates know?” Bucky asked as they waited for their coffee and dessert.
“Know what?”

“That you’re gay? Bi? Whatever you consider yourself, since you’re here with me?” Bucky pressed.

“I guess it’s bi, I think? At least according to how it was explained to me,” Steve eventually said. “And Sam knows. We’ve talked about it a lot, and he was the one who made me understand that it really is different now.”

“And the rest?” Bucky wanted to know, curious as to how much of his true self Steve had actually revealed to his teammates.

“I haven’t said anything to them,” Steve shrugged. “Didn’t really matter until now, I suppose. I think Natasha’s figured it out though. She’s finally stopped trying to set me up with every single woman in the Tower at least.” Bucky had to hide the shiver of mortified fascination he felt at those words. The Black Widow playing match-maker? That had to have been interesting. Or disastrous.

“What about you?” Steve asked, cutting into Bucky’s thoughts. “Your friends all know?”

“Oh yeah,” Bucky nodded. “Since it’s not illegal anymore, I don’t see any reason to hide it. I did that already, and it sucked. I ain’t hiding shit no more.”

“You get any trouble over it?”

“Nope,” Bucky shook his head. “Most people could care less. And I’m a big guy, with a big dog. If they do have a problem with it, they sure as hell ain’t gonna say it to my face. I’ve been lucky, real lucky so far.” Bucky paused to smile as he sat back in his seat, realizing as he did that they had spent the entire meal leaning in close to one another. “You should meet my neighbors, Betty and Paige. Crazy couple of gals, but sweet as can be. They’ve been married for over seven years, and just had their first baby, Lizzie, not too long ago.”

“Really?”

They ate their dessert with Bucky telling Steve all about his neighbors, Steve laughing and smiling the entire time, until the plates were cleared and the check paid (Steve wouldn’t even let Bucky look
at the bill), and they were rising to leave.

“Feel like going for a walk?” Steve asked once they were outside.

“Sure.”

That was how the two of them ended walking along the promenade of the Brooklyn Bridge. The wind was cold as it blew through their hair, and even though it was Friday night, there was the continual hiss from the cars that drove past. But it was still peaceful, quiet, different from the way their Saturday hikes were, but just as relaxing none-the-less.

“You know, at first I wanted to take you to Coney Island,” Steve confessed, when they paused midway between Manhattan and Brooklyn to study the opposing skylines. “Get a coupla hotdogs at Nathan’s, walk the boardwalk for a bit, ride the Cyclone.”

“Puke on my shoes again,” Bucky chimed in.

“I don’t do that no more,” Steve rolled his eyes at him. Bucky snorted. “But then I found out they were closed for the season. So I decided on this instead.”

“This is good,” Bucky admitted. “I’m having a great time.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

They fell quiet again, but it wasn’t uncomfortable. Pensive, stilled, waiting for something perhaps, but not uncomfortable. It never had been between them, at least not when it truly mattered.

“It’s so different now,” Steve said softly, from where he had rested his arms along the railing to study the lights from the buildings that illuminated the Brooklyn shoreline.

“Good or bad?” Bucky asked, straightening from where he had bent over to scratch at Sarge’s ear, so
he could stand at Steve’s side.

“Dunno,” Steve shrugged. “Haven’t made up my mind yet.” His eyes ran up and down the coastline as if he were searching for something. “Food’s better,” he eventually added.

“Shit yeah,” Bucky laughed. “And there’s Starbucks.”

“Yeah, you keep telling yourself that, Mr. Frappuccino.” Bucky nudged him with his hip. Steve’s eyes were still on Brooklyn, but the corner of his mouth had curled into a sly, little grin.

“It was hard at first, when they first woke me up,” Steve eventually confessed. “Scary.” And Bucky knew that this was a big deal, a secret Steve had probably not shared with anyone else. He needed to treat it carefully, with respect, because Steve was, had always been, so cautious, so hesitant to admit to the things he felt made him weak.

“For me too,” Bucky admitted, inching even closer so they were pressed shoulder to shoulder.

“You seem to be doing all right though,” Steve glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. “I mean, I know it wasn’t easy for you either, and that you still have your shitty days, but you seem to have landed on your feet.”

“I like it here now, in the twenty-first century,” Bucky shrugged. “Love it actually, if I’m being honest. I love cell phones and the internet, the music and the books. That the dames can wear whatever they want and no one can say shit to them about it. I love Vans and jeans and the Rolling Stones and Nikki Minaj. Microwave ovens and telenovelas, thirty-one flavors and the fact I can get siracha at my local grocery store. I love that my neighbors can get married because they love each other, and no one can tell them otherwise, and all the choices we have now that we didn’t before. It’s not perfect, no, and I know that. But if Jonesie was still alive, nobody would be able to say nasty shit to his face anymore and just expect him to take it. If you had been born in this century, instead of back then, your asthma would have been taken care of, and they probably would have been able to fix your spine and your bum ear. Me and your mom wouldn’t have had to worry you were going to die every time you got sick, and they probably would have been able to help her too. So yeah, it’s different, and it’s more crowded. But it’s definitely better than it was.”

“You were always the one who wanted to live in the future,” Steve said with a dry laugh. But there
was something in it, something like glass cracking, or wings spreading, Bucky couldn’t tell which, but it made him pause and pay attention. “And here you are. Who would have thunk it, all these years later.” That definitely gave Bucky pause, and it was his turn to look away.

“Paid a heavy price for it though,” it was his turn to eventually admit.

“Bucky,” Steve breathed out.

“It’s okay,” Bucky cut him off.

“No, it’s not. It’s never going to be okay, what you had to go through.”

“It is what it is Stevie,” Bucky shrugged, closing his eyes. “And there were times I would definitely have rather died than live through another day. But I didn’t. I’ve been given a second chance instead. I gotta remember that, and never take it for granted. ‘Cos it was shitty, what I went through, really fucking shitty, but I’m still alive. And I love my life now, even on the bad days, so I’m grateful, you know?”

When Bucky opened his eyes, Steve was staring at him. His eyes were as dark as the river beneath them, as deep and as fathomless. But he no longer looked as if he were searching for something, but as if…as if he had finally found what he’d been looking for. And it was Bucky.

“Can I kiss you again?” Steve’s voice should have been lost beneath the winds, the hissing of that endless stream of cars. But Bucky heard it like a whisper in his ear, a serenade outside his window. And Bucky couldn’t help but smile.

“Stevie,” Bucky chided him with a sly grin, “you never once asked me that question in your life. You don’t gotta start now.”

Then Steve was on him, as if nothing in the world was going to keep him away, as if he’d been waiting for this moment all of his life, and all he had needed was Bucky’s permission, while around them the winds blew, the passing cars honked their approval, and Sarge kept watch.

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The thing of it was, back in their day, if anyone had known, had looked closely enough to figure out what Bucky and Steve were to each other, had finally grown into when they were twenty and twenty-one years old, they would have seen Steve, small and slight and oh-so-fucking-pretty, and Bucky, looming, tall, with his wolf’s stride as he sauntered home after a day working on the docks, covered in sweat, and assumed Bucky was the one who pounded his pretty little fairy into the mattress every night.

Nothing could have been further from the truth.

Because Steve may have been small and slight, with hair the color of corn-silk, and Bucky looming and tall, with muscular arms all the single girls in their neighborhood loved to slide theirs through when Bucky walked them home, but once they were finally back in their apartment, with the door locked and the curtains drawn, it was Steve who always ended up taking Bucky apart.

Back then Steve’s body had been nothing but a lie, a cruel joke almost always on the verge of self-destruction from the fires contained within. And Bucky was not a wolf, but a cat, that loved to be petted and stroked, caressed until he rolled over onto his back, and revealed his belly, purring as he begged for more.

Bucky used to wonder if anyone knew. They had to be so careful, so discrete, never giving anything away, when Bucky would have sworn there were times when his own skin would have peeled itself away so it could wrap itself, like a coat of the finest silk, a suit of armor made from the strongest of metals, around Steve so that he would never, ever have to let Steve go. He thought Sarah might have known, must have seen the way they were always whispering and leaning towards one another, even when they were on opposite sides of the room. And Rebecca, his baby-sister Becca, smarter than anyone gave her credit for, than the accepted gender norms of their time allowed her to be, had never said a word. But she always readily agreed, with a smile both soft and bittersweet, to remain by Steve’s side when they asked her to join them out on a night on the town, Bucky with yet another girl on his arm, in order to prevent anyone from asking any questions. He missed her, fiercely sometimes, his younger sister, whom he had indulged and spoiled as much as possible. He hoped life had been kind to her, and often wondered what she would think if she could see him now.

But Becca was the farthest thing from his mind at that moment, and the world, both past and present, completely forgotten. Because over eighty years later, and this part of Steve, always one of Bucky’s favorites, hadn’t changed a bit.

He was on Bucky the way green flowed through leaves, blood poured from a cut, rain sunk into the ground after years of drought, taking Bucky apart while nourishing skin that was famished and quivering with need. Steve may have been the trouble-making little shit, and Bucky the one both cocky and charming when they were growing up, but when they came together like this, it was as if their jagged pieces, so mismatched, a set of opposites forced to fit, smoothed the knife-sharp edges of one, and untied the threads binding the other too tightly, so they could finally slide together into the
It had surprised the both of them at first, how badly Steve had wanted to fuck him, and how desperately Bucky had wanted to let him. But Steve had always been Bucky’s biggest surprise, from the day they met, to the time when they were nineteen and twenty years old, and Steve had been the one to pull Bucky into their first kiss.

“‘Bout damned time,” was all Bucky had been able to say when their lips parted. They’d always been close, tactile with one another, sharing things as if what belonged to one of course belonged to the other. It was a natural progression, Bucky had supposed back then, one he’d been waiting for ever since he’d gotten his first hard on looking at Steve, before shame and doubt forced him to look away. But for all that Steve hated his body, hated the way it limited him and made the world judge him, he had never been one for shame. And maybe it was because he always believed his time on Earth was limited, so Steve had never hesitated when going after what he wanted. And what he had wanted, what he had apparently always wanted and still did, was Bucky.

They had fought about it, of course they did. They fought about everything, why wouldn’t they fight about this as well. Because in spite of how much they both loved coming together, and the scents and sweat it left on their sheets, Bucky thought the price too high.

Because despite of all his fire, the never-ending passion Bucky often worried would burn Steve up from the inside out, Steve was sickly, and weak, with lungs that rattled even during the best of times, and a heart Bucky swore was ticking like a timebomb. And it was hard to enjoy something, to truly let go, when he was always afraid this thing he so greedily wanted and hungered for, would end up killing the one person he loved more than anything or anyone in the world.

“No, no more, this is the last time. No more Stevie!”

“Why not?” Steve had snarled back at him. They couldn’t even fight like normal people, like a normal couple could. Instead of shouting at each other, they had to hiss and whisper, crouching in a corner away from their window while the radio played to cover their argument.

“Why not? Why not? ‘Cos the last time your lips turned fucking blue and you had a goddamned asthma attack! Do you think that’s what I want? What any man wants? For their lover to die on them? I love you Stevie, I love you more than anything, and I can’t…I can’t…” There were tears in his eyes, shameful, hateful tears, that Bucky felt ashamed of, even if he couldn’t make them stop.

“Bucky, Bucky you listen to me.” Steve had grabbed him by the face, lifting his head, forcing Bucky to meet his gaze. Bucky had tried to pull himself away, but Steve’s hands, the biggest part of his
“I ain’t got much Bucky, ain’t got much to give. You’re the one who’s always doing most of the work.”

“I don’t mind that-“

“Shut up!” Steve had given his head another shake, not too rough, but enough to stop whatever it was Bucky had been about to say next. “The world is always trying to take shit from me, tell me I can’t. And the one thing I got, the only thing I know will never leave me, is you. And I can give you this, I love doing this for you. You don’t get to take that away from me!”

“It ain’t worth it Steve!”

“It is!...It is.” And then Steve’s hands, which had been clenched in Bucky’s hair, their grip vice-like and immovable, loosened, gentled, until he was running his fingers through Bucky locks, soothing and calm. “You are. You’re worth everything to me.”

“I don’t want it,” Bucky snarled back. But Steve had found his spots, had always known Bucky’s spots, and just like a cat who tended to hiss when it was upset, but settled if you were patient and steady enough, all of Bucky’s anger slowly started to slip away. “Not if it costs me you.”

“You let me worry about that James Buchanan Barnes.”

“Stevie-“

“You ain’t gonna lose me. You ain’t never gonna lose me, okay sweetheart, I swear to you, I swear it.” Steve continued to soothe him with his promise, a kiss to his forehead. “We’ll just figure out a way. We always do.”

And Steve, cunning, brilliant, tactical Steve, did. While it was nearly impossible for him to endure any grueling physical activity for more than a few minutes, and difficult for him to maintain an erection for very long, in spite of how desperately he may have wanted to, he found ways to work around it and ensure that both he and Bucky got everything they needed. He became a master of lips and tongue, soft, heavy caresses and deft strokes of his fingers. He learned how to coax and curl, whisper and praise, and take Bucky apart piece by slow piece, until Bucky couldn’t stand it anymore, was begging and mewling for it, and all Steve had to do was slide himself inside of Bucky’s body with a few carefully aimed thrusts to have Bucky burying his face into his pillow to muffle the cries that had built up in his throat.
Their sex life had been amazing, and no one had any idea that the skinny little blond who could barely make it up the four flights of stairs to their apartment some days, was a dynamo in bed who always left his lover glowing with satisfaction.

Bucky prayed that hadn’t changed, but he had high hopes for the rest of their evening.

The car ride back to Bay Ridge was a blur. And for the first time ever, Bucky was impatient with Sarge, nearly cursing at him as his dog seemed to take his sweet fucking time finding just the perfect corner of his yard to do his business, before Bucky was ordering him inside and to his dog bed, while Steve stood behind him the entire time, peppering the back of his neck with hot, greedy kisses that made goosebumps run up and down Bucky’s spine.

Then they were inside, desperately kicking off their shoes, and Steve lifted Bucky up by his hips, so all Bucky could do was wrap his thighs around Steve’s waist, and whispered, “Your bedroom?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Bucky panted against his lips, his hands in Steve’s hair, every inch of his skin on fire.

“’Kay,” Steve gasped back, and then they were moving, Steve the knight invading the castle, and Bucky the treasure he’d been searching for in the dragon’s keep.

Bucky’s coat and belt, and Steve’s jacket and tie were long gone by the time they reached his room, the one place, the only place in Bucky’s home that Steve hadn’t seen so far. But the details of Bucky’s inner sanctum, the blue and gold walls, the gleaming hardwood floors, the hand-painted bureau and night tables, the sheer curtains and Japanese style paper lanterns, were irrelevant, indiscernible, as Steve carried him inside, and kicked the door shut with the back of his foot.

All of them except for the king-sized bed taking up prominence in the center of the room. The blankets were thick and soft, smelling of vanilla and fabric softener, and Bucky had indulged himself with more pillows than any human could possibly need, and yet his breath still left him in a huff when Steve practically threw him down on top of it, his body soon following like a sea serpent rising from the blue.

That’s what Bucky would remember most when he thought about this night in the future. The inky blue of the sky he could barely make out through his curtains. The soothing blue of his walls. The blue fire that burned from Steve’s eyes as he gazed down at Bucky one last time, before he lunged forward to seal their lips together in a promise of heat and hunger and endless, endless pleasure.
Then it was hands in each other’s hair, hips rolling upward to thrust against matching hardness, and kisses, kisses, kisses as they tried to reclaim what had once been lost, as they sought to discover what new treasures awaited them now.

Steve’s body was everywhere, miles and miles of muscles and flesh, when Bucky remembered it had not been much more than skin and bones the last time they had done this. He was taller, stronger, more solid than he’d ever been, and for the first time Bucky didn’t have to worry that if he moved too fast, or clutched too hard, something in Steve would break. He could grasp and reach and suck and bite with no fear, and devour Steve the way Steve had always devoured him.

But Steve had always been the maestro of their symphony, and while Bucky plucked at the strings of Steve’s new body, looking for just the right notes, the perfect pitch to make Steve sing, Steve guided and composed, and wrought from Bucky every sweet and blissful sigh that had been locked inside of his skin, forgotten, banished, for over eighty years.

Then Steve pulled away, leaning back so he could rest his weight on Bucky’s hips, his swollen lips red and wet, and reached for the edges of Bucky’s shirt so he could tear it open.

That was when Bucky froze, suddenly remembering they were different now, he was different now, and it would, could, never be the same. With a speed that surprised even him, Bucky reached out and grabbed Steve by the wrists, halting his movements.

“Buck?” Steve asked, his demeanor instantly shifting, his gaze still as intense, but concerned now when it had been blazing before. Bucky needed to take a second, and the another, to swallow, until he could force the words out of his throat.

“I don’t…I don’t…” He had to pause to swallow yet again, before he could continue. “My body’s not the same anymore Steve.”

“Yeah well, neither is mine,” Steve said with a gentle smile.

“It’s different Steve,” Bucky shook his head. “It’s ugly now, with the arm. I’ve got a lot of scarring on that side and it isn’t pretty. I still have a hard time looking at it sometimes, and it’s my arm. So you might want to leave the shirt on, because I don’t think you’re going to like what you see.”

Steve remained where he was, perfectly still, his wrists still clenched in Bucky’s hands. He was
studying Bucky, taking him in, absorbing all of Bucky’s details in a careful and slow study. But his eyes never changed, never dimmed, and Bucky couldn’t even begin to imagine what was going through his mind.

“Did you love me?” was what he said when he finally did speak.

“What?” Bucky was confused.

“Did you love me?” he asked again, in that same tone of voice. “Back before the war, before the serum, when I was nothing more than a bag of bones with a crooked spine, and a nose too big for my face.”

“You know I did,” Bucky answered him. Steve nodded as if what Bucky had said was the obvious answer, the only answer.

“Back then, you always used to tell me I was beautiful, the prettiest thing you had ever seen, prettier even than all the girls that always tried to catch your eye. Was that a lie?”

“Don’t be an idiot! I meant every word I said!”

“Hmm,” Steve hummed with a small nod. “And just the other day, you said it to me again. That it never mattered to you what I looked like. That big or small, that was never what you saw, that you never cared, and I was always the most beautiful thing in the world to you.”

“Well yeah. It’s the truth. It always has been.”

“If that’s the case, then why would you think it’s not exactly the same for me?” Steve pressed, his gaze no less intense than it had been, but now tinged with something that looked a little bit like loss, a little bit like heartbreak. He slipped his hands free from Bucky’s hold, only to slide them against Bucky’s hands, where he interlocked their fingers together. “I’m sorry if I didn’t say it to you enough back then. And I’m sorry if I haven’t said it to you enough now. But you’ve always been the most beautiful thing in the world to me, James Buchanan Barnes, and you still are. In fact, I think you’re even more beautiful now, with your long hair, and those eyes of yours that can still look at the world and see all the wonder in it, even after everything you’ve been through.

“Your scars don’t matter to me. Your metal arm doesn’t matter to me. If you’ll be more comfortable
with it covered, then that’s what we’ll do. But I’d really like to see it, see all of you, cos yeah, I’m curious, I’ll admit to that. But mostly because I want to kiss each and every inch of you, so you’ll know I love every part of you, and nothing about you could ever be ugly to me.” And then Steve leaned forward, to press a kiss that was reverent and gentle to Bucky’s forehead, before he sat back and let go of Bucky hands, to lay his own on top of his thighs, while he waited for Bucky to make up his mind.

Could he do this? Could he be brave enough? For a second, just a second, he doubted himself. In that moment when Steve had reached, he’d been so suddenly worried that all his desire had fled, his erection flagging.

But Steve had always been the best of men, his courage and endless strength not overshadowing those around him, but inspiring them to do more, be better, follow where he so bravely led. He had always been an inspiration to others, because he didn’t molly-coddle or overlook the weaknesses of those around him, but believed in his men in spite of them. Most shockingly of all, he apparently still believed in Bucky, even after everything he had done, everything that had been done to him. And it was that, that allowed Bucky to let go of his fear, have faith in Steve’s belief, and take that last first step forward.

“Yeah, yeah, okay,” Bucky eventually decided with a nod. “We can do this without the shirt.”

“You sure?” Steve double-checked one last time.

“Yeah,” Bucky said again. “Just don’t rip it. It’s silk.”

 Wouldn’t dream of it.” And just like that, it was easy again. Not as desperate as before, but not as heavy either. Steve leaned forward again, to press another kiss to Bucky’s forehead, then one to his cheekbone, and then to his lips, before he reached out once again and slowly began to undo the buttons of Bucky’s shirt. This time, instead of freezing, Bucky helped him, raising slightly to lift his arms and shift his shoulders, so that with a final, silent caress, the silk slipped away and it was the air’s turn to caress Bucky’s skin. Somewhere, in spite of his best intentions, in the middle of that Bucky had again closed his eyes. He hadn’t realized he had until he heard Steve’s voice, beckoning to him with a soft whisper.

“Bucky,” Steve said. “Bucky, look at me. Please Bucky, open your eyes.”

When he did, he found Steve in the same position, still kneeling over Bucky’s hips, staring down not at Bucky’s shoulder, but at his face.
“You idiot,” Steve said once he was sure he had Bucky’s attention. “You’re still gorgeous. That hasn’t changed a bit.” He reached out then, his intentions clear, and gently ran his fingertips over the ridges lining the inside of Bucky’s left shoulder. “And this, this doesn’t change a damned thing about you. You survived it. I hate that it’s something you had to go through, but you survived it. And you living, being with me here right now, that’s the most beautiful thing in the world. Every wish I ever wanted, every prayer I ever had answered. So don’t you dare think that I would ever think you’re ugly. Okay?” Bucky heart felt too small to beat, too big for his chest, and he wondered if this was how Steve used to feel, when his body refused to make up its mind about whether it wanted to live or die. And his touch wasn’t helping, both soothing and distracting, sending conflicting signals to Bucky’s brain.

“You’ve always had some strange notions in that head of yours, Rogers. Sad to see that hasn’t changed.” Bucky’s sarcasm seemed to have finally rallied, and it was making up his mind even if Bucky still couldn’t.

“Yeah well, you’re the one who invited me up here,” Steve smirked at him. “What does that say about you?”

“I kinda remember you carrying me up those stairs like a fucking caveman,” Bucky volleyed. “Which, now that I think about it, I really enjoyed. So can we get back to that please? Before the fucking cows come home.”

“And you call me bossy,” Steve teased, and Bucky barely had a chance to see the fire flaring back up in his eyes, before Steve lunged forward and stopped anything Bucky had been about to say by sealing his lips to Bucky’s own.

New and old. Forgotten and remembered. A kiss goodbye, and a kiss hello. It was all the things a kiss should have been. All the things it needed to be. And all Bucky could do was let himself be kissed, while he tried to kiss Steve back, and bubbles began to burst beneath his skin.

And then Steve shifted, nudging Bucky’s face to the side so he run the tip of his tongue just beneath Bucky’ ear, while his hands slid in a slow, heavy slide down Bucky’s body, squeezing his hips for just a second before they made quick work of Bucky’s button and zipper, his fingers slipping inside.

“Well hello there,” Steve hummed happily in Bucky’s ear. “I remember you. Been awhile, but I think I remember how to do this dance.” Steve tightened his fingers, rough and calloused, but still long, still agile, and Bucky felt himself swelling eagerly into Steve’s hand. “Yeah, just like that.”
Heat and pressure, the rustling of cloth, the whisper of skin on skin, and Bucky felt himself already beginning to float away, his thighs falling open of their own accord. Because Bucky had played with himself, eagerly, enthusiastically exploring his body for sometimes hours at a time once his sex drive had returned. But it never felt as good as this did, as Steve’s fingers did, running up and down the length of Bucky’s cock in a slow and steady stroke.

“Still just as sensitive as you used to be,” were the words Steve murmured into his skin with a matching flick of his tongue. “Always loved that about you. Biggest fucking turn on in the world, and all just for me.”

Those were the last words Steve said for a while, because with another kiss to Bucky’s lips, where he traced the corner of Bucky’s mouth with his tongue, Steve slowly began to make his way down Bucky’s body, using his mouth and wet little presses with just a hint of teeth, to re-mark and claim all of Bucky’s flesh. The dimple of his chin, the peak of his Adams Apple, the hollow just beneath his throat. The inside of his right shoulder, the barbed-wired line of scars along his left, where he spent an extra moment, not just with his lips and tongue, but the tip of his nose as he traced the blood-red border of flesh and metal, that tingled to life beneath his attentions.

He didn’t linger long though, moving on to each of Bucky’s nipples, suckling each with a tiny nip, so that when he began to move even lower, they were tight and wet, stinging ever so slightly from the sudden lack of warmth. Then it was the base of Bucky’s sternum, and the inner ridge of Bucky abdominals, before he let his tongue perform the tiniest of little dances in Bucky’s navel, the final step a small puff of breath that was enough to make all the hair on Bucky’s body stand on end and his toes curl. And all the while he kept his right hand wrapped around Bucky’s dick, squeezing, stroking, milking his length so that Bucky couldn’t help but feel the drops of his own precum as it slicked Steve’s palm. Until finally, with one last puff of breath, and one last tightening of his fingers, Steve sat back upon his heels, cocking his head as he studied the results of his work on Bucky’s skin.

“Well look at you.” He grinned at Bucky like a cat that had already lapped up the last drop of cream, satisfied and pleased, and eager for even more. “Now, let’s get this show on the road for real.”

The thing everybody knew about Steven Grant Rogers was that he was a master tactician, able to take in his surroundings in less than an instant, and formulate sixteen different plans, all with an equal likelihood of success. It meant he could be both silent and still, a snake patiently waiting for its prey to come within easy reach before he struck with fangs bared. But it also meant he always knew when the moment was right, and how to lunge forward without any patience or preparation, because he had exactly what he wanted in his sights, and he was going to take it, and nothing, absolutely nothing, was going to get in his way. He had always been like that; small and weak, huge and strong, and in his blissful nest of sheets and pillows, and too many but never enough kisses, Bucky had forgotten that.

Which was why all he could do was gasp when Steve tore his pants and briefs from his legs, and
then lunged forward to bury his face into Bucky’s groin with a deep and greedy inhale.

“Oh fuck!” Steve barely gave Bucky the chance to hiss, before his hands were on the insides of Bucky’s thighs, spreading them even farther apart while he took another deep breath in before he began to run his cheeks up and down the length of Bucky’s dick, smearing the precum all over his face, so that his skin began to gleam with the proof of Bucky’s arousal. He had always been an enthusiastic lover, even when his body had been weak and small, knowing how to make the most of what he had, and how to stretch that even further, until they were both crazy with it. And he had loved having sex with Bucky, the power it gave him, but also, however brief, the freedom from the aches and pains he constantly had to endure. And Bucky had loved being the one to be able to give that to him. The only one who could give him ease and peace, simply by letting Steve have his way in this one aspect of their lives that they couldn’t share with anyone else. That they never wanted to. Such an easy thing to give, once Bucky overcame his fears. A gift that gave back more than a million times over, and one Bucky thought forever lost.

But Steve, bossy and demanding as he could sometimes be, had never been selfish, and always treated Bucky’s gift as something sacred and valued, to be cherished and kept safe, and returned with just as much generosity.

So after he had gotten his fill of the scent and warmth emanating from between Bucky’s thighs, he pulled back to lick his lips, just once, before he lowered it again, and took Bucky’s dick into the heat of his mouth, slowly swallowing it down toward the endless hot and wet tightness that waited for him at the back of Steve’s throat.

As his bones turned to jelly and what was left of his skin felt like it was melting away, Bucky briefly thought of all those historians who had studied Steve and his life, all his acts of courage and bravery, and if they knew what a greedy little cocksucker Steve really was. Because Steve could suck dick like a champ, full of enthusiasm and always eager for more. But then again, he wasn’t the only one, and Bucky was wondering when he would get his turn, before Steve made a growling noise, and all of Bucky’s thoughts flew away.

It wasn’t just the vibrations of Steve’s throat around the head of his cock. It was Steve’s hands running up and down the inside of Bucky’s thighs. The breadth of his shoulders beneath the back of Bucky’s knees. The ends of his hair brushing against the curls of Bucky’s own. Steve was everywhere; above and beneath him, within and without. And all Bucky could do, the only choice left to him was to let go, let the web of himself stretch and expand so Steve could pour himself into the spaces in between, just like he always had, so Bucky could do nothing but let him, pour his release into Steve’s waiting mouth, so there would be enough room for the both of them beneath Bucky’s skin.

“Oh fuck.” The words were said on an exhale this time, when Bucky could finally speak again. He needed to blink and then swallow, and then do both again, before he was able to look down, to find
Steve still crouched in between his legs, looking back at him with a very smug smile on his face.

“Are you still good, or do you need a break?” Steve asked him. It was the question he used to ask whenever they came together like this. Bucky used to think it so unfair. He’d always had a very healthy sex drive, better than most from what he’d understood, and he could come multiple times in a night. The limitations of Steve’s body meant Bucky often had two, sometimes three orgasms to Steve’s one, but Steve always insisted he didn’t mind. That he loved it actually, because it meant Bucky would never have to look elsewhere to get his needs met. As if that was what love was about. As if Bucky wouldn’t willingly go without, as if there were any other arms Bucky wanted to be in at the end of a long day.

“Are you kidding me?” he laughed, instead of saying all of that. “You know once was never enough for me. You were the one who had to worry about throwing your back out.”

“Yeah well, things are different now,” Steve grinned back at him. “And we don’t have to worry about my back no more. Or me having an asthma attack.”

“Why don’t you c’mon up here and prove it then,” Bucky said, reaching for him. “And kiss me while you’re at it. You know how much I always loved the taste of me on those pretty little lips of yours. And take the rest of your clothes off, okay? ‘Cos you’re seriously overdressed right now. Don’t make me have to rip them off you.”

“Whatever you say Buck,” Steve smiled, and then crawled up the length of Bucky’s body and into his open arms. Their mouths met and Bucky did get to taste himself on Steve’s lips, bitter and salty, but somehow sweeter than a drop of honey when combined with the essence of Steve. Then it was Bucky who ran out of patience, the one who needed to feel, to see, to explore. So he reached between them, and used his hands, one of flesh and one of metal, to tear open Steve’s shirt.

“Oh, don’t rip my shirt, Steve. It’s silk, Steve,” Steve complained between kisses as his buttons pinged to the floor.

“Shut up, Steve,” Bucky retorted between nips to Steve’s mouth before he tightened his arms around the endless stretch of Steve’s shoulders and pulled him in even closer. Steve may have been the one to learn how to play Bucky’s body like a fiddle, but Bucky had never been a passive lover. Cautious, yes, due to Steve’s health, but never passive. And he liked to stroke as much as be stroked, kiss as much as be kissed, and know he was the one that knew how to unlock all the curves of Steve’s body so he too had a chance to stretch out long and languid, relaxed and free, two cats lying together in the sun, while one groomed the other, and the other purred in response.
So Bucky reached and stroked and pet, running his fingers through Steve’s hair, his hands down the length of his now perfectly straight back, and cradled his hips between the vee of his thighs. It was slower this time, but no less heated, as they licked and kissed and breathed each other in between muffled moans and shivering gasps. Steve’s new body, which Bucky had never had a chance to explore, had barely even seen unclothed before they had been ripped apart, was a wonderland for Bucky, his skin still as sensitive as it had ever been, but with so much more of it now for Bucky to play with. Which he did, until they were rutting their hips together, and Steve’s spine began to tremble in the way that told Bucky he was desperate, close to the edge, and needed to lay his final claim.

“Bucky, I gotta…I gotta, can I Bucky?” Steve’s frantic whisper in his ear less than a second later confirmed.

“Yeah. Yeah, you can. Please Stevie, please,” Bucky whispered right back. Steve wasn’t the only one who was desperate, and Bucky’s entire body ached with the need to be filled.

“You got slick?”

“Yeah, bedside table, right side.” Steve was already reaching for it by the time Bucky finished speaking, the heavy drag of his erect cock over Bucky’s lower stomach teasing Bucky with hints of what was still yet to come. Bucky toes were clenching in anticipation, always his favorite part, as Steve dug through the contents of his drawer, when Steve froze mid-motion, as if in shock.

“What’s the matter? Can’t you find it? I know I got some in there,” Bucky panted, wondering why Steve had that look on his face.

“Are those…are those?” At Steve’s question, Bucky suddenly remembered what else was in his bedside drawer, aside from his bottle of lube.

“Yeah,” Bucky said. And seriously, had Steve been living under a rock ever since he’d been pulled from the ice if that was his reaction to Bucky’s collection of sex toys.

“It’s just…” Steve’s hand started moving again, shuffling things around. “There are four of them Buck.”

“So?” Bucky snapped, because of course the idiot would choose now to start asking questions, when there were other things he needed to be doing; namely Bucky. “You gotta problem with vibrators
Stevie?”

“One of them’s purple.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake! Will you just grab the goddamned lube and forget about everything else, or I’m gonna toss you out the fucking window and finish myself! Using that purple one!” It was his favorite after all, and would get the job done, since Steve had the attention span of a chicken, and there were other things he needed to be focusing on.

“Yeah, yeah, all right.” Steve had finally shaken himself out of his stupor, his mind back on track. But something in him had shifted, or clicked at last, because once he found the lube and quietly closed the drawer, when he looked back at Bucky there was something in his eyes that reminded Bucky that Steve’s mind was, and always had been, the most dangerous thing about him. “But we’re definitely gonna come back to those, because I think that’s something I’m really going to want to see.” And there went Bucky’s toes, curling all over again.

“Yeah, all right, but not right now. Right now I really need you to fuck me Stevie, and I don’t think I can wait anymore.”

“Yeah,” Steve’s voice was low and deep, full of satisfaction, and a promise of all the things to come. “I think you’re right. You’re desperate for it, aren’t you? But that’s all right, I’ll take care of you.” Steve knelt back on his knees, settling himself between Bucky’s thighs while he flicked open the cap on the bottle of lube with his thumb. “Now spread your legs for me honey, nice and wide, that’s it, just like that, ‘cos I’m gonna have to get you ready, and it’s gonna take me a little while. I’m bigger than I was, and I want to make sure you can take it all, because that’s what you want, isn’t it? To take all of me?”

“Yes, yes, yes,” Bucky began to chant, spreading his legs even further. “Hurry Stevie, hurry.”

“Don’t worry honey,” Steve assured him as he poured a healthy dollop of lube over his fingers. “We’ll get there, I promise you. But this has always been one of my favorite parts, you on my fingers, so let me enjoy it. Now take a deep breath and relax. This is going to take a while.” Then Steve reached between Bucky’s legs, and with fingers that were slippery and slick, began to play with Bucky’s asshole.

If Bucky had any breath left in him, he would have called Steve a bastard, because the motherfucker was taking his sweet, fucking time. But true to his word, Steve had always enjoyed doing this to Bucky, and was damned good at it. And he reminded Bucky just how much, with fingers that circled and caressed, pressed and soothed and slowly, oh-so-slowly slid their way into Bucky’s body.
But that’s not all that he did. He did have two hands after all, and he used his left to cradle Bucky’s balls in a gentle rocking motion, stroke along the sensitive soft skin of Bucky’s inner thighs, and brush through the curls at the base of Bucky’s groin. Then there were his lips, that kissed the back of a knee, the inner seam at the top of Bucky’s legs, and the crest of his hipbone. Once or twice, or even a million times, he would lay a single kiss to the tip of Bucky’s prick, using the curl of his tongue to lap at the slit, before he swallowed down the bead of moisture gathered there with a wicked smile. And all the while, he showered Bucky and his body with praise, calling him ‘Beautiful,’ ‘Beloved,’ ‘Sexy,’ ‘Wonderful,’ and ‘Treasure’… ‘Treasure’… ‘Treasure’… until Bucky was bereft of words, and nothing more than a long and endless line of need, shivering and desperate, not able to withstand even another second more.

“Please Stevie, now, now, now!” Bucky begged when his control finally snapped, clenching Steve’s wrist in the fingers of his left hand. When he looked up, it was to see he wasn’t the only one. Steve’s pupils were huge, their normal blue a nearly invisible corona around the black, and for all his control and determination he was panting nearly as badly as Bucky. “I’m ready, I’m ready. C’mon. I need you. I need you.”

“Yeah, yeah, okay,” Steve agreed, reaching for the lube one last time, coating his dick that rose rigid and proud from its own nest of dark gold curls, before he took Bucky’s thigh into his hands, and repositioned himself, lining himself up perfectly, and with a whispered, “Now take another deep breath for me honey. This is going to feel different than it used to. But it should also feel a lot better too,” before with a slow and steady press, he began to push his way inside.

It burned and it hurt, the endless, endless stretch of it. But it also lit up every single nerve in Bucky’s body, from the tips of his toes, to the base of his spine, and out from his heart in a glorious rush that made Bucky feel as if he were made of champagne. Bubbles and tingles and sparkles behind his eyes, coursing through his blood, pouring from his lips. If he could have, he would have laughed. But Steve was everywhere, within him and without, and all Bucky could do was curl his arms around Steve’s shoulders, pulling him close, pulling him in, and share with Steve the taste of his joy, while his own hips began to rock of their own accord, urging Steve to thrust against his body and bring them even closer.

With a groan of his own, Steve was more than happy to comply.

There had always been words for sex and orgasms, and there were even more now. Bucky had heard and read so many of them in his relentless study of this newer world. Terms like waves crashing against a shore, explosions and bursts of starlight. Coming and cumming, riding the wave, and the little death.

For Bucky on that night it was none of that, it was all of it.
It was letting go and holding on. Restraint and freedom. It was fear and courage. Surrender and victory. Coming home after a long day and climbing into your car to set out on a new adventure. It was feeling wings that he’d never known he’d had finally unfurl, and his roots sinking into the deepest, darkest of soils, where they were nourished and could grow. It was all of that, and none of it.

And it was Steve and love, and love and Steve, over and over again in his mind, a prayer, a hope, a shooting star that he didn’t have to reach for, because Steve had laid it in his palms for Bucky to curl his fingers around and keep safe. And Steve and love, and love and Steve and nothing, nothing else.

Until it was done, his body his own again, just in time for him to place his own stars in Steve’s hands, so his were free to keep Steve close while he soared, and pressed his face into Bucky’s neck with a final growl, sinking his teeth into Bucky’s skin, that without words told Bucky again and again and again just how much Steve loved him.

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It was still dark out when Bucky eventually opened his eyes, the sky he could see through his window heavy and grey. Steve was a long line of heat against his back, and at some point, when they had finally finished, Sarge must have decided he was tired of being kept waiting, and made his way into Bucky’s bedroom, where he had stretched himself out over their calves at the foot of Bucky’s bed. It was raining, and the sound would have been soothing, if the endless plink of it against his closed windows didn’t make Bucky realize he really needed to piss. He was loathe to leave the warmth of his bed, but his bladder was getting more and more insistent, so with a quiet groan he slipped from the tentacle-like embrace of Steve’s arms, and sliding on his slippers, quietly padded his way to the bathroom.

Once he was done, he glanced at himself in the mirror and had to stifle a laugh. His hair was a wreck, there were marks all along his neck, and the rest of his body wasn’t much better. But sex was always a messy affair, especially the best of it, and this was one of the best nights Bucky could ever remember having.

It was as he was doing a quick clean-up that his stomach decided to get involved, and reminded him with a growl that the rib-eye he’d eaten, while delicious, was a distant memory, and since he’d had a very vigorous evening, could it please have something else now? Knowing he would never be able to get back to sleep until he’d consumed something, (damned serum and how it had kicked up his metabolism), he crept back into his bedroom, found his boxer-briefs on the floor, and made his way downstairs. Sarge, having woken when Bucky moved, had been waiting for him outside the bathroom door, and quietly plodded after Bucky as he made his way into his kitchen and tried to decide on something to eat.
He pondered his options as he stared into his refrigerator, supposing he could bake something. But that would take too long, and he was really in the mood for some damned protein. But then a packet of uncooked shrimp caught his eye, and Bucky was struck with inspiration.

Ten minutes, the packet of shrimp, a pound of linguine, some minced garlic and chopped onions, thinly sliced leeks, a handful of sage, a dash of salt and pepper, olive oil, butter, a healthy pouring of white wine and some shredded parmesan later, and Bucky was sitting down at his table, a fork in one hand, and the skillet he’d used to combine everything in the other. He didn’t even bother with a plate; he was going to end up eating it all anyway, so why bother dirtying a dish.

It was a damned good meal, even Bucky had to admit, especially for something so quickly thrown together, and Bucky was planning to take his time and enjoy it before he went back to bed. So of course, it was right after his second mouthful that Steve shambled into his kitchen completely naked, looking not much better than Bucky had, squinting against the light, searching for Bucky.

“Are we eating now?” his confused voice rasped as he took in the sight of Bucky sitting at his table, a skillet-full of shrimp and pasta in front of him, and Sarge stretched out contentedly at Bucky’s feet, gnawing on an antler bone.

“I don’t know anything about this we,” Bucky rasped back before he shoveled another forkful of linguine in his mouth.

“Did you…did you cook?” And Steve had the nerve to call him a zombie before he had his first three cups of coffee. Bucky ignored him, choosing to bite into a piece of shrimp instead. “Seriously Buck,” Steve continued, stepping forward, “did you get up in the middle of the night to cook… pasta?” Bucky didn’t even bother responding; if he was going to ask stupid questions, Bucky didn’t see why he had to answer him. Especially when he had shrimp and linguine to focus on.

“And you’re not going to share? Really?” Steve continued to press, suddenly a lot more awake than he’d been just a second ago. Bucky’s glare should have told him everything he needed to know. But Steve had never known when to quit, and apparently over eighty years later that still hadn’t changed. “Really Buck? Really?” He was trying to use his I'm-Captain-America-And I'm-So-Disappointed-In-You-Voice. Apparently he had no idea it was a lot less effective when his naked junk was hanging near your face.

“If I give you a taste, will you shut up and let me eat in peace?” Bucky finally grumbled, just so he wouldn’t have to stare at Steve’s bits anymore; they were all dangly and floppy, distracting Bucky from his food. Steve arched an eyebrow in response, so with a sigh, Bucky swirled a together a forkful of linguine and shrimp, dipping it in a bit of the sauce, before he handed it over to Steve.
Steve took the fork, and then a cautious sniff, before he took a much less cautious bite.

“Hey…Hey!” Steve exclaimed, his eyes widening. “That’s really, really good.”

“Yeah I know.” Bucky snatched his fork back. “Now go away. I’m busy.”

“Uh-huh,” Steve grunted, making his way toward the drawer where he knew Bucky kept his utensils, pulling out a fork before he came back to the table and sat his naked ass down on the chair next to Bucky’s. “Now share. I know your momma raised you better than that.” Bucky sighed again, wondering how Steve wasn’t freezing his nuts off, and moved the skillet so it was equidistant between them.

But at least the food was enough to make Steve stop talking, and Bucky had made plenty. And it really wasn’t such a bad way to spend the next twenty minutes, sharing a meal with someone he had just shared his body with, who was equally appreciative of both. Especially toward the end, when Bucky rose and went over to his breadbox (he actually owned a goddamned breadbox now) and pulled out the remains of the baguette he’d baked just the day before, ripping it in half, and handing one of the pieces to Steve so they could use it to mop up the leftover sauce in the pan.

“Oh Jesus Christ,” Steve moaned when the last bite of bread was gone. “Is this a thing? Can this be a thing that we do now? Sex and then pasta?”

“Sure. If you’re willing to cook it.”

“What if I do the dishes afterwards?”

“I got a dishwasher. That don’t count.”

“What if I promise to make it up to you when we get back upstairs?”

“You just want me to make breakfast.”

“Oh please. It’s not like you weren’t going to get up in less than two hours to get ready for our hike.”
"Dunno if you noticed this Rogers, but it’s raining outside. Maybe you like being outside in the cold and wet, but me and Sarge have better ways to spend our Saturdays."

"Huh, you’re right. It is,” Steve said, noticing the weather for the first time as he glanced through the window of Bucky’s back door. “So what are our plans for the day then?”

“I don’t know what your plans are, but I’m going back to bed.” Bucky rose from the table, taking his skillet with him, and giving it a quick rinse before he stacked it in his dishwasher.

“To sleep?”

“That was the plan, yeah.” Bucky glanced over his shoulder. “Why?” And he knew, he knew, exactly where this was going.

“Cos I don’t know about you” Steve said, rising from his chair. “But the serum, it’s given me a real quick recovery time, and a lot more endurance than I used to have. And there’re still a few positions, and those things in your drawer, that we haven’t tried yet. And it’s been a while, and I think you and me have a lot of things we need to catch up on.”

So that was his Saturday then.

“Lemme just check if Sarge needs to go, and then I’ll meet you back upstairs.”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what I thought you’d say,” Steve said as he walked past Bucky, smiling as he dragged his fingers over Bucky’s shoulders. “Don’t keep me waiting.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is dedicated to my beautiful and beloved haysend. We were PMing while I was writing this scene, and she actually got to see bits of it in process. And she was nothing but encouraging and supportive throughout. We "met" while I was posting chapters of my previous story, and became friends. She calls me her fuckface, which makes me laugh every time, and has become one of my nearest and dearest. This one is for you my love. I hope you enjoy it.
As well as everyone else. This chapter was a long time coming, and I hope it ended up being worth the wait.

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Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

They spent the entirety of their Saturday and Sunday together, never more than a few feet apart. They didn’t get around to exploring the contents of Bucky’s drawer, but that was more than okay with Bucky, since their bodies were more than happy to get reacquainted with one another, and there were plenty of new secrets and ways of touching each other for them to discover.

It was a glorious weekend, and Bucky couldn’t help but toss his head back and laugh with the joy of it as he rode Steve, vigorous and greedy on his living room couch, something he had never been able to do before, for fear of hurting Steve.

It was even better now, in this new century; not just because of the differences in Steve’s body, his endless strength and his ability to give back as much as Bucky could take. But because the times were different, and Bucky now had a different understanding of himself, his sexuality.

He was a bottom, always had been. He could easily admit that now, knowing it was just a part of who he was, how his body liked to receive pleasure. It didn’t mean he was sick or an invert, or that there was something wrong with him, that he was a woman in a man’s body, with perverted desires that made him less than. He knew there were others who felt that way, that gender and sex were much more complicated than they’d ever been. Or that society had finally gotten to the point where people finally had the words and the freedom to express who they really were, had always been. But Bucky had never felt like a woman, had never thought of himself in that way. And while he enjoyed being with women, finding their bodies both fascinating and beautiful, if asked what he wanted, what act most satisfied him, it was to receive. Not in a way that was passive or left him feeling helpless, but allowed him to stretch out and soak up his pleasure, so it overflowed from his skin, his nerves, his very soul.

He and Steve had tried it the other way, then they first came together like this. It was something they both liked to do from time to time, and they enjoyed it. But Steve really preferred to top, where his bossy nature could transform into something compassionate and caring, and Bucky loved being the recipient of all that devotion and attention.

He’d been lucky, he supposed. Steve had never once mocked or disrespected him for it, and always expressed nothing but an endless sense of appreciation for what he perceived as Bucky’s generosity. And he was still lucky, because that aspect of Steve hadn’t changed, even all these decades later, and the world was a different place.

He spent quite a few sessions talking to Dr. Callahan about it, when the monsters in his closet were
quiet, and the dragon of his rage sleeping. The conversations could have been embarrassing, but he now knew there was very little that could shock his therapist, and she’d been very frank and open with him, willing to answer any of his questions, and providing Bucky with even more resources when she could sense his doubt.

“There’s nothing wrong with you Bucky,” she assured him time and time again. “It’s just a part of who you are, and how your sexuality expresses itself. There’s no shame in it, and you shouldn’t allow anyone to make you feel like there is. And there are plenty of potential partners out there who would be more than happy to have sex with you in a way that leaves you both satisfied. What you need to remember it that the three most important aspects in any relationship, whether it’s sexual or not, are respect, communication and consent. As long as you remember that, you and anyone else you decide to get involved with, in whatever capacity is comfortable for you both, should be fine.”

The idea of a potential partner had been daunting at that point, but something Bucky had started to consider. It had still been summer, and Steve hadn’t stumbled his way back into Bucky’s life yet. But Bucky’s sex drive had returned, and he’d spent a lot of time with Betty and Paige, and listening to Tara talk about Meghan, and thought some companionship might be a nice thing to consider maybe one day incorporating into his life.

That idea came with an entire new set of complications, but once again Bucky had been very lucky, because he wasn’t alone in his concerns.

It was something the MWs often discussed during their meetings, how it was hard to date when you were a vet suffering from PTSD and had experienced things very few people could ever understand, no matter how sympathetic.

But they were an open-minded group, supportive of one another. Out of all of them, only Marco and Shawn were married. Yet not a single one of them cared that Timmy was gay, or Angie identified as ace, and merely shrugged when Bucky finally found the courage to admit he was bi. Mel had been the only to say anything, asking, since her cousin Trina still hadn’t stopped going on about how hot Bucky was, if he’d be interested in dating her. They had all laughed, Bucky the most relieved of all, before Bucky confessed that he was thinking about starting to date, but not quite there yet. The discussion then turned to a broader direction, while they munched on the butter pecan squares Bucky had brought that day, and talked about how it was a struggle they each faced.

So Bucky was very, very lucky, and he knew that. He was no longer the James Buchanan Barnes of the Thirties and Forties, who had to hide who he really was from his friends and family with a secret shame. Nor was he the Soldier, HYDRA’s Fist, with no sense of self, and even his most basic human needs denied. Some days he felt more like James, and some more like Bucky, but he was who he was. A man with a difficult past he was working to not so much overcome, but come to terms with, with great friends, a quirky house and the best dog in the world.
And a lover who was making sure that no matter what else Bucky may have once forgotten about himself, Steve’s name was something he was never going to forget ever again.

So they had sex, lots and lots of sex. They fucked and they made love and they made each other shiver and sigh. But that wasn’t all they did on that first weekend together. They talked and they laughed, and they watched movies, Bucky laying on his couch with his head resting on Sarge’s stomach, while Steve curled around him with what had once been his bad ear pressed to Bucky’s chest, listening to his heartbeat. Bucky introduced Steve to even more music, Patty Griffin this time, while Steve did the laundry, and Bucky changed the sheets on his bed. They showered together, Bucky agreeing to let Steve brush his hair, in exchange for Steve allowing Bucky to shave him, like he had when they’d been younger, and Steve first started sprouting whiskers on his chin. They walked Sarge together, and yeah, Bucky cooked. He really was better at it, but it was also something he took pride in, found relaxing, and after being known for so long for his sniper skills, he much preferred being appreciated for his culinary talents. Steve certainly had no complaints, practically licking his plate clean after every meal.

It was a pleasant way to spend the weekend, a perfect one, if Bucky were being honest. Until Monday morning finally rolled around, and after their usual predawn run, it was time for them to finally part ways, and go back to their lives.

“So,” Steve said, as they stood on their hill, facing each other. “I guess I need to get back.”

“I guess you do,” Bucky agreed.

“Anyway, uh,” Steve lifted the hand not holding the container of chocolate chocolate-chip muffins Bucky had prepared specifically for him (still one of Steve’s favorites), and ran it over the back of his head. “I uh…I uh…I had a great time.”

“Yeah? Me too,” Bucky finished with a wink, even though his heart was hurting. And then Steve seemed to shake himself out of whatever mood had overtaken him, and reached out with that free hand, pulling Bucky in by his hoodie for a kiss. Bucky had no idea how long they would have stood there like that, kissing on their hill, when out of nowhere, there suddenly came,

“Woo-hoo! Go get ‘em Tiger!”

They broke apart just in time to see Janet making her way along the far end of an opposite path, fist pumping in the air.
“I’m tryin’!” Bucky called back.

“Woo-hoo!” Janet chanted one last time before she disappeared from view, never once breaking her stride. They both burst out laughing once she was gone.

“You know some crazy fucking people,” Steve said when they were finally able to stop.

“Brooklyn man. What can I say?” Bucky shrugged. “But it’s home, you know?”

“Yeah it is,” Steve agreed, and then leaned in to press his lips to Bucky’s one last time. “I’ll call you, yeah?”

“You better.”

“I will.” One last kiss, one last shared breath between them. “Thanks for an amazing weekend Buck. I’ll see you soon.” And then Steve turned and began to walk away.

As he did, Bucky’s heart started to hurt yet again. Because he could already see it, the changes in Steve with each step he took. The way his shoulders both lifted and tightened, and how his stride grew more determined, but also heavier. He was preparing himself to face the day, his teammates, his life at Stark Tower, the weight of the world resettling on his shoulders, too much for any man to carry, but Steve still believing its burden was one he was born to bear.

You could stay here with me, you know, Bucky thought as he watched Steve make his way across the park. In Brooklyn. It’s your home too, and I’d love to have you here. I’d make room for you, and keep you safe. Make you all the damned chocolate chocolate-chip muffins you could ever ask for. You just have to want it enough, want me enough, instead of whatever it is you think you deserve. I’d keep you, and I’d love you, and I would never ever let you go. Just say the word Stevie, and it’s yours.

But Steve never would say the words. And Bucky wasn’t naïve enough to belief that a weekend of, yes admittedly fantastic sex, would ever be enough to change Steve’s mind. He even had a moment of doubt, when he wondered if Steve would actually call him again. He supposed only time would tell.
He just hoped he’d be strong enough this time to survive the fallout. Because Steve was going to crash and burn. And no one but Bucky seemed to realize it was going to happen.

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Steve didn’t call him, but Bucky did receive a text from him that afternoon, confirming that they were still running together the following morning. Bucky didn’t know why he was surprised; Steve always had been a man of his word, but he was still pleased when he saw the words on his screen.

But he was there, bright and early the next morning, smiling and sheepishly holding up two bags of groceries when Bucky opened the door.

“Where’s my container?” Bucky grumbled at him once they were done kissing each other silly.

“I’ll bring it with me tomorrow,” Steve laughed. “Now c’mon. Let’s get going. Sarge looks like he knows there are squirrels out there he hasn’t terrorized yet, and he needs to change that for the safety of all the acorns in the world.”

Steve did have Bucky’s Tupperware with him the next morning when he came back, and two more bags of groceries on Thursday morning. In fact, Steve began to spend more and more time at Bucky’s house in Bay Ridge, so much so that on nights when he ate at home, instead of at Nancy’s with the rest of the MWs, Bucky began preparing dinners for two. Steve didn’t spend every night in Brooklyn, but it got to the point where he kept a toothbrush and razor in Bucky’s bathroom, along with a change of clothes in his bureau. He even had a coffee mug of his own, or well, the one Bucky decided was his, yellow and pink, with a handle shaped to mimic the neck of a flamingo. Steve had rolled his eyes at it, of course he did, but since it was one of the biggest mugs Bucky owned, he learned to keep his mouth shut.

He also never showed up empty handed. Usually he came with bags bursting with groceries, but there was the time he came with laundry detergent, fabric softener and toilet paper, when he’d noticed Bucky was running low. Once it was with a large, clay serving platter, blue and gold in the Kintsugi style he had noticed Bucky was so fond of.

And flowers. Whenever he showed up in the evenings, no matter what he brought with him, he always came with a bouquet of flowers, usually roses, that he presented to Bucky with a shy smile.

It was courtship. Steve was courting him in his shy but old-fashioned way, wanting to make sure
Bucky understood he was taking this seriously, was thankful for this second chance. And Bucky couldn’t help but be charmed.

That wasn’t to say it was perfect, or easy all the time. There were nights when Steve showed up at his door, and Bucky didn’t even need the texts Steve sent him to tell him he was on his way; Bucky could feel the way Steve’s bones were rattling and teeth chattering before he ever crossed the border between Manhattan and Brooklyn. But Steve never wanted to talk about it, growing sullen and even snappish on occasion if Bucky pressed too hard. It was going to come to a head, it was inevitable. But if for now, if Bucky’s home and his presence and his dog were a place where Steve could find some respite, Bucky was willing to let it be. But only for a little while. And Steve always eventually ended up apologizing for it anyway, so Bucky had to reassure him, sometimes with food and other times with his body, still patching up Steve’s bruises, even all this time later.

And then there was also the fact that while Steve was devoted and attentive while they were together, he seemed to have very particular notions about what together meant. In an effort to expand Steve’s horizons, show him that there was a life outside of SHIELD and the work he did with the Avengers, Bucky attempted to introduce Steve to the other people in his life. To join him for dinner on one of the nights when Teresa came over, so they could watch their telenovelas together. Or to meet him at Petco, so he could be charmed by Tara, and observe one of his classes with Andy, where he could see Bucky in his element, and get to know the man Bucky considered a mentor. Never mind being introduced to any of the MWs. While Steve was curious and always listened intently when Bucky recounted his day, he never gave away too many details of his own, and always balked at any invitations Bucky extended his way.

Bucky didn’t understand it. He didn’t think Steve was ashamed of him; he seemed to have no issues with taking Bucky out to restaurants, or going to see movies with him. But there was a sense of separation, almost isolation, as if Steve had compartmentalized Bucky, put him into a box he stored on one of the shelves in his closet. Bucky hated being put in boxes, and he worried the box Steve had shoved him in would end up being one filled with monsters. But Steve wouldn’t talk about it, no matter how skillfully Bucky attempted to shift the tiles of the mosaic, and Bucky knew it just was something else they were eventually going to have to discuss, hopefully before Steve’s final crash and burn.

Truth be told, Bucky didn’t push too hard. He spent so much of his day to day life talking about himself and his own feelings, and that could be draining enough on its own. He forced himself to remember he was still dealing with his own recovery, and he couldn’t subsume all of that just to focus on Steve. It was a big part of why he hadn’t wanted to reconnect with him when he’d first willingly surrendered himself to what was left of SHIELD. Steve could be demanding and emotionally exhausting, and Bucky had needed to conserve what little strength, sense of self, he had left, because he had known, even back then, that his battles were far from over.

Selfish of him, he sometimes thought. Healthy, at others, usually after one of his appointments with Dr. Callahan. He had built, was still building, a new life for himself, and that meant making sure he took care of that as well.
Besides, it wasn’t all bad. Very little of it was, in truth. And Bucky wanted to enjoy this honeymoon stage for as long as possible, something neither of them ever had the chance to experience previously. It was nice to have a lover to watch television and share meals with. To tease when they went running in the mornings. Who always showed up with a gift in hand and a smile for his dog.

And who loved to spend hours and hours showering Bucky’s body with kisses and praise, eagerly fucking him into the mattress night after night.

It made Bucky feel alive, his flesh thrumming happily beneath his skin. His hips were loose, his spine relaxed, and even his neck and shoulders felt less tense than ever before, something Betty had commented on the last time she looked him over.

“It’s all the fucking,” Bucky heard himself blurt before he could stop himself. From her usual chair in the corner, Paige snorted.

“Yeah well, endorphins. They’re a body’s best fucking friend for a reason,” Betty agreed. “But it’s looking good, whatever you’re doing. Keep it up.”

“I will as long as he does.” Paige cackled at his response that time.

Steve could keep it up, for hours at a time. But, well, Bucky always did have a very healthy sex drive. He also now knew that once given mental permission, the serum had enhanced that as well as the other attributes of his body. Combined with his healthier eating habits, regular exercise, and very vivid imagination, and there were times whether Steve was there or not, Bucky’s dick decided, of its own accord, that it wanted to come out and play.

Like that Friday afternoon, three weeks after he and Steve had finally come together again in all the ways they once had.

Fridays were Bucky’s easiest day out of the work week. There were no therapy sessions or VA meetings. There was Sarge’s regularly scheduled training with Jake in the morning, and then just a few hours of his apprenticeship with Andy at the ASPCA. But since Andy didn’t teach any classes at Petco on Fridays, Bucky’s afternoons were his own. He usually did his weekly shopping once he was free, but as Steve had taken it upon himself to ensure Bucky’s pantry and refrigerator were always well stocked, there wasn’t anything he needed. Steve was off doing something else, a presentation of some sort at the UN according to his text that morning, so Bucky had a free afternoon and the house to himself, and an erection that made itself very apparent as Bucky showered away all
the dog hair and drool that had accumulated over his clothes and skin during the day.

Bucky also had a drawerful of sex toys he hadn’t used in a while, eaten a very filling lunch, and Sarge had been exercised and was napping contentedly downstairs. So he thought why the hell not?, lay his towel on top of the bed, and dug through his drawer, deciding on the purple one, before he lay back, and spread his legs, knowing he would really enjoy the next hour.

He should have remembered he’d left his cell phone downstairs. But five minutes later, after a generous application a lube, he slid the vibrator up his ass, his body eagerly sucking it in, and turned it to its lowest setting. He had plenty of time and there was no need to rush. And there were reasons why this toy was his favorite; it was wide enough to make him feel the stretch of it, with a perfectly angled curve so that just the very tip pressed against his prostate, making him very happy about all the advances in technology since the Forties. It buzzed and he tingled, his dick growing even harder, the veins along the length throbbing in time with the pulse-throb-pulse in his ass.

He took his time, deciding to spoil himself, reaching down with his left hand to fondle his balls, still damp from the shower, and then back up to tweak his nipples. He grew more relaxed and excited with each passing moment, losing himself to the sensations, his thighs falling even farther apart.

He was distantly aware of Sarge barking, but given the time, it was probably the mailman, another one of Sarge’s favorite people, and ignored it, deciding instead that he was ready to kick it up a notch, and switched the vibrator to its next setting. When the barking stopped less than a minute later, Bucky knew he’d been right and added an extra pump of lube to his right hand, sinking even further back into his pillows.

He also should have remembered that goddamned set of keys he’d given Steve, because not too long after that, there was the creak of a floorboard not too far away, and when Bucky’s eyes shot open, he cursed at himself, thinking of far he had fallen, and how he would have never survived a single mission as the Soldier if it was that easy for someone to sneak into his house without him realizing sooner.

But it was only Steve, standing in his bedroom doorway, his arms crossed and his eyes narrowed.

“Well look at you. I leave you alone for just a few hours and this is what you get up to,” he said in a voice that was both calm and amused.

“Oh, uh hey Stevie…Um, what are you doing here?” Bucky could feel a different type of blush rising on his cheeks now, and he quickly pulled his hand from his dick.
“Don’t you dare stop,” Steve commanded, as with very deliberate steps he slowly made his way over to the bed. “And I texted you to let you know I was on my way, but you never answered. Now I know why.”

“Guess I was a bit distracted,” Bucky had to admit, because really, what else could he do? Steve had literally caught him red handed. Or was it dick handed? Bucky’s thoughts were still too blurred to tell anymore.

“Mm-hmm,” Steve hummed as he sat himself down on edge of the mattress. “Now why don’t you put your hand right back where it was honey, and lemme watch. You know how much I used to love watching you do this to yourself. Still do. So just relax and let me watch, see if anything’s changed.”

It was true; Steve had loved to watch Bucky play with himself. He used to ask Bucky to do it for him, while he sat on the edge of their old mattress, wearing one of Bucky’s white button-downs, his sketchpad perched on his knees. Bucky knew he was many things, but he’d never considered himself an exhibitionist. Still, there had been something so arousing, so freeing, in allowing Steve to see that side of him, the only sounds in their cramped apartment Bucky’s panting, and the scratch of Steve’s pencil over paper. He had to have drawn at least a hundred sketches of Bucky’s body in a variety of positions; sometimes half clothed, sometimes completely naked. The lines of Bucky’s shoulders and back, stretched out in their bed. And there were some with Bucky as he was now, with his legs spread and his hands on himself. Bucky wondered what had happened to all those sketchbooks. If they had been discovered and burned as pornography, were locked in a basement vault at SHIELD headquarters. Or if they were a prized item in some private collection somewhere in the world. Bucky supposed it didn’t matter, although he would have loved to have had another chance to look through them, make note of what was the same and what was different, and refamiliarize himself with all the careful details Steve had so lovingly captured.

But Steve was here now, his eyes as heavy as they’d ever been, a weight Bucky could feel on his skin, just as attentive, as excited. And he had asked, and Bucky really didn’t have anything better to do, so why not?

He reached down and took his dick back in hand, and resumed the steady stroking he’d been in the middle of before Steve walked in. He closed his eyes and tweaked his nipples, and once again lost himself to the sensations pulsing in his blood. He’d cracked his window open before he’d taken his shower, and there was the barest hint of a cool breeze in the air, tickling his skin, a sharp contrast to the heat emanating from Steve’s body, where he had perched himself at Bucky’s hip. It made for interesting conflicting sensations. Warm and cool air, the hardness in between his legs, and the softness of his well-washed sheets along his back. The slick of the lube and the dryness at the back of his throat, and Bucky the pendulum swinging to-and-fro between them all.
But Steve had never been passive, nor patient a day in his life. And he had never known when to leave anything well enough alone, so of course, of course he had to get involved.

“Oh, look at you, look at you,” he murmured, praised, running his broad hand down the inside of Bucky’s thigh. “Feels good, huh?” He dragged the tips of his fingers over the back of Bucky’s own over his balls, where he had once again cradled them in his palm, slipping them further back, where Steve ran them over the sensitive skin of Bucky perineum. When Bucky jerked and gasped from the sudden burst of pleasure, Steve laughed. “Still like that, huh?”

“Mm-hmm,” Bucky responded through his own teeth biting into his lip.

“Yeah, it used to drive you crazy whenever I touched you there.” Bucky could hear the pleased smile in Steve’s voice. “But you used to like it even better when I—” Steve’s voice cut off, just as the journey of his hand did, when they reached the rim of Bucky’s anus. “Bucky…are you using one of your toys right now?”

“Mm-hmm,” Bucky hummed again. “The purple one….It vibrates…My favorite.” The choking sound Steve made at his words forced Bucky to open his eyes. Steve’s own were wide with shock, and his mouth was hanging open. “Do you want me to take it out?”

Steve’s mind, if not his body, had always been quick to recuperate, and he shook his head. “Don’t. You. Dare.” he ordered, and then the bastard actually had the nerve to reach back out and circle his fingers over the edge of the toy, causing it to shift inside Bucky’s body, changing the angle. Bucky’s back arched off the bed, and he couldn’t help the soft cry that escaped his throat, because Steve’s touch had wedged the vibrating tip even harder against Bucky’s prostate.

“Yeah, yeah honey, just like that,” Steve urged. “Don’t be shy. You never have to be shy around me. I know how much you love having your ass played with. You look so sexy like this, all spread out, with your dick leaking like that, just for me.” He was such a bastard, but he wasn’t wrong, and this had been something they’d both enjoyed discovering. So Bucky closed his eyes once more, spread his legs even further, and tightened his grip on his dick.

“Look at you. Look at you,” Steve breathed. Bucky could feel Steve’s eyes on him, just as captivated as Bucky was in his gaze. He may have been the one with all his clothes still on, and Bucky the one in the more vulnerable position. But for Steve, Bucky’s body, his pleasure, was and always had been a gift, treasured and adored, and one he always treated as if sacred. That knowledge allowed Bucky to let go of any remaining restraint, and he succumbed to the pleasure blooming in his core, giving it the freedom to surge upward and spread out, until he couldn’t hold it back anymore, and with a final groan, it coated his stomach with the tears of his release.
“Oh honey, look at you, look at you,” Steve murmured again, all patience gone as he leaned forward to lap at the drops of spend on Bucky’s skin. “So beautiful when you come. Always were.” Then Steve shifted, his hand back at the base of the toy, where Bucky could feel him tightening his fingers as he slowly began to pull it out. Bucky shivered at the sensation, and then shivered again when Steve’s fingers slid right back in where the vibrator had just been. “And you’re still tight too, but all relaxed now. Do you think you could handle another go? ‘Cos you’re all slick and I think I’d slide in nice and easy. Will you let me do that honey? Fill you up and make you come again?”

“Yeah, yeah Stevie, c’mon,” Bucky said, reaching for him. “Give it to me good. ‘Cos I love that toy, but there ain’t nothing as nice as your dick.”

It didn’t take long, less than thirty seconds in total. There was the jangle of Steve’s belt buckle opening, and the zip of his zipper being undone, and then Steve was sliding into him, nice and easy, just like they both knew he would. It was more of a stretch, with a bit of a burn, but Bucky’s ass was already slick, his muscles relaxed, and Steve had always been a perfect fit. And then they were rocking together, and kissing, Steve’s hands in Bucky’s hair, and Bucky’s hands digging under Steve’s shirt so they could trail up and down his spine. Steve knew just how to move to hit all of Bucky’s spots, and Bucky’s little performance had left Steve perilously close to the edge, so it didn’t take long for either of them before Steve sunk his teeth into Bucky’s neck as he came, and the feel of it, skin breaking, a knife’s edge of pain colliding with Bucky’s own pleasure, pulling a second orgasm from him.

And then they were both panting, laughing, shivering with the aftershocks, sated for now, and happy to be back in each other’s presence.

“I fucking love Fridays,” Bucky exhaled, once Steve pulled out and was lying flat on his back by Bucky’s side.

“If this is how you spend them, I can totally see why,” Steve snorted, blinking blindly at the ceiling.

“What are you doing here anyway? I thought you had that thing at the UN,”

“Wrapped up early. Thought I’d stop by. Texted you to let you know I was on my way. You didn’t answer me, but now I know why.”

“Yeah well, I was busy.”
“Uh-huh. You most certainly were,” Steve snorted.

“Shuddup punk. I didn’t hear you complaining.”

“I wasn’t. But now whenever you don’t get back to me, I’ll know why.”

“Speaking of which,” Bucky dug around in the sheets until he found the remote control for the vibrator and with the press of a button, turned it off.

“It has a remote control?” Steve gaped at him.

“It’s the twenty-first century, Steve. Everything has a remote control,” Bucky shrugged.

“And you didn’t tell me?”

“Cos I ain’t a masochist. And I remember how you can get. I wanted to come, not be tortured for half an hour while you played with all the settings.”

“Yeah well, next time-“

“Next time I’ll remember to keep my phone on me,” Bucky glared at him. “And why didn’t you know about this already? Don’t you ever whack off back at your place?”

Steve shot him a scowl, before he rolled over with a huff and buried his face into the pillow while he grumbled something.

“What was that Stevie?” Bucky asked. Steve just shook his head. As if that had ever thrown Bucky off the trail; Steve wasn’t the only one who could sink his teeth into something like a dog with a bone. “No seriously, what was it you just said?”

“JARVIS,” Steve mumbled when he finally lifted his head.
“What the hell is JARVIS?” Bucky wanted to know.

“It’s not a what, it’s a who. Or maybe it’s a what, I dunno.”

“You’re not making any damn sense, you know that right?”

“It’s Tony’s building, or the AI that runs the building. It’s part security system, and part butler I think.”

“Okay…” Bucky drawled, still confused.

“It’s everywhere!” Steve exclaimed. “According to Tony and Pepper, it’s not supposed to intrude on anything private. But all I know is if I wake up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom the lights automatically turn on. Or if I ask it, or him, I think it’s supposed to be a him, to change the settings in my shower, it will do it automatically. So I don’t know how private it actually is. I have a hard enough time taking a shit over there, knowing it’ll automatically flush the toilet if I forget—“

“Who the hell forgets to flush the toilet after they take a shit?” Bucky wanted to know.

“-never mind trying to wank.”

“So you don’t? Ever?”

“No!” Steve whined.

“How do you get off then?”

“I used to do it at Sam’s place when he lived in DC—“

“That’s awful!” Poor Sam.
“I know! I used to feel guilty as fuck afterwards, but then he moved down here and into the Tower, so now I got no options, except here.”

Bucky blinked at him, then blinked at him again. And then he frowned.

“Did you start coming over here just so you could have a place to *wank*?” he growled, grabbing a pillow and whapping Steve over the head with it. “You asshole!”

“No, no, I swear to you I didn’t. Knock it off Bucky, knock it off!” Steve covered his head with his arms in an effort to shield himself.

“I don’t believe you, you punk!” Thwack! Thwack! Thwack! “And you better make damned sure you remember to flush the toilet every time you take a shit, or else I’m gonna make you start going out in the yard, just like Sarge.”

“Ow! Ow! Ow! Cut it out. Stop Bucky, stop!”

“Stupid, Neanderthal punks, and their super-solider shits!”

“Oh my god, will you stop?” But Steve had started to laugh, his entire body shaking beneath Bucky’s onslaught. And once Steve started, Bucky couldn’t help but follow, until the two of them were nothing more than a pile of pillows and giggles, tears in their eyes.

“I’m gonna tell Sam what you used to do in his apartment,” Bucky snickered.

“You better not,” Steve threatened, but it was a lot less intimidating with the way he kept chuckling.

“I will…As soon as I find my phone,” Bucky said, waving a floppy arm in the air.

“Yeah well, that means getting out of bed.”

“Ugh.” Bucky lowered his arm, sighed and then sat up. “Yeah well, I need to clean this fucker up and put it away first.” Bucky lifted the now silent vibrator from where it had settled itself against his
hip. “The last thing I need is for Sarge to come in here and decide it’s a new toy for him to play with. You do not want to spend fifteen minutes chasing your dog around the house, and then another fifteen after that using bleach to make sure you got all the dog drool off of it.” And aw shit, he really needed to learn how to keep his mouth shut. He was going to blame it on the sex.

“Oh really?” Steve peered up at him through slitted eyes.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Rogers,” Bucky said, rising from the bed.

“Oh really?” Steve asked again. “’Cos that sure as hell sounds like an interesting story.”

“I’m gonna call Sam! Tell him what you did, I swear ta god!”

“Uh-huh,” was the last thing Bucky heard, before he dashed into the bathroom, locking the door behind him.

***

It was a good thing they had going. A beautiful thing. A perfect thing, one that Bucky treasured and kept close to his heart.

But like all good things, it eventually had to end.

And Bucky should have known better, he really should have. Because he had never been all that lucky in his life, and he didn’t know why he expected that to have changed, just because it was eighty years later.

Chapter End Notes

So, um, hi, **waves** remember - Comments are ALWAYS appreciated and make this fanficcer's heart sing **she says as she slowly creeps her way toward her bush** OKILUVYOUBYEBYE!!!
The Fates, capricious as they were, gave him seven more days. Just seven more days of jogs and meals, movies and laughter. Seven sultry nights of sex and kisses, promises and sighs of relief pressed into his skin, before they went their separate ways on Friday morning, with plans to hike through the Ice Caves in the Shawangunk Mountains the very next day.

Bucky was on his way home from the ASPCA, trying to decide what food to prepare for their trip, when he got the text.

**Stevie:** Got called out for a job. Don’t know when we’ll be back, but don’t think I’ll be able to make it tomorrow. Sorry. Raincheck?

**BDD:** Be safe Stevie. Let me know when you get back. Love you.

Steve didn’t bother to respond, and Bucky knew that meant he was donning his cowl and the mantle of Captain America and turning all his focus, within and without, toward the mission. Bucky wondered how long it would take for them to get back, and how much longer after that before his Stevie finally returned to him.

The answer was both two days, and never.

Bucky spent those next two days worried, hoping the rest of Steve’s team paid just as much attention to their leader as they did to the ever-changing details of their situation. Sam would do his best, Bucky now knew, but his track record hadn’t been great so far, even if it was through no fault of his own. Winged or not, Sam was only human after all. Just like Bucky was. Just like Steve.

As those two days slowly dragged by, Bucky went about his life while he waited and worried, waited and worried, and realized with a self-deprecating laugh that he was now a military spouse. And he suddenly had a lot more respect for the men and women who were left behind, and had to go about their lives, waiting for their loved ones to return to them. It was a strength he hadn’t appreciated before, one he never considered, and certainly not one he ever thought he’d have to develop. But he had always spent time sitting and waiting for Steve; for the fever to break, for Steve to open his eyes, for his chest to take one more breath. It seemed as if Bucky and Steve had always been involved in a war of some sort, Steve off fighting his battles, and Bucky the heartsore one waiting for his beloved to return. He wondered if that would ever change.
He even considered, for a brief instant, returning to the fray. But the mere thought of it, of picking up a rifle and aiming his muzzle at someone else’s head, blood and cordite, and corpses, so many goddamned corpses, triggered a panic attack that had him kneeling on the floor, his arms wrapped around Sarge. He couldn’t do it, not and survive. He had known that from the very beginning, when his first sense of self had started to return, that voice in his head that he’d been stupid enough to think was a remnant of HYDRA’s programming began speaking to him, urging him not to just take better care of himself, but actually start living his life. One mission would have been all it took, and he would have been dead for real, his body burned or dissected, his left arm handed over to the SHIELD technicians like some sort of trophy.

He couldn’t go back. He didn’t want to go back. And after seventy-five years of being tortured and brainwashed, he thought he’d more than earned the right to say No, to rest. If the world was such a better place now, then he was entitled to live his life, with his dog, in peace.

Steve obviously didn’t feel the same way, so Bucky was left to worry and wait, try to get on with his life, and hope the damage wouldn’t be too bad when it was over.

Yeah, hope was a bitch. Bucky didn’t know why he bothered anymore, when she was always going to fuck him over every chance she got.

On Sunday night, just after midnight, the knock came. That frantic tap-tap-tap that told Bucky exactly who he would find when he opened his door.

And he wasn’t wrong. Steve stood on his threshold, still in his uniform, with the shield strapped to his back, his breathing shallow and his eyes unseeing.

“Do you know where you are?” were the first words Bucky said to Steve in more than fifty-eight hours.

“No.”

“Do you know who I am?”

“Bucky.”

“Yeah, I am. And you’re safe here Stevie, I promise you. Now come inside and let me take care of
It was different this time, than the others. There were no marks on Steve’s skin, no tears or burns Bucky could see on his uniform. Steve was deathly pale and ice cold, and far, far away. Passive in that was that was so unlike him, and Bucky once again felt like his handler. They used to use the Chair on Bucky to make him compliant, complacent. Steve’s Chair was the aftermath of his life as an Avenger, and all the battles he was forced to fight.

Without a word, without a twitch, he allowed Bucky to guide him to his bathroom and remove his uniform. He lifted his arms when asked, and tilted his head back when requested, so Bucky could rinse the last of the suds from his hair. He never made a peep, just stood there waiting for his next instructions as Bucky dried him off, and then dressed him in the softest clothes he owned. Bucky both did and did not understand. There had been no bruises, not a single mark marring Steve’s skin. But it didn’t take much to send a mind spiraling, and Steve’s mind had shut off, vortexed to someplace safe, leaving Bucky to keep the home fires burning, praying they were enough to guide Steve back.

He debated bringing Steve to his bedroom, but they’d unintentionally developed a protocol of their own for this, so Bucky led Steve to his living room couch instead, tucked him in and told Sarge to keep watch. Then Bucky went back to the bathroom, pulled out Steve’s phone, and made a call.

“Steve? Oh thank god, where the hell are you?” Sam’s question was an echo from their not so distant past, a memory he didn’t have to dig too deep to find. And Bucky was just as furious, just as enraged as he’d been the last time. But it was beyond even that; this time it wasn’t the fires of a dragon that blazed through his veins, but the ice of a cryo-tank, the endless tundra of what should have been Steve’s final resting place, the precision of a blade in the right (his) hands, skilled enough to slice a second in half.

He was tired of this, so mother-fucking tired of this. And just like McAdams had had no idea who he was dealing when “Bucky” had finally decided to come back, SHIELD and Sam and even Steve were going to see what happened when The Winter Soldier had been pushed too far, and took matters into his own hands.

“It’s not Steve.” If someone didn’t know him, didn’t know all he was capable of, they would have thought his voice sounded flat. Even HYDRA had failed to truly understand what they’d ended up creating from time to time. There was a list of names, that no one knew, of handlers he had killed when they had pushed him too far. It usually meant a beating, a trip to the Chair, and then time in the cryo-tank. But dead was still dead, and unlike their Fist, those men and women stayed that way.

All of that was in his voice, if you knew how to listen for it. (And maybe, just maybe, it had never been The Winter Soldier, but Bucky all along.)
“James? Is this James? Please tell me this is James and that Steve is with you,” Sam was practically begging for a confirmation. And Bucky liked Sam, he did; the man was a stand-up guy, trying to do his best. But Bucky also knew about begging, had men and women at his feet, begging for their lives, and he had never once not pulled the trigger.

“What happened Sam?” He could have been crooning to a lover, for all the sibilance in his voice. Soft, smooth, beckoning, a feint very few could resist.

“Look, you know I can’t tell you anything—”

“I need to know what happened Sam.”

“Can you at least tell me if he’s all right?” Sam pressed.

“You know he’s not. I can’t believe that you’re the only one who knows this, but here we are.” Bucky voice’s never rose, nor did his posture shift. He felt strangely loose and easy, a wolf just taking a stroll through its territory, but always aware of its den. “And the thing of it is, I just can’t figure it out this time. He shows up at my door, less than forty minutes ago, not knowing where he is or how he got here, without a scratch on him. Not a single fucking mark. But he’s gone, lost inside his head, and I’m the one who’s going to have to deal with the fall out. So you tell me Samuel Wilson, just what the hell am I going to be dealing with here?”

“I…I don’t know what to tell you man.” Bucky could hear both Sam’s frustration and exasperation over the line. “Natasha found out about an AIM base in South America, and we headed down there to take it out. They didn’t know we were coming this time, but we found some nasty shit when we got there, neuro-toxins like you would not believe, according to Bruce. And one of those assholes got the bright idea to release them. None of us were exposed, and we managed to contain the area, but we had to slash and burn the entire place to the ground. Steve gave the order, and it really was the only choice, ‘cos this shit was fucking nasty James, and too dangerous to risk anybody getting their hands on it. But there were over a hundred AIM members in that facility, not to mention all the people they experimented on, and we had to burn it all to the ground. Steve watched the entire time, wanting to make sure the job was done, then he gave the order to return back to the Tower, checked in with us, gave his report to Fury, and disappeared.”

Son of a fucking…

“Is everyone else all right? Were any of you exposed?”
“We’re all fine. Steve, the Hulk and Tony took care of the worst of it, and went through a
decontamination sequence on the Quinjet.” Sam paused, and Bucky could hear his swallow. He also
knew there was a *but* coming. “But we found kids in their labs, what was…what was left of them
anyway. And Steve couldn’t stop staring at them.”

*Jesus fucking Christ.* Well, that explained a lot. And how much could on man bear, be expected to
bear, before he finally broke for the last time. Steve had borne witness to the horrors of concentration
camps, weapons created by a glowing cube no one could understand. He had seen fellow soldiers
fall time and time again, and crashed his plane into the ice in an effort to keep the world safe. Only to
be pulled from his well-earned rest into a world that was loud and strange, with everything and
everyone he had ever loved dead, to fend off an alien attack, and put in charge of the Avengers
Initiative, which really just meant the battles would never end. How could anyone expect even more
from him, when he’d already endured, sacrificed so much, and not see the toll it was taking on him.
He was a super-soldier, but also a human being, and human beings had hearts that could break, and
Steve’s had been broken time and time again.

It needed to stop, Steve needed to stop, before there would be nothing left of him to save. He’d done
his duty, more than done his duty, it was time to cut the strings of Fury and SHIELD and all those
other assholes who thought they had a right to use him to achieve their agendas, and just, for once in
his life, let the man be.

And that was fine. It could be done. Bucky still had plenty of knives in his arsenal that he hadn’t
used yet.

“This is it. It’s done. This shit ends today,” Bucky proclaimed. He was finished playing nice,
pussyfooting around the issue, shifting the tiles. He and Steve were going to have a talk, once the
idiot could sit up on his own and remember his damned name.

“Good luck with that.” Sam laughed the laugh of the exhausted.

“I don’t believe in luck Sam. I got better tools in my arsenal than that.”

“Yeah well, Steve’s got a head made out of bricks, and no one’s been able to get through to him.”

*Meaning you,* Bucky thought but didn’t say. Instead, he said, “And I gotta metal arm, and more
experience than any of you at dealing with his bullshit.”
“Can you just, keep me in the loop? Let me know how he’s doing?” He really was a good guy, Sam Wilson. In over his head, but a steadfast and loyal friend. Bucky really would have liked the chance to get to know him better, but he had other priorities right now.

“If you’re lucky, in a couple of days, he’d be able to tell you himself. If I don’t kill him myself first.” Bucky ended the call.

Right. Enough was enough. This shit had to stop.

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Eighteen hours. It took eighteen hours, during which Bucky had to make several phone calls, adjust his own schedule, make apologies and assure everyone he was fine, before Steve so much as stirred.

And then it was another battle, a different kind, with Bucky holding onto Sarge’s collar while he tried to soothe a disoriented and nearly rabid super-soldier. It took nearly twenty minutes of Bucky urging Steve to breathe and describe all the details around him before anything resembling recognition returned to his eyes. After that, it was doing something he never did, and locking Sarge upstairs in his bedroom. Then it was getting enough nutrients and fluids into Steve to replenish what had been lost, and Steve slumping over his kitchen table, a mugful of hot chocolate cradled in his hands, muttering apologies, before Bucky struck.

“When is this shit going to stop Steve?” He knew it was a low blow, to strike so soon, when Steve was still recuperating, barely able to hold his head up. But he also knew, from some of his most painful sessions with Dr. Callahan, that sometimes the best time to talk about the real issue was when you were at your rawest, and hadn’t had time to rebuild a wall constructed of lies and fallacies. Dr. Callahan was always gentle, but steadfast in her approach. But she had the time to be, and a willing patient. Bucky didn’t have that luxury; one more battle, one more call out of the Avengers, and it was very likely Steve would never come back.

“I’m sorry,” Steve apologized yet again. “I don’t mean to keep showing up here like this.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about, and you know it,” Bucky said from his position at the opposite side of the table. This conversation, this argument, because it was going to turn into an argument, needed to be face-to-face and eye-to-eye.
“Look, I’m sorry,” Steve tried to apologize again. “It was – it was a bad mission-“

“Yeah, I know all about it.”

“You know all about it?” That brought Steve up short, his head lifting and eyes narrowing. “How do you know all about it? You don’t have that clearance. No, wait, you talked to Sam, didn’t you? Of course you did.”

“He’s worried about you too,” Bucky acknowledged with a tilt of his head.

“I’m fine Bucky! The both of you need to get offa my back and let me do my goddamned job!”

“You are not fine Steve!” Bucky slammed his hand down on top of the table, with enough force to rattle everything on its surface. “You show up here not knowing where the hell you are or how you got here, spend eighteen hours practically in a coma, and when you wake up, I have to spend nearly half an hour calming you down before you can even stand up. That is not fine, Steve. That’s a hell of a lot of things, but it ain’t fine.”

“Oh and I’m sure you’re going to tell me exactly what it is,” Steve snapped at him.

“You wanna list? I sure as hell can give you a list,” Bucky snapped back. “Let’s start with the basics. PTSD is at the top of it. And then there’s disassociation, which, lemme tell you buddy, as somebody who goes through that himself, you do like a fucking champ.”

“I am not sick Bucky!”

“Well you ain’t well either kiddo.”

“I’ve been declared fit for duty at each of my reviews!”

“By who? McAdams? Fury?” Bucky sneered at him. “Yeah well, let me tell you something about those two assholes, cos I got plenty of experience with the both of them. The only thing those fuckers cared about was getting their hands on another super-soldier. They didn’t give a damn about my mental health or what was best for me. They just wanted to find out if I could take orders and still
never miss a shot, and see how long it would take before I was ready to go back to work, but for them this time, instead of HYDRA. And you know what the answer to that was? Never. Because the first mission they sent me on, I would have blown my own fucking brains out just to make it stop. So don’t you dare sit there and try to tell me they got your best interests at heart.”

“It’s different for me Bucky. I ain’t like you. I ain’t— “ Steve actually paused for a second, as if he had realized what he was just about to say, and was actually holding back. As if Bucky didn’t know, as if he didn’t have to look at himself everyday in the mirror and see the truth staring back at him.

“What? Sick? Broken? Coo-coo crazy nuts?” He felt himself smile. The words were harsh, insulting. But they were just words, and Bucky knew he was so much more than that. “I know what I am Steve. But unlike you, at least I can admit it, and get the help I need. Stop being a coward, and do the same for yourself.”

“Who the hell do you think you are?” It was Steve’s turn to slam his hands down on the table, as he slowly rose, a trembling mountain of muscle and rage, oblivious to the cracks in his foundation where the earthquakes, where all earthquakes, began.

“I’m the one person in this world who actually gives a damn about you. You, Steve, not the Captain America from history, or what those fuckers from SHIELD told you who you need to be. I’m the only one, aside from your momma, who saw the good and the bad, and still loved you anyway. Give me a little goddamned credit here.”

“You think you know who I am?” Steve sneered at him in a way that was almost, almost reminiscent of the way McAdams used to look at him. As if Bucky was too stupid to see the bigger picture. “You think because you’re going to therapy and have a house in Brooklyn, and spend half your time baking muffins and shopping for fancy clothes, that you have any idea what it’s like for me?” And this was nasty Steve, bitter and vile, spewing words he hadn’t yet realized he would never be able to take back. But between one heartbeat and the next, the blink of an eye, Bucky became aware that this wasn’t Steve. This was something else, a fabrication he’d created as a last resort, a last means of defense. And Bucky, with or without his metal arm, knew he could punch through it. It was all in how you dealt with Steve; hit him hard and he’d just try to punch back harder. Come in soft, and he wouldn’t know what to do with that. The world had never been kind to him; worshipful at times, but fame came with its own prices, burdens to bear. But softness, Steve had known never softness. War was not soft, and Steve was a man who had been shaped by wars. But that wasn’t all of him; it had never been all of him, or even a fraction of what had made him great.

“Go ahead Steve,” Bucky said quietly, leaning back in his chair. “Tell me how it’s small, this life I’ve managed to build for myself. There are days I can barely get out of bed. Days when my therapist and my dog, and me baking muffins were the only thing that kept me alive. You think you’re the only one out there fighting? ‘Cos I’ll tell you right now, you’re not.
“And not every fight is big, or has to end with burning everything to the ground. And everybody has a different way of fighting back. My neighbor Paige, she’s a tattoo artist, who specializes in working over scar tissue. People who have had horrible things happen to their body go to her because they know she’ll turn their hurt into something beautiful. Her wife is a physical therapist because she wants to help people in pain rebuild their strength and get back to doing all the things they loved. One of the women in my VA group has a cousin, Trina, who’s a hairstylist. She volunteers one Saturday every month at woman’s shelter, helping the women living there feel pretty again, or confident when they go out for a job interview. My therapist has devoted years of her life helping vets like me get better, so they don’t end up another statistic. And Marco, the guy who runs my VA group, has a wife and kids and a job as an office manager, but he still devotes four nights a week at the center for the same reasons. And me yeah, I like to bake, but I also know that Timmy, another kid in my VA group, doesn’t have all that much money, and I’m helping make sure he has enough to eat.

“So you go ahead Steve. You stand there, and look me in the eye, and tell me how what I’m doing, what we’re all doing, is small.”

“I never said that Bucky! Don’t put words in my mouth.” Steve tossed his hands up in the air and started to pace. “I know it’s important, that all of that is important. It’s so important. But it needs to be protected, and there’s shit out there that you wouldn’t believe, and someone needs to stop it from ever getting worse.”

“And why does it gotta be you?” Bucky asked.

“What?” Steve turned on him with yet another glare.

“You were the first Avenger Steve, but you’re not the only one. Not anymore. And you already died for your country, for the world, once. Ain’t that more than enough? More than anyone should be expected to give? When do you get to stop fighting for the world and get a chance to start living in it instead?”

“I can’t just sit back when there are others out there-“

“When not?” Bucky cut him off. “This ain’t the Second World War anymore. There’s no draft, and people are free to choose whether they want to enlist or not. Why can’t you stop?”

“You never understood why I wanted to serve!” Steve practically roared at him, as if this, this were
all he had ever been, all he had ever wanted.

“You’re right, I didn’t,” Bucky said, finally rising from his own chair. “I was drafted, and I didn’t want to go. I loved our life, shitty as it was sometimes, and I hated having to leave you. Cos I knew I’d never see you again. But knowing you were home, you were safe, that made it okay. But the difference between me and you Steve, was I knew what propaganda was when I saw it. Spent seventy-five fucking years with it being shoved down my throat. You still haven’t figured that out, even all this time later.”

“How fucking dare you—"

“I fucking dare, Steve. Especially when it’s killing you.” Bucky crossed his arms. “And let me ask you something else. Did they even give you a choice, when they defrosted you like a fucking piece of meat? Tell you you had other options now? Or did they just shove you into a fancy apartment somewhere, and leave you to stew, with nothing else to do and no one to help you figure shit out, until you were going outta your mind, and then Fury shows back up with his bullshit about great men and their duty to the world?” From the look on Steve’s face, Bucky knew he had struck a nerve, one Steve hadn’t even realized was exposed. But Steve was not stupid, had never been stupid, and Bucky could see he hadn’t said anything Steve hadn’t already thought of.

“You used to want to be an artist. We never had much, and yeah, our apartment was a shithole, but we had the prettiest walls in all of Brooklyn, because they were covered in your art. What happened to that?”

“That was a long time ago Bucky, and things have changed.”

“Well you certainly have. ‘Cos the Steven Grant Rogers I know, that kid I grew up with, he never let anybody tell him what to do.”

“Well you sure as shit are trying.” They had started to circle each other, sharks in the water, the blood of Steve’s soul drawing them in even tighter.

“I’m trying to make you admit you have a problem, and see there are other options out there for you.”

“Jesus fucking Christ Bucky! Will you just let it go! I don’t have a fucking problem, and I’m not sick!”
They could fight. It didn’t happen often, but when it did, their battles were legendary. Bucky was surprised that aspect of their lives had never made it into the history books. And this, this was going to be their ugliest one of all.

“Did it ever occur to you, in that serum-enhanced brain of yours, that there’s a difference from being told no, you can’t do something, and saying no, I don’t want to do this anymore? ‘Cos here’s a big fucking difference between the two. And you can stop Steve, all you hafta do is say the word, and both me and Sam will back you up.”

“I am fucking done with this conversation! And fucking done with you!” Steve turned and stormed out of the kitchen.

“The hell you are,” Bucky growled, following him into the living room.

“Where the hell did you put my gear?” Steve looked around the room, searching for his uniform.

“Steve, listen to me!” Bucky reached to grab Steve’s arm. Steve turned and lurched, breaking free of Bucky’s hold, turning with his arm cocked back and his hand clenched into a fist. They both froze. For a second, an hour, millions and millions of years, both of their eyes wide, one in stunned shock, his skin turning grey, and the other with regret and a horrible, horrible understanding.

“Oh Jesus Christ, Bucky.” Steve stumbled back, his arm lowering, his skin growing even greyer. He hadn’t even realized what he’d done, what he’d been about to do. And that, more than anything, proved everything Bucky had been saying, trying to tell him. All Bucky could do was shake his head and sigh.

“You know,” he began, making sure Steve couldn’t avoid looking him in the eye. “Back in the Forties, when we lived together, you were five-foot-nothing, and a hundred pounds soaking wet. And I was a big guy, even back then. You used to piss me off sometimes, like you wouldn’t believe. If I wanted to, I could have hit you so hard you would have bounced off the walls, and nobody would have said shit about it. But I never once did, it never even crossed my mind. Cos you were my Stevie, and I loved you. I always loved you.”

“Bucky, I – I…”

“And I know you used to feel the same about me. Knew it in my bones then, just like I know it in
my bones now. But the fact that you even thought about it right now, for just a second, even if you stopped yourself…If that doesn’t convince you that you have a problem, I don’t know what will.”

Steve merely stood there, staring at him. There was nothing he could say; the proof was right there for the both of them to see. But they were no longer living in the Forties and there was one last thing Bucky had to say.

“I still love you Stevie, and I know this ain’t you. But if you ever, ever raise a hand to me to hit me, I’m gonna hit you right back. And I got a metal arm. I don’t take that kind of shit from anybody anymore. Not after what HYDRA did to me. Not even from you.”

Steve stared at him, stared and stared and stared, his chest heaving and his skin still grey. Until he finally broke their standstill with an abrupt jerk of his head.

“Fair enough,” he nodded. “You won’t have to worry about that happening. I promise you. Now where’s my stuff. I need to get out of here.”

“And my phone?” Steve asked as he stomped away.

“Under your shield.”

It was a cease-fire, a break, and maybe even a good-bye. Bucky had said what needed to be said, and Steve, well…For the first time in his life Bucky had no idea what Steve was thinking. He was stubborn, obstinate and in denial. Bucky knew Steve felt he had insulted him, questioned his capability, mocked everything he felt he stood for and believed in. Nothing could be further from the truth, but Bucky also knew Steve didn’t see it that way, might never be able to work his way around the words and hear what it was Bucky had truly been saying. He was about to walk out of Bucky’s house when the biggest truth, the most important words, still had not been said. Bucky couldn’t let him leave like that, not yet.

“Steve,” Bucky called out to him as he followed him to the front door.

“Not now Bucky,” Steve said as he shouldered the rucksack Bucky had packed his uniform in. “I need to go.”
“Steve, just listen to me for a sec before you go. You owe me at least that much.” When Steve turned around to face him, Bucky knew he was pushing his luck, and skating on very, very thin ice. That was fine; this entire night was a disaster anyway. What was one more.

“You need to remember one thing Stevie, just one before you walk out that door,” Bucky told him.

“Oh yeah? And what’s that?”

“That I’m your friend. That I will always be your friend, no matter what happens. And no matter what you may think of me, or us, once you calm down, you will always be welcome here. My door is always open to you, when you need a chance to get away or someone to talk to. I know you’re mad right now, and think I’m an asshole. But that hasn’t changed, and it never will. You will always be welcome here, and me and Sarge will always be happy to see you. Remember that.”

It was another cease-fire, another parley, and there were no more tiles for Bucky to shift. Just the truth, one of Bucky’s deepest ones, spread out between them like the last of Bucky’s cards. Steve stared at him, his eyes icy, his face immobile, before he nodded, just once, muttered a quiet “Thanks,” turned, and walked out the door.

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Steve didn’t knock on his door the following morning for their run. And he wasn’t waiting for him in the park on Wednesday. Bucky knew he wouldn’t be, but he and that bitch hope had always had a complicated relationship. When he didn’t show up on Thursday, Bucky decided to text him and got no reply. The first response he got was on Friday evening, when he sent a second text, asking if Steve would be accompanying him and Sarge for their weekly hike as usual, when his cell vibrated less than a second later.

Stevie: Sorry, not this week. Been pretty busy lately. Don’t know when I’ll be able to stop by.

Uh-huh.

So that was that then. Bucky knew he had pushed hard, but there were things Steve needed to hear. They had never had a fight that bad before, but they’d come close. Still, Bucky knew he’d been taking a chance when he rolled that die, and Lady Luck had apparently decided to turn her back on him. He didn’t regret what he’d said, not a word of it, but it was obvious he and Steve no longer
spoke the same language, always able to identify the intent beneath the words, never forgetting the devotion beneath. Steve had his priorities and was making his choices based on those, no matter how skewed Bucky knew they were. He had made his own, and now he had to live with the consequences of that. Yet there was one last choice he could make.

**BDD:** *I meant it when I said it Stevie. You’re always welcome here. If you need someone to talk you, or just want to watch a movie, my door is always open.*

No response. Bucky guessed he had his answer.

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The days passed, as they did, and Bucky had a life of his own he needed to live. It wasn’t that it was easy, or that he still wasn’t worried, or not thinking about Steve all the time. And it was obvious Sarge missed Steve, always searching for him when they went to the park, whimpering on Saturdays when they climbed into Marlene, and Steve wasn’t there. But Bucky had dealt with heartbreak before, especially *this* heartbreak, so it was familiar to him, he could bear it. And Sarge would get over it. (Bucky may have spoiled him a bit more than usual during those two following weeks, and soon enough Sarge was back to normal.)

But this time, this time it was different. Because you could talk about these things now, and not fear being arrested, shunned, ridiculed. And the people in his life knew he liked men. That was the other thing, he now had people in his life, people who loved and worried over him, liked him for who he was. They wanted him to be happy, and when they saw that he wasn’t, they offered their shoulders to help ease the weight of his sorrow.

He spent time discussing it with Dr. Callahan, and while she was sympathetic, and agreed that Bucky had a right to be concerned, her main focus was him, wanting to make sure he was giving himself the permission to be hurt, and the time to process all his conflicting emotions. She was a wise woman, one of the best in her field, Bucky was convinced, and talking about it with her helped. A lot.

But she wasn’t the only one.

When he confessed to Teresa why he was so quiet, not even commenting when Jessica ran off with obviously the wrong man during the latest episode of *Amor en Silencio*, and he told her that he thought his boyfriend had broken up with him, she ran her fingers through his hair, cradled his face in her warm and weathered hands, and kissed his forehead.
“Then he is a fool. You are a good man, James Barnes, with a big dog and an even bigger heart. Anyone would be a fool to let you go.”

Tara’s reaction had been less softly spoken, and much more impassioned.

“That asshole! Who the hell does he think he is?”

“Eh,” Bucky shrugged his left shoulder. Tara was clinging too tightly to his right arm to let him shrug both. “He’s got a lot of things of his own he has to deal with.”

“So? Who doesn’t?” She paused to take a sip of the Venti Caramel Macchiato Bucky had brought her, and then smiled a small but noticeably evil smile. “If you want, we can give him one of Meghan’s prune and broccoli smoothies. He won’t be able to leave the bathroom for a week. It’ll give him plenty of time to think about what an idiot he’s being.”

“Oh my god!” Bucky didn’t know what was worse. The smoothie itself, or its apparent after-effects. “She didn’t!”

“She did,” Tara shook her head forlornly. “I’m serious Bucky, I didn’t know two people could be that gassy. We only have one window in our apartment too. We had to keep it open for three days! In the middle of November!” Bucky couldn’t stop the laugh that burst from his throat.

“You know I adore you, right?” It was his turn to press a kiss to her forehead, his heart feeling lighter than it had in days.

“Yeah I know.” Her smile this time was warm and sincere. “And right back atcha. You and your baked goods are the only thing keeping me from murdering my own girlfriend in her sleep.”

“Any requests?”

“Those pumpkin spice cupcakes were fantastic. I wouldn’t say no to more of those.”
“You got it.”

Yuna’s solution was a kick ass outfit, of skinny jeans, a tight-fitting cashmere sweater, and a purple knee length trench-coat, with matching combat boots, and a Stetson hat, that she undercharged him for, telling him, “Looking good is the best revenge. And you look fabulous.” She paused to focus on carefully wrapping the jacket in a sheet of tissue paper. “But not just on the outside. Your insides are pretty fabulous too. Remember that the next time you’re looking at yourself in a mirror. Anybody can wear clothes, but it takes heart to have style. And you, you got a big one Bucky. There’s a reason you’re my favorite customer, and it’s not just your amazing legs.”

Bucky brought her handmade linzer tarts the next time he stopped by.

And the MWs, well, they were a unit. And units, especially the best ones, always looked after their own. He didn’t bring it up during their meetings; that wasn’t the time or place for that. But they did notice something was wrong, and asked him about it over burgers and fries at Nancy’s. When he told them that he and his boyfriend had had a fight, and were no longer speaking to each other, they were very sympathetic and protective of him. They let him talk, and listened without judgment as Bucky, keeping any identifying details about Steve as vague as possible, told them his boyfriend was career military, and how they had very different opinions about being in the service, and while Bucky was worried about him, he didn’t think it was going to work out. Angie insisted it was his loss, not Bucky’s, and Mel once again reminded him of Trina’s interest. Roger told him how sometimes these things just didn’t work out, how it was no one’s fault, it was just a thing that was. And Shawn invited him to his family’s house for dinner that Friday, so Bucky wouldn’t be alone. When they rose to go their separate ways, refusing to allow Bucky to pay for his meal, Timmy pulled him into his arms for an embrace. The kid was all skin and bones, big ears and red hair, but he was nothing if not sincere, and he gave really great hugs.

So it wasn’t all bad. Painful, yes, but not as bad as it could have been. Bucky had built a support network, and they were helping him. Reminding him he was more than his relationship to Steve, more than his heartbreak. He wasn’t avoiding his feelings; he was processing them. He also found himself wondering if this had always been what would have happened if they had both come home, and had enough time to sort themselves out after the war. Steve would have wanted to pursue justice, protect those that couldn’t protect themselves. And Bucky knew, if given a chance, he would have wanted to build a quiet life for himself, much like he had now. So who knew what would have ultimately ended up happening between them. People changed, grew apart, and maybe this was them coming to their crossroads.

Still, he had to give it just one last chance.

It was the last week of November, two weeks since he’d last spoken to Steve. Thanksgiving was in a few days, and Bucky had shared with Steve how excited he was about it, planning to prepare a feast, and extend an invitation to anyone who wanted to come, something he had never been able to do
before. But he had a house now, with a dining room, and so many things he was grateful for. Of course he had invited Steve, but Steve had been non-committal in his response. Bucky thought he would take one last shot, reach out one final time, remind Steve he had a place to go, and picked up his phone to make one last call.

To his surprise, Steve answered on the first ring.

“Hey,” Bucky couldn’t hide the surprise in his voice.

“Hey,” was Steve’s equally eloquent response.

“It’s been a while since we last talked. How’re you doing?”

“Yeah, I know. And that’s my fault. I’ve been meaning to call you, but it’s been real busy over here.” Steve’s voice was even, calm, giving no hint of what he was really feeling away.

“Everything all right?” Bucky wanted to know.

“Yeah, just busy, like I said.” And then he said nothing else.

“Okay.” Bucky cradled his phone against his left shoulder, while he pulled a bottle of apple juice from the refrigerator. “Anyway, I was just calling cos Thanksgiving is in a few days, and I’m cooking a feast fit for a king. And I wanted to know if you were coming or not.”

“Oh. Bucky, I…”

And Bucky knew.

“You got other plans?”

“Yeah, I promised Sam weeks ago I’d go back home with him to his mother’s place. She makes the best pies you have ever tasted, and you don’t want to miss the chance to have some of Momma Wilson’s pies…” Steve trailed off, as if he’d just realized what he said.
“Bucky, I didn’t mean that like it sounded.”

“It’s okay, Steve,” Bucky assured him, while his insides curdled like cheese. “I figured you probably already had other plans. I just wanted to check.”

“Seriously Bucky, I didn’t mean it like that. And we need to talk.” The most infamous words in the English language. “But there’re some things I need to take care of first.” There was always something Steve needed to take care of first, something else that took priority. “Once I do, I’ll give you a call, okay?”


“Bucky…”

“Anyway, I just wanted to check in with you, see if everything was all right. Have a Happy Thanksgiving, Steve. Say hello to Sam for me. I’ll talk to you later.”


“Yeah, sure, whatever you say. G’night Steve. Enjoy your pie.” Bucky disconnected the call.

So. That was that then.

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“I didn’t know you fucking smoked.” Paige’s voice cut through the dark, interrupting Bucky’s contemplation of the moon. When he looked over, he saw her standing on her back porch, her hair pulled up into a sloppy ponytail, wearing the fuzziest purple robe he had ever seen. He was both fascinated and kind of envious. “What are you still doing up?”
“What are you?” Bucky asked, but not unkindly.

“Lizzie woke up hungry, and I’m an insomniac at the best of times. You add breast-feeding into that, and I can’t remember the last time I got more than four fucking hours of sleep.”

“That sucks.”

“You’re telling me,” she said. “Anyway, why’re you up? And why the hell are you smoking? And would you mind some company, or do you want me to leave you alone?”

“C’mon over,” Bucky nodded at her. “Do you want some coffee?”

“Nah, I’m good.” She lifted the mug in her own hand as she made her way across the driveway and onto his patio. Sarge, who had stretched himself out at Bucky’s feet, gave a happy huff, and lifted his head so she could pet him.

“And you wonder why you have trouble sleeping.”

“Yeah well, if I can’t sleep, I might as well enjoy some coffee,” she said she settled herself in the chair next to his. “And how have your nuts not fallen off? It’s fucking freezing out here.”

“Says the woman who came out here in nothing more than a bathrobe.”

“Don’t forget the fuzzy slippers.” She lifted a foot and wiggled her ankle, showing off her elephant shaped slippers.

“How could I? They’re what make the outfit.”

“Damn straight,” she smiled at him, and then took a sip of coffee. “Anyway, seriously Bucky, are you alright? You seem kinda down.”

Bucky took another drag from his cigarette, flicked the end against his ashtray and sighed. He really didn’t smoke very often anymore. But once in a while, after he’d had a rough day, or just needed
something to distract himself, he smoked one or two. And it had been a shitty day, with a shitty conversation, and Steve making a shitty comment about pie. The asshole.

“I just got off the phone with my boyfriend not too long ago, after not speaking to him for over two weeks, to ask him if he was coming over for Thanksgiving.”

“Mr. Keep-It-Up?” she asked.

“Yeah, him. Told me he had other plans, insulted my baking, and then said we needed to talk.”

“Ouch,” she winced. “And also, what a fucking douche.”

“Yeah.”

“Well that explains the cigarette then,” she smiled at him. “Although I prefer a couple of shots of whiskey myself.” Quite honestly, Bucky would have preferred a few shots of whiskey as well. But the serum made it impossible for him to get drunk. His body synthesized anything it viewed as toxic too quickly for it to have any effect. He’d had to explain that to Dr. Callahan when she suggested anti-depressants to help in his recovery. For it to have any effect, the dosage would need to be high enough that the side effects would render him comatose. And that would only last for an hour at most, without providing any benefit. They’d had to find alternative methods as a result. But Bucky couldn’t tell Paige that. He doubted she’d believe him, much less understand.

“Ever since I got back stateside, whiskey just don’t taste the same anymore. It’s not worth it, so I just don’t bother,” he said instead.

“Fair enough,” she nodded and took another sip of her coffee. She lowered her mug, and studied him, her eyes curious and bright underneath the moonlight. “The two of you weren’t actually together for that long, were you? Maybe a month or so, from what you said.”

“Maybe a month, and maybe forever. It felt that way to me sometimes.”

“Care to say that again, in fucking English this time?” She arched an eyebrow at him. Bucky sighed, took another puff, and leaned back in his chair.
“We knew each other ever since we were kids. Childhood sweethearts, I suppose you could say. But where,” when “we grew up, it wasn’t safe for us to be together. We had to keep it a secret. If anyone found out, if we were lucky, we’d have just gotten the shit beaten outta us.” Paige hissed in sympathy. Bucky shrugged. “We both ended up joining the army, for different reasons, and our paths diverged not too long after that and we lost contact with each other. Not too long after I got the house, we reconnected.” As he spoke, he slipped his foot out of his own slipper, and started dragging his sock covered toes over Sarge’s belly. Sarge let out another contented little huff, and stretched out even further, his paws flopping lazily back and forth in the air. “Picked up right back where we left off. Seemed to be going well. We were having lots and lots of great sex-“

“So you’ve said,” she smiled at him.

“But we’re very different people now, then who we once were. And our experiences in the military were very different. You’ve seen my arm and the scars, I don’t have to tell you mine wasn’t all that great. And he, he’s all about serving his country and the world, fighting the good fight.” Bucky took another puff of his cigarette, followed by another sip of coffee.

“But the thing is, it’s not that good for him either. He has more issues than there are Captain America comics.” That was as close as he was going to come to admitting the truth of who his boyfriend was. “As many as I do, maybe. But he doesn’t want to admit it, refuses to talk about it. We ended up fighting about it, both of us saying some pretty ugly things. That was a little over two weeks ago, and I haven’t seen him since. And when I spoke to him today, he said we needed to talk. I’m not stupid, I know what that means. He’s made his choice, and it’s not me.”

Next to him, Paige was quiet, taking her time to go over his words. He’d learned this about her, about Betty too. As gregarious as they could sometimes be, they were both very intelligent and intuitive women, non-judgmental and accepting of him and all his quirks. He loved having them as neighbors; he loved all the women in his life now, and he knew, at least in aspect, Fate had been very kind to him.

“Did I ever tell you about Hillary?” was what she said when she finally spoke, reaching over to slide one of his cigarettes from his pack.

“No,” Bucky said, flicking his zippo open and holding it out to her.

“Hillary Hastings, love of my fucking life,” she went on once the cigarette was lit, leaning back in her chair. “Or at least I thought she was at the time. Met her my first semester of college. I was studying art and she was studying design. First week there, and she walked into my Renaissance Art class, this beautiful brunette, that I couldn’t take my eyes off of. And then she spoke, demanding to know why there weren’t more female artists on our syllabus, and I immediately fell in love. I asked her out at the end of that class, and she said yes. Within a week, we were girlfriends, and by the time
the next semester rolled around, we were sharing a dorm room. And I couldn’t remember ever being happier. We were good together, me and her, really, really good. I thought she’s the one, you know, I’ve found her, my person.”

“So what happened?” Bucky wanted to know, since it was obvious they were no longer together.

“Graduation happened,” Paige exhaled around a puff of smoke. “There I’d been, looking at apartment listings, thinking we were going to start building the rest of our lives, when she tells me she had no intentions of settling down, that this was just college, and living in some crappy apartment in Brooklyn was not what she wanted to do with the rest of her life.”

“Ouch,” Bucky sympathized.

“Yeah,” Paige nodded. “She packed up her things, moved to the West Coast, to take a job with Apple I think, and never once looked back.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah,” she said again. “So was I. Because I’d loved her Bucky, with all of my heart, and the thing of it was, we were really great together. She could make me laugh, like no one else, and always challenged me with my art, urging me to take chances and do even more. But it just wasn’t meant to be. Sometimes these things aren’t.”

“So then what?”

“So then I spent a year on my own. I’d already spent the last two years of college as an apprentice at an ink shop in the East Village, working on my portfolio and building a good reputation as an artist. They were a good group of artists at that shop, and I miss them, even though I love the place I work at now. A couple of us joined a softball league, where we played against other teams every other weekend. And that’s where I first met Betty.”

“Love at first sight, you said.”

“It was,” Paige nodded. “But I’d been burned badly, and was still scared. Didn’t know if I was ready to go through that again.”
“I take it Betty had a different point of view?” Bucky asked around another mouthful of coffee.

“You’ve met her,” Paige smirked. But her eyes were soft, amazed, taking the moonlight that reflected in them and transforming it into adoration. “She’s even more determined than I am. She gave me a month, before she cornered me at the end of a game and said, ‘What the fuck are you waiting for? I’m right here. I’ve been waiting for you all my life. Why the hell haven’t you kissed me yet?’”

“That sounds like Betty,” Bucky smiled.

“She’s my girl,” Paige nodded, that light still in her eyes. “And I’ve never, ever wanted to kiss anyone else since. It hasn’t been easy, but here I am ten years later, married to the love of my life, and a mom to the most beautiful baby girl ever.” She leaned forward to put her half-finished cigarette out in the ashtray and turned her still gleaming eyes toward Bucky.

“The thing of it is, I know I could have had a fucking amazing life with Hillary. And who knows, maybe if it had been another time or place, we would have. But if she hadn’t left to pursue her own dreams, I never would have met Betty, never would have known that there was this motherfucking amazing woman out there waiting for me.” She reached out and took Bucky’s hand, the one that had been holding his coffee mug, his metal one, into her own, squeezing their fingers together.

“And your person, he or she is still out there. It may not be this guy, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t out there, waiting for you to find them or trying to find you. When they do, the first thing they’re going to do, after they take you in their arms and swear to never let you go, is say ‘Thank you for waiting for me.’ I can promise you that. ‘Cos you’re a great guy Bucky, and anybody would be lucky to have you. If that asshole can’t see that, then he’s not the one for you.”

“Thank you,” Bucky could barely whisper, while he squeezed her hand back. Everyone else had told him something similar, in their own unique ways, but no one had been as direct or forthcoming as Paige had been that night. There were echoes of his mother in her words, his baby sister Becca, and he’d been missing the both of them fiercely, especially lately. He hadn’t realized how desperately he had needed to hear someone say to him that he was worthwhile, that his heart was a gift that deserved to be kept safe. That even he, after all this time and the things he had done, was worthy of love, of care. That the love he had to give was also worthy, and should be appreciated, and it both broke and mended his heart.

“You’re welcome.” Then she smiled at him. And Bucky knew that smile, had seen it enough on Tara’s face to know she wasn’t quite done, at least not yet. “Always listen to a lesbian. We never lie. We got better shit to do with our mouths.”
And yep, definitely not done. He wondered if the two of them were related.

“Speaking of which, why aren’t you in bed with your beautiful wife right now?”

“She sleeps like the fucking dead. The bitch. I fucking hate her sometimes.”

Bucky laughed. “Does she snore?”

“Like a fucking chainsaw,” Paige rolled her eyes.

“Yeah well, since she’s obviously down for the count, would it be alright if I gave you a kiss instead?”

“Look at you, being all gentlemanly and asking a woman for her permission first,” Paige said, rising from her chair.

“I have seen Betty wielding a sledgehammer.” Bucky smiled as he stood. “I hafta admit, she scares the fucking shit outta me.”

“I know. Isn’t she great?” Paige beamed.

“She is,” Bucky agreed. And then he stepped forward and took Paige into his arms.

She was such a tiny thing, the top of her head barely reaching his clavicle, and he was again reminded of Tara. But beautiful too, with her shiny black hair and striking ink. Soft and warm, with a big heart. They were powerhouses, all these women in his life, but generous with it, willing to share both their wisdom and their kindness. He thought it sad that men were so often considered the heroes of the world, when women were the ones who were really doing all the hard work, the difficult tasks, considered so trivial by most. She’d had no reason to help him tonight, probably wanted nothing more than to enjoy a quiet cup of coffee in peace. But she had seen him sitting there, sensed he was in pain, and shared with him a part of herself, a painful one, to help ease his burdens. He wished he had more to offer her in return.
But a hug, and a kiss to her cheek was all he had to give at that moment. No more, no less, except…

“Thank you, Paige,” he murmured into her hair.

“You’re welcome.” She gave good hugs, strong and all encompassing, but not suffocating. Lizzie was a very lucky baby. “You good now?”

“Better than I was.”

“Good. Now let go of me, so I can go back inside, take a melatonin, pop in some ear-plugs and try to fall asleep next to my fucking vacuum cleaner of a wife.”

Bucky was still laughing when her back door had closed and the lights in her kitchen flicked off. He could still hear her words, and the message beneath.

She was right. He and Steve could have had a beautiful life together. Challenging yes, but that’s what life was, even during the best of times. But still beautiful, worth all the effort they would have both had to put into it.

Or maybe they had never really been meant to be. And there was someone else out there, waiting for Bucky to find them. When they did, maybe the first words in Bucky’s heart would be Oh, there you are, I have finally found you. And theirs would echo, Yes, and, Here I am, and Thank you for waiting for me.

Bucky supposed he wouldn’t know until it happened. But he could wait; he had time now, and Paige had relit the spark of hope in his heart.

Still, Bucky couldn’t help but think as he picked up his coffee mug and opened his kitchen door so Sarge could trot inside, it would have been nice if once, just once, Steve had chosen him first.
In the end, Bucky had to push all thoughts of Steve, their current status, and the possibility of maybe someone else to the back of his mind. Because Thursday was rapidly approaching, and for the first time in his life, Bucky was hosting a Thanksgiving dinner.

It started out simply enough, with Bucky asking Teresa to his home so the two of them wouldn’t have to spend the holiday alone. Then, knowing Timmy would more than likely have nowhere else to go, he extended an invitation to all the MWs. Timmy had immediately accepted, but to his shock so had Mel, Angie and Roger. Mel didn’t want to deal with the relentless questions from her parents about when she planned to go back to nursing. Angie thought she would be better able to handle the day at Bucky’s house, where she was already comfortable, and knew no one would protest if she needed to step away and take a few minutes to herself due to her social anxiety. And Roger’s ex-wife had their kids for the holiday, and Roger needed both the distraction and company to keep him from spending the day drowning his sorrows in beer. Then Timmy texted him, asking if it would be all right for him to bring a plus-one, and Bucky wasn’t going to tell him no, not when he had been the most excited of all for the invite.

He even went so far as to ask Yuna and Tara if they wanted to come. Yuna was grateful for the offer, but had other plans. Tara also declined, with a mournful sigh, explaining that Meghan was the one in charge of their Thanksgiving dinner, and was supposedly planning a feast like no other.

Bucky had no illusions to how well that was going to go, but Tara was a loyal girlfriend, if nothing else.

“The offer’s still open though, if you end up changing your mind,” Bucky told her, as he texted her his address.

“Just bring me a leftover turkey sandwich on Friday,” Tara sighed dramatically. “If I can make it out of the bathroom by then, I’ll have it for lunch.”

“Deal.”

He’d also invited Betty and Paige over, but they’d told him they had plans to visit Betty’s mother in New Jersey that day.
“You really think that’s the best idea?” Bucky had no compunction asking.

“My sister Marcy’s flying in from Chicago. She’s got a little boy, ‘bout the same age as Lizzy. We don’t get to see each other very often, and we want Lizzie to have a chance to spend time with her cousin,” Betty explained.

“I’ll just leave the sledgehammer out then?” Bucky cocked an eyebrow at them.

“Good idea,” Paige agreed. “We’re both gonna fucking need it after spending the day with that witch.”

So that was six people, not including himself, Bucky was cooking for. A challenge, yes, especially for his first Thanksgiving, but he had never failed a mission in his life, and he knew how to assess and adapt, organize and strategize, and do all the things to ensure this mission was completed successfully.

It started on Wednesday, with Bucky giving Sarge a bath, and then his entire house a thorough cleaning, with Larry, Curly and Moe working overtime, followed by a mopping, so his floors were clean enough to eat off of. Then he pulled the twenty-five-pound turkey he had been defrosting out of his refrigerator and set it to brine. Once that was done, Bucky put on an apron, rolled up his sleeves and started to bake.

Because it was Thanksgiving and he was going to make pies. Cherry, apple, blueberry, coconut custard, pumpkin, sweet-potato, pecan, and sour-orange. At the last minute, because he knew chocolate was always a crowd pleaser, he also made a dark-chocolate-salted-caramel pie with an Oreo crust. He may have gone a bit overboard, but his crusts were to die for, light and flakey, and he still may have been smarting over Steve’s last comment (there was no maybe about it). He was going to have pie for days, but there were plenty of people coming over, so he could send them home with generous slices, and knew any left-overs he brought to Yuna, Tara, Jake, Andy and even Dr. Callahan would be greatly appreciated. So fuck you, Momma Wilson, and your best pies that anyone’s ever tasted.

(And yeah, okay, he could admit it. He was definitely going overboard.)

Then it was a shower, and a decent night’s sleep (where he ended up dreaming of dancing pies), followed by an early rise, a quick breakfast of just cereal, some additional pre-meal prep, before he and Sarge climbed into Marlene and drove to pick Teresa up from the old-age home where she had
spent the morning visiting Pedro.

They made good time back to Brooklyn, and Bucky quickly got her settled on the living room couch with some appetizers and a glass of wine, where Bucky took a short break, and just sat with her for a little while so they could enjoy one of the episodes of *Prisioneros de Amor* Bucky had recorded, before Bucky headed back into his kitchen to finish cooking.

The thing of it was, Bucky was not only an excellent cook, but a very organized one as well. It was a lot of work, but no one, not even the best chefs in the world, could slice, dice and chop as fast as he could, so most of it was keeping an eye on his ovens, pulling things out that needed to cool, and replacing them with things that needed their turn. In between that, under Teresa’s careful supervision, he set up a side table, where he planned to lay out his feast, covering it with a dark purple runner, before he turned to mixing and matching his plates on his dining table where they were all going to eat.

It was a lot of work, but still fun, and Teresa was a pleasant companion, and a great conversationalist. And Bucky still had enough time, after the last cloth napkin had been carefully folded, to take Teresa into his arms, and twirl her around the living room while Elvis Presley crooned in the background. She was flushed, and they were both laughing, before she shooed him away, telling him she would keep an eye on everything in his kitchen so Bucky could go upstairs and change his clothes.

It was just in time too. As Bucky made his way down the stairs, wearing a slim fitting pair of black jeans, a long-sleeved t-shirt, over which he had thrown a sapphire-blue button-up with a tribal black dragon silk-screened on the back, whose sleeves he had rolled up, at four o’clock on the dot, his doorbell rang.

It was Timmy. And next to him was standing a short, skinny man, about the same age as he was, with olive skin, curly black hair, and the greenest eyes Bucky had ever seen, that he had lined with kohl. His nose was a bit too big for his face, but he had what appeared to be pouty lips, if they weren’t tightened into a scowl, and at least six piercings in each of his ears. Not what Bucky had been expecting, but he knew better than to judge.

“Oh, uh, hey Bucky. Are we too early?” Timmy asked. “You did say four o’clock, right? Oh, and this is for you, and this is for Sarge. To say thank you, for having us.” He held up one box, which was obviously filled with cookies, and a second bag, that when Bucky checked its contents, were filled with dog biscuits.

“No, you guys are right on time. Come on in.” Bucky stepped aside to let them pass. Timmy was wearing a faded pair of jeans and an orange sweater, while his companion was dressed in all black; cargo pants, combat boots, a tight Henley, and trench coat. He also appeared to be wearing
something that resembled a dog-collar, as well as black nail polish. Bucky had to admit he was curious, but he supposed time would tell. “Shoes off, and then make yourself at home.”

“Okay,” Timmy readily agreed, and bent over. “Heh, I remember how much you bitched and moaned about how much it cost to get the floors re-varnished. Wouldn’t want to scuff them up now would we. Oh, and this is Tommy. My boyfriend. Hey Sarge!”

Bucky had to control his grin from taking over his face. Because seriously – Timmy and Tommy? How fucking cute was that? They were a perfect set, like salt-and-pepper shakers, Bucky couldn’t help but think, as he continued to study them once he’d closed the door.

“This? This is Bucky? The guy from your VA group you’ve been telling me all about?” Tommy had a heavy Spanish accent, that Bucky placed as Puerto Rican, once Tommy had straightened, and given him a second look over, still scowling.

“Yeah, that’s him,” Timmy nodded. “And oh my god Bucky, whatever you’re making, it smells great.”

“I see,” Tommy said, and then very deliberately slid his arm through Timmy’s. Bucky suppressed a laugh; so that’s how it was going to be then.

“Yeah well, I’ve made plenty,” Bucky said instead. “Now follow me into the living room, and I’ll introduce you to Teresa and then get you something to eat.”

“Oh my god!” Tommy burst out, once he was settled on the couch. “Is this Prisioneros de Amor? I haven’t seen this episode yet!”

“Yes it is,” Teresa informed him primly. “And if you don’t shut up and let me watch it, I will shove that cheese-puff down your throat. Cecelia is just about to take her pregnancy test, and I want to see the results, even though we all know she’s already pregnant.”

“I think Jose is the father,” Tommy said.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Teresa snapped. “We all know it’s Raul.”
“We’ll see,” Tommy countered.

“I have no idea what they’re talking about,” Timmy confessed with a shrug in Bucky’s direction.

“Don’t worry. They’re both wrong anyway. Carlos is the father,” Bucky said.

“Says you,” Tommy shot back, and then patted the open spot on the couch next to him. “Now situate papi, and I’ll explain it to you while we watch.” As soon as Timmy sat down, Tommy climbed into his lap, curling around him like a prickly little black cat. After once last glance at Teresa, where they shared matching grins of amusement, Bucky had to turn away, because they were just. So. Cute. And there were things Bucky needed to attend to in his kitchen. But their voices were a soothing soundtrack in the background, while Bucky pulled the two trays of stuffing he had prepared from the oven, slid in the three trays of biscuits he had handmade, and transferred the Brussels sprouts he had grilled with shallots and bacon into a serving platter.

Then the doorbell was ringing again, Sarge dashing off with a bark to say hello. It was Mel, who came with two bottles of wine. Not too long after that, it was Angie, who handed him an interesting bouquet of sliced fruit dipped in chocolate, before she joined the trio on the couch to add her commentary on Cecelia’s sleeping habits. It took her a little while to fully relax, but Teresa was a calm presence, and Sarge familiar enough with all the members of the MWs to recognize when one of them would be soothed by his presence, so he jumped up onto the couch and into her lap, causing her to laugh in spite of the two-hundred-pound dog that had decided to use her as a pillow.

They were just waiting on Roger at that point, and the turkey still needed about ten or fifteen more minutes in the oven, when the doorbell rang again. Thinking it was the last of his guests, Bucky opened his door to find Tara there, with a striking woman of color standing less than half a foot behind her.

“Please tell me that invitation to dinner is still open?” she begged.

“Yeah, course it is. I told you that,” Bucky said as he stepped aside.

“Oh thank god,” she exhaled, moving past Bucky and shrugging out of her coat. “I thought I was going to starve to death.”

“Um, I take it this is Meghan?” Bucky asked, smiling at the other woman.
“Yes, this is Meghan, the love of my life, who I am not speaking to right now,” Tara said as she kicked off her shoes.

“Hi Meghan, it’s nice to finally meet you. Tara’s told me a lot about you.” Bucky held out his hand.

“Same,” she smiled at him briefly, before she let go and followed Tara into the living room. “And it wasn’t that bad, Tare, I don’t know why—“

“You tried to feed me tofurkey! On Thanksgiving!” Tara snapped. “The one day of the year I should be allowed to eat whatever I want! I just want some meat. Please tell me you have meat Bucky, I’m begging you.”

“I have a twenty-five-pound turkey, that I coated in butter and wrapped in bacon, that’s just about ready to come out of the oven.” Everyone in the living room was watching the two of them, Tara’s antics much more interesting than anything on the television.

“Oh thank god!” Tara exhaled, collapsing back onto the couch. “I thought I was going to die!”

“Would you like a piece of melon wrapped in prosciutto?” Teresa asked calmly, easily passing the tray she had been nibbling from over to Tara.

“Yes, please and thank you. You’re very kind,” Tara said as she took the tray. Seeing the way Tara was eyeing the remaining slices, Bucky went back into the kitchen to get more. And to hide his laugh. This was turning out to be the best Thanksgiving ever, and the craziest. But definitely the best. He’d been hiding in his kitchen, muffling his laughter, when less than five minutes later, as he was wrapping the last pieces of melon in prosciutto, he heard Teresa’s voice say,

“Senorita, you are a very beautiful young woman. And I can see you love your girlfriend very, very much. But if I hear you say the words colon and olive oil cleanse in the same sentence one more time, I am going to beat you to death with my shoes.”

“Not if I don’t do it first,” Tommy muttered.

“No you won’t, hijo,” Teresa snapped at him. “You will respect your elders, and let me go first.”
“I’m a veteran. I spent eight years serving my country. I think if anyone deserves to go first, it’s me,” was Mel’s contribution.

“That is all well and good, and everyone here is grateful for your service,” Teresa said. “But it was my idea. You’ll all just have to wait your turn.”

“Um, Bucky…I think we need some help out here,” Timmy called.

“Or at least some more prosciutto,” Angie spoke up for the first time.

“Yes please!” Tara called. Bucky had shoved one of his dish towels in his mouth, and was hunched over his counter he was laughing so hard, when he was saved by the bell, literally, when Roger finally arrived, bearing two six packs of pale ale.

“Just don’t say anything about colons,” was all Bucky could say once Roger had slipped out of his shoes. “And here, take this with you.” Bucky handed him the tray he’d been working on before Roger’s arrival.

“Okay?” Roger said, obviously confused, but he took the tray from Bucky’s hands and made his way into the living room.

“Woo-hoo! Gimme!” Tara’s voice called out less than three seconds later.

Best. Thanksgiving. Ever.

Bucky was just pulling his biscuits out of the oven, after having set the turkey on his kitchen counter so it could rest for a bit, when a new argument started, led by Roger and supported by Mel, Angie and Tara about how football was a Thanksgiving Day tradition, and could they please change the channel now. Teresa graciously allowed it, and then joined him in the kitchen to help him carry out the remaining sides, followed by the turkey, with its crispy shell of bacon, that Bucky proudly placed in the center.

And that was when everything went to shit.
Bucky had no interest in modern day sports. He had boxed, back in the days of his youth, and enjoyed it. And ever since he’d found out the Dodgers had abandoned Brooklyn, he absolutely refused to watch any baseball. Football and basketball had never interested him, and soccer bored him to tears. But something must have happened on screen, because suddenly there was a loud set of cheers from his couch, and even louder cursing from Tara. Bucky had turned his back on the table for less than two seconds, to see what all the ruckus was about, and that’s when it happened.

Sarge was such a good dog. Well-trained and obedient when he knew he was working. But he wasn’t a year old yet, and technically still a puppy. Apparently there was only so much even he could resist, and a twenty-five-pound turkey, basted in butter and wrapped in bacon was his tipping point.

There was an unbelievably loud crash, followed by the sounds of plates hitting the floor, and when Bucky turned back around, all he saw was his dog’s ass, as he dashed up the stairs, Bucky’s delicious and juicy turkey clenched in his jaws.

“Sarge! You bastard! Get back here!” Bucky shouted, running after him.

“What the hell happened?” Roger asked.

“My damned dog just stole our turkey!”

“What?” The shriek definitely belonged to Tara.

Bucky chased Sarge up the stairs, everyone else hot on his heels, and into his bedroom, where his dog had somehow managed to wedge himself under Bucky’s bed, and wouldn’t come out, no matter what Bucky said.

“Sarge! Release! Side! Now!” Bucky ordered. The only response he got was the sounds of bones crunching. “Are you fucking kidding me Sarge? Don’t make me crawl under there after you!”

“Did that dog really just steal our turkey?” Tommy asked.

“Well, it was wrapped in bacon. He never was a stupid dog,” Teresa said. Tara moaned as if in pain.
“I want to know how the hell he managed to fit himself under your bed,” Mel wondered.

“Do you think he’d bite me if I crawled under there with him and asked him to share?” Tara sounded way too serious.

“You’d really want to eat that thing after the dog drooled all over it?” Tommy again.

“Of course I would! It was wrapped in bacon! Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve had bacon!”

“You need to feed your girlfriend more meat,” Tommy said to Meghan. “I think she’s going into bacon withdrawals.”

“She’s not the only one,” it was Mel’s turn.

“Seriously,” Roger grumbled.

“Sarge!” Bucky tried one last time, just as the sounds of bones being crunched finally stopped. “Get out from under there right now!” Sarge burped, but didn’t come out from under the bed.

“I think he’s done now,” Timmy said kindly, obviously trying to be sympathetic.

“That was twenty-five-pounds of meat!” Roger exclaimed. Tara whimpered. “How the hell could he eat it that fast?”

“His breed’s been known to take down bears,” Bucky grumbled.

“And apparently turkeys,” Angie finally decided to speak up.

“What the hell are we supposed to eat for dinner now?” Roger asked.
“There’s pie,” Teresa said. “It’s not turkey, but there’s pie.”

“And prosciutto.” Timmy really always did try to be as helpful as possible.

“But no more there’s not. I put the rest of it out on the table with everything else,” Bucky confessed.

“Ah no.” Tara again.

Bucky sighed. It really wasn’t Sarge’s fault. He normally was such a well-behaved dog. He really couldn’t be blamed for surrendering to his nature, just this once. But Bucky couldn’t help but wonder why it had to be today of all fucking days. Just like Tara, he had really been looking forward to that turkey. He sighed again.

“Yeah, I feel the exact same way.” Roger patted his shoulder.

“That’s not it,” Bucky shook his head. “I’m just wondering if a Roomba is strong enough to suck up bird bits.”

“If not, we can just shove this one under the bed. I’m sure she’d be more than happy to suck up whatever was left.” Of course, that would be Tommy.

“I would too!”

If the disaster of Sarge’s theft wasn’t bad enough, leaving Bucky with a house full of hungry people he had to figure out some way to feed, there was some asshole outside riding a motorcycle. Bucky had first heard the growl of the engine in the distance when he’d come up here after Sarge (and his turkey). It had only gotten louder since, and Bucky had to wonder at the balls of some people, making a racket like that on a day that was supposed to be about family and togetherness. The noise was only getting louder too, drawing closer and closer, until it was right outside his street.

And Bucky had had enough. He couldn’t yell at Sarge; he knew dogs had a very different sense of time, and Sarge wouldn’t understand why he was being punished for something he couldn’t remember. And he couldn’t yell at his company, because it wasn’t their fault. But he could yell at assholes on motorcycles in his neighborhood on Thanksgiving Day.
So that’s what he decided to do.

He climbed onto his bed, shoved his window open, stuck his head outside and shouted, “What the fuck, man? It’s fucking Thanksgiving! Show some respect!” just as the engine’s growl cut off.

“Oh, uh, hey Bucky. Sorry ‘bout that.”

“Steve?”

Because that’s who was staring up at him when Bucky looked down at his street. Steven Grant Rogers, wearing a brown leather bomber jacket, sitting astride a motorcycle.

“Uh, yeah?” Steve said, running a hand over the back of his head.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Bucky yelled down at him.

“I was kinda hoping I could join you for Thanksgiving dinner?”

“Well you’re too fucking late for that! It’s already ruined!”

“Ruined? Why?” Steve looked both genuinely surprised as well as concerned.

“‘Cos his stupid dog ate the turkey!” Tommy called down. Apparently his guest weren’t content to just stand back while Bucky yelled out his window. When he glanced around, he could see a third of them dangling out the room he had converted to his walk-in closet, a third were leaning out the window of his second bedroom. And Teresa, Tommy and Timmy staring out of the window in his hallway.

“Sarge did what?” Steve asked.

“He ate the fucking turkey!” Bucky yelled.
“Well what did you expect? You just left it on the table like that! That was a good as waving a sign that said free pussy in his face!” Roger shouted across from him.

“Did somebody say free pussy?” Paige called out as both her and Betty stepped out onto their stoop, with Lizzy cradled on Betty’s hip.

“What the hell are you doing here? I though you guys were going to Jersey,” Bucky said.

“Marcy called, her flight was cancelled due to the weather over in Chicago. Since she wasn’t going to be there, we weren’t going to waste three hours on the fucking Jersey Turnpike just to go to that witch’s house! Are we still invited for dinner?” Paige answered.

“My stupid dog ate the turkey!”

“Sarge did what?” Steve asked again.

“The Golden Dragon should be open. We could probably put an order in through Seamless,” Betty offered.

“Do they have meat?” Tara asked.

“Best fucking spare ribs in all of Brooklyn,” Paige informed her.

“Thank god! I’ll take six orders please,” Tara said.

“That’s a lot of ribs, girl,” Paige eyed her.

“My girlfriend tried to feed me tofurkey for Thanksgiving!” she shouted back.

“Right then. If they’re open, I’ll put in an order for eight.” Paige started tapping on her phone.
“That’s dinner taken care of then,” Teresa nodded. “But can somebody please explain to me what Captain America is doing here?” And suddenly, the were nine sets of eyes, all focused on Steve.

“That’s Captain America?” Tommy leaned forward even farther.

“Holy shit! It is! And holy shit, I just said holy shit in front of Captain America!” Mel squeaked.

“Go you!” Betty cheered.

“They’re right. What the hell are you doing here Steve? I thought you were going to Sam’s for Thanksgiving!”

“That’s Steve? That’s the asshole who dumped you and insulted your baking?” Tara wanted to know.

There was a chorus of “He what?” and then there were eight sets of eyes on Steve, now glaring at him.

“I never insulted your baking Bucky!” Steve defended himself.

“You said Momma Wilson made the best pies in the world!”

“What a douche!” Paige chimed in.

“See, this is why gringos make shitty boyfriends. They never know how to treat their papis right. You never insult their cooking!” Tommy said.

“Really?” Timmy asked.

“Yes really.” Tommy nodded at him. “Because whenever your papi cooks for you, it’s always the best meal in the world. Nobody makes me Kraft Macaroni and Cheese with hotdogs like you do, papi. It’s my favorite meal ever.”
“Oh my god! They’re fucking adorable!” Paige yelled.

“I know, right?” Bucky nodded at her.

“Um…” Steve made the mistake of trying to interject. It drew everybody’s attention back to him.

“What the hell are you doing here Steve? Why aren’t you at Wilson’s?” Bucky asked again. And this time his voice was quiet and low, tired. Because he was, tired of this. Years and years and years of him and Steve, and Bucky always the one who had to pick up both of their pieces in the end.

Steve must have been able to hear it. Because he swung his leg over his motorcycle, took a step forward and straightened his shoulders, all the while never taking his eyes off Bucky.

“I had to go to Sam’s,” he began.

“So you said.”

“But not for the reasons you think. And not because I didn’t want to spend Thanksgiving with you,” Steve continued.

“Don’t bullshit me Steve,” Bucky shook his head.

“I’m not Bucky, I swear to you I’m not,” Steve told him. “And I know I haven’t been around much these past two weeks or answered any of the texts you sent. But that’s because I needed to think about everything you said the last time I was here.”

“Yeah, and?” Bucky asked.

“And you were right. I don’t want to do this anymore. I used to, but I don’t, not anymore. I thought I did, but then Fury started talking about this new strategy he wanted us to implement, and my hands started shaking and wouldn’t stop no matter what I did. For three days. I just,” Steve paused to shake his head, “I just didn’t want to do it anymore. And it wasn’t cause I was afraid-“
“You never were a coward, Steve,” Bucky said.

“It felt like that at first,” Steve admitted. “Because it’s who I thought I was, who I always wanted to be. Except I realized that wasn’t it, not really. I just didn’t know who it was I wanted to be now, except for your Stevie, if you’ll still let me. ’Cos you’re the only one who ever saw the real me, and loved me anyway. It never mattered to you if I was Captain America or not. You never cared what I was, as long as I was happy. And you were the only one back then, and even now, especially now, who said it was my choice to decide that for myself.

“So I made my choice. I packed up my gear, drove to DC, and gave the shield to Sam.”

“You what?” Bucky couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“Yeah, I did,” Steve nodded. “He’s a great guy, and the Captain America the world needs now.”

“And he accepted it? Just like that?” Bucky asked.

“He didn’t say anything. But then again, his mother didn’t give him a chance. She threw me out of the house once she saw what I’d done.”

“You didn’t even get pie?”

“No,” Steve shook his head with a small smile. “But that’s okay. Because it’s like whoever that guy is over there said-“

“Tommy!” Tommy shouted.

“The best meals in the world are the ones you get to share with the person you love most in the world. And that’s you Bucky, it’s always been you. You came back to me, and I gotta second chance now, and even I’m not stupid enough to waste it.”

There were tears in Bucky’s eyes, tears in Steve’s own, as they stared at each other like Romeo and
Juliet, or Rapunzel and her prince. And maybe he was the princess in this particular chapter of their story, but that was okay. Every princess deserved his happy ending.

“So what do you say Buck? You willing to make room in your life for a former Captain, and let him love you to death while he gets the help he needs, and tries to figure out what to do with the rest of his life?” Steve asked with one last step forward.

The silence around them was as thin as a spider’s web, as wide as all the oceans. Bucky had no words; it was everything he had ever wanted, hoped to hear, and still he had no words. Because in that web, and in those seas, there was also hurt and loneliness and feeling like he’d been abandoned.

But Steve was here now, in his street, in front of all the people Bucky loved, asking him for a second chance.

“Is he your person Bucky?” It was Paige who broke the silence, her voice soft, the one she must have used when she held Lizzie in her arms and crooned her to sleep. Bucky blinked at her, this beautiful woman, standing next to her beautiful wife, and nodded.

“Yeah Paige, he is. Always has been.”

“Then maybe you should take him into your arms and let him know that,” she smiled at him.

“Yeah, but…” But Steve had never been able to walk away from a fight when he saw one. But Bucky’s heart was still recuperating from all that it had been done to it. But there were still so many things they needed to discuss first. But, but, but…

“There’s always a but, Bucky,” Paige said, as if she knew exactly what had been running through his mind. “But that don’t mean it’s not worth it.” He glanced from her and back to Steve, who hadn’t moved or taken a single step, still staring up at Bucky, his own ‘but’s in his eyes. But also hope, and please, and maybe finally, finally, we can get it right this time.

“Bucky,” he whispered, begged, promised in that single word, the consonants and vowels of Bucky’s name.

“You fucking idiot!” Bucky hissed at him. But he was climbing out of his bedroom window, without a care for who was watching, and leaping to the ground. He was a super-solider after all, or at least
he had been once. Now he was nothing more than a man in love, and that made it even better. “Of course I am, you fucking punk. I fucking love you. I couldn’t ever stop, even if I wanted to.”

“Lucky me then. ‘Cos it’s the same for me.”

And then they were kissing, in the middle of the street, in front of everyone, tears and laughter and love in their eyes, their hearts. The two of them together at last, like they were always meant to be. And nothing had ever tasted so sweet.

“Wait a minute. Captain America is gay?” Roger’s voice called down from somewhere far up above.

“I knew it!” Timmy crowed.

“Knew what?” Teresa asked.

“That Captain America and Sergeant Barnes were more than just friends who met on the playground!” Timmy said.

“What?” Mel asked.

“Guys, you do know that’s Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes right? From the Howling Commandoes and Captain America’s second-in-command?”

“What?” Everyone asked that time.

“You knew?” That was enough to pull Bucky from Steve’s arms so he could turn around at stare up at Timmy.

“Of course I knew!” Timmy gloated. “I was a huge fan of Captain America growing up. Musta read every issue of the comics. Even did a history paper on him in high school. When you first showed up at the meetings, I thought you looked familiar. And then you said your name was Bucky, and I was pretty sure. All I had to do was look up all the old photos of you online, and I knew I was right.”
“You never said anything,” Bucky said.

“Why would I? You never did and I figured I needed to respect your privacy. Plus, you were really, really cool, and I got to hang out with one of my childhood heroes. But I always knew there was something going on between you and Captain America, and hello Sir, my name is Timmy by the way.”

“Hello Timmy,” Steve sounded as confused by Timmy confession as everyone else.

“Anyway, I was right. Cap and Bucky were gay! And together! This is so fucking cool!”

“You’re so smart papi.”

“Course I am. I picked you, didn’t I?”

“So fucking cute,” Paige said.

“And gay. This has got to be the gayest Thanksgiving ever,” Teresa added.

“Shawn is going to be so pissed he missed this!” Mel laughed.

“I’m so confused right now,” Roger admitted.

“And hungry. Let’s not forget the hungry,” Tara said.

“Is the Golden Palace open?” Bucky asked Paige.

“Yep,” she answered after glancing down at her phone.

“Right, so here’s the fucking deal, Stevie,” Bucky said, stepping out of Steve’s arms. “Sarge ruined Thanksgiving, because he stole the fucking turkey when none of us were looking, so we got nothing
to eat right now—"


“Right, except pie,” Bucky nodded.

“Which Captain America can’t have any of, ‘cos he’s a fucking douche!” Betty chimed in.

“Aw come on! I just poured my heart out over here,” Steve whined.

“But not until after you insulted your papi’s baking!” Tommy accused.

“And ignored him for two weeks!” Angie sounded insulted.

“And then said ‘We need to talk.’” Paige said, making quotation marks in the air.

“Did you tell everyone about what happened Bucky?” Steve asked.

“They’re my family Steve. Maybe not the one I was born with, but the one I got now.”

“We love you too Bucky,” Tara said softly.

“And if you want them to accept you, you’re gonna get your ass back on that motorcycle, and drive over to the Golden Palace, and pick up the order me and Paige are going to put in,” Bucky smirked at him.

“And pay for it,” Teresa declared.

“That too,” Bucky nodded.
“Yeah alright,” Steve agreed, swinging his leg back over his motorcycle. “Will I at least get pie when I get back?”

“Don’t push your luck.”

***

Two hours later, they were all sitting around Bucky’s dining room table, steaming platters of Chinese food in front of them.

It had taken a bit for everything to get sorted. First Bucky and Paige had to ask everyone what they wanted to eat. Once the order was put in, they sent Steve off, and Bucky walked back into his house to clean up the mess Sarge had made. That hadn’t taken up too much time; the MWs were a unit made up of former military personnel, and they knew how to organize themselves in the most efficient way possible in order to get a job done. By the time Steve had gotten back to the house, the table had been righted, the broken plates swept up, the floor mopped, and the remaining scraps of food tossed in the garbage.

It still took a while before they were ready to sit down and eat though, because once he returned, it seemed as if everyone wanted to spend a few minutes on their own talking to Steve. Not to ask for his autograph or take a selfie with (the former) Captain America, but to have what Tommy informed him was something called “the shovel talk.”

“Do I even want to know?” Bucky asked him.

“Don’t worry. They just want to ask him what his intentions are, and make sure he’s going to treat his papi right from now on.”

“Oh Jesus,” Bucky thunked his head on his kitchen counter. Because from what he could see, there was a line, and this was definitely going to take a while. Especially from what he could see from the looks on Paige’s, Teresa’s and Tara’s faces. (Bucky also now had a sneaking suspicion as to why Angie had been eyeing his meat tenderizer so intently earlier.)

Until a little more than an hour and half after that, they were all seated around Bucky’s table, even Sarge, who had finally decided to slink down from the second floor and press himself bashfully against Bucky’s shins.
“Yeah, you know what you did, ya big jerk. That’s okay. I still love you anyway,” Bucky told him, reaching down to scratch his ear. Sarge yipped happily at him, and then trotted over to Steve, his tail wagging. Because Steve really was one of his favorite people, and his dog had missed him just as much as Bucky.

But then it was time for them to get back into the spirit of the holiday, holding hands as they sat there together, this weird and wonderful group of people Bucky had somehow been lucky enough to find, and give thanks for their blessings. Of course, they did it in their own unique way.

“I’m grateful that we’re finally sitting down to eat,” Roger said. “And that the Giants won against the Panthers.”

“I’m grateful that we didn’t have to eat dinner at my fucking witch of a mother-in-law’s house,” was Paige’s contribution.

“I’m just so fucking happy the Golden Palace was still open,” Betty added.

“And that we’re going to be eating meat,” Tara sing-songed.

“I’m thankful that I wasn’t the last one to figure out what was going on this time,” Timmy smiled.

“And I’m glad that Steve’s papi has a microwave so the food’s not cold,” Tommy said.

“And that Cecelia didn’t end up with that pendejo Jose,” Teresa chimed in.

“Me too,” Angie nodded.

“I’m grateful that I still have a girlfriend,” Meghan said next.

“And that I didn’t have to go to my mother’s house either,” Mel nodded.

“I’m grateful that I finally got to meet you all,” Steve admitted shyly. “And that Bucky still loves me, all this time later, even though I can be an idiot sometimes.”
And then it was Bucky’s turn. As he sat there, with one hand in Teresa’s and the other in Steve’s, he looked around at all the people who had decided to come to his home to celebrate the holiday, when they had other places they could be. A few people were missing; Dr. Callahan, Shawn, Marco, Andy, Jake, Yuna. But that was all right, he would be seeing them again soon, and he would bring them pie and tell them all about what a great Thanksgiving he’d had. Because it had been great, turkey-stealing dog aside. He was so very grateful, for all that he had now, when less than a year ago he’d had next to nothing. And he wanted all of them, each and every one of these crazy motherfuckers that he adored, to know that. So he opened his mouth, and his heart, and released the words within.

“I’m thankful that I’m here, right now, with all of you. A year ago, my life was very different, and I didn’t have much. But that was a year ago, and everything’s different now, so much better than it was and that’s all because of you. I could never thank you enough, for everything you’ve all done for me. But I wanted you to know, that this, you, are what I’m grateful for this year.” Then Bucky shook his head and smiled.

“But mostly, I’m grateful for Sarge, turkey stealing asshole that he is. Because none of this would have been possible, if he hadn’t found me that day, and loved me enough to guide me home.

“Now, let’s eat.”

And that’s exactly what they did.

***

But later that night, after all the food had been eaten, the leftovers divided up and placed into Tupperware containers, and everyone had gone home, there was one last thing Bucky needed to say.

On top of sheets that were damp with sweat, on a bed where Bucky’s body had been kissed by Steve’s in a million ways, in a room that smelled not only of sex, but also love, with Steve held tightly in his arms, and his ear pressed against his chest, so Steve could hear the sound of Bucky’s heartbeat, Bucky said the words, the most important ones of all.

“And you Stevie. I love you so much. You’ve always been the best thing in my life, and I am so fucking grateful, every damned day, for you.”
Steve lifted his head from Bucky’s chest, so he could stare at Bucky with eyes both beautiful and blue, and filled with more love than Bucky thought possible and smiled.

“Me too, Bucky. Me too.”

And then Steve kissed Bucky, soft and sweet, while from the foot of their bed, Bucky’s dog kept watch, his tail wagging happily in approval.

Chapter End Notes

In case anyone was wondering, Steve DID NOT get any pie. XD

There is only one more chapter after this, an epilogue that will go into a few details of what happens to Bucky and Sarge (and yes, Steve too) after Bucky's Best Thanksgiving Ever. I will post it sometime tomorrow afternoon, and I hope you enjoy it when I do. =)
Chapter 21

Chapter by BlueSimplicity

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

WINTER

Epilogue

Two Years Later…

With a sigh, Bucky dropped his pencil, closed the booklet he’d been given, then stretched his arms above his head. Gathering his materials, he rose from the desk, and made his way toward the front of the room, smiling at the proctor as he exchanged his packet for his messenger bag and phone, and sliding into his coat, walked out the door.

It was done.

Steve was waiting for him when he emerged out onto the street, his hair a golden halo surrounding his face, longer that it had ever been, lit from behind by the crisp and thin early January sunlight.

“So?” he asked with a smile as Bucky approached.

“Aced it,” Bucky grinned back.

“Knew you would,” Steve laughed, pulling Bucky into an embrace. It would be a few weeks before Bucky knew the results of his written examination, but Andy and Jake had both already signed off on his practical exam, and now Bucky just had to wait for his documentation to arrive in the mail, so that the next time he showed up at the ASPCA, it would be as a certified dog trainer. Bethany already had his employment contract in her desk, waiting for his final signature to make it official.

From Steve’s side, Sarge barked, announcing he had been patient long enough, and it was his turn for Bucky’s attentions. They sometimes spent time apart now, usually no more than two hours at a time. While still Bucky’s service dog, Bucky was less dependent upon him now than he’d been two years ago. He still did have the occasional panic attack and nightmare from time to time, and there had certainly been a couple of very grey days. But he hadn’t had a disassociative episode in over
fourteen months, and occasionally went out somewhere without Sarge accompanying him. Not too often, because they really did not like being apart from one another. Bucky was proud of the fact that he could do it, even if he didn’t have to. Sarge was such a big part of his life, and had been a huge component in Bucky’s recovery, this scrawny, dirty puppy he had found nearly frozen to death, who was now two-hundred-and-twelve pound adult dog, who easily towered over both Steve and Bucky when he rose up on his hind legs because he needed to examine their faces for any remnants of roast beef. Or maybe bacon.

But Sarge hadn’t been the only one. There was still Dr. Callahan, and the MWs, Andy and Jake, Betty and Paige, Yuna, Tara, and Teresa.

And Steve.

The past twenty-six months hadn’t been easy ones, for either of them. There had been plenty of struggles, and lots and lots of changes.

The first being a week after Thanksgiving, when Steve returned to the Tower for one last time to gather his things and move them into Bucky’s house in Bay Ridge. For a man that had been out of the ice for nearly five years, there hadn’t been much he’d considered important, and it had only taken one trip in Bucky’s SUV to complete the transfer. But that had been the easy part.

Nicholas J. Fury had not been pleased with Steve’s decision, trying to make it as difficult as possible, and suggesting Steve spend some time with Captain McAdams if he felt there were issues he needed to work through. When Steve blatantly refused, Fury had demanded to know, with a sneer, what the hell Steve thought he was going to do now? They were the best at what they did, extraordinary men born and bred to protect others, and how could Steve turn his back on his duty to his country, the world.

“I already died for my country, this world, once,” Steve had said. “And there are other ways to fight, to make this world a better place. My partner, the most extraordinary man I know, was the one to show me that. For the first time in over eighty years, I’m actually going to listen to him for a change, and see what else is out there for me. It’s a new century Fury, it’s time I actually started living in it.”

Bucky, who had been standing on the sidelines, wearing his purple velvet jacket and matching combat boots, Sarge at his side wearing a matching halter and purple cowboy hat, had never been so proud. Instead of matching Fury’s sneer with one of his own, he wiggled the fingers of his left hand at him instead, and then followed Steve up to his floor to gather the last of his boxes.

That had been a tough night for Steve. He knew he had made the right decision, hadn’t doubted it for
a second, but it was still hard to let go of the old, even if you were eager to embrace the new. Bucky had held him extra tight that night, showering his face in kisses, and made him over a dozen of his favorite chocolate chocolate-chip muffins once the sun finally rose.

The rest of the Avengers had varying reactions, Tony being the most vocal in his disbelief. According to Steve, Clint Barton had shrugged it off, Dr. Banner had shaken his hand then retreated to his labs, and Peter Parker had stood there confused. Wanda Maximoff had been the one to take him into his arms, kissing both of his cheeks, whispering “I’m so glad for you Steven. This was not the life for you anymore, I could sense it. You deserve your happy ending, more than anyone I know. Now go home, back to your lover. He’s waiting for you.”

Natasha Romanova hadn’t said a thing, merely watched him walk away. During his final exit interview, while Steve insisted that Sam was the one who should take on the mantle of Captain America, he had also recommended that his leadership duties be equally shared with the Black Widow. She too had travelled a very long and hard journey, and deserved this chance.

Bucky had no idea what Natasha thought of Steve’s proclamation, although he could guess. But one summer day, he had made her, out of the corner of his eyes, watching him and Steve, and Sarge, as they worked their way through one of the many flea-markets in the city, happily searching for even more glassware. When their gazes met, she had nodded and smiled a small, knowing little smile, before Steve’s “Hey Buck, check this out! What do you think about this one? It’ll go perfect with that platter you found last week,” distracted him. When he looked back, she was long gone, disappearing in the way only she could.

Steve barely ever saw most of his former teammates anymore. They sometimes crossed paths, on the rare occasion when Steve put on a suit, and decided to make a public appearance, not as the former Captain America, but Steven Grant Rogers, who even without the uniform could inspire people to be better, and make the right choice. There were issues he supported, LGBTA+ rights, vets recovering from PTSD, childhood diseases, and always, always urging peace instead of war. But he preferred a private life now, with fewer pressures, and actual time for himself.

The only one they did see with any regularity was Sam. Once he had accepted his new role, and his mother had calmed down enough to let him out of the house, he showed up at their home at least once every two weeks, sometimes more, at first to ask Steve for advice and guidance, and then because, well, he was a friend. He was growing into the role of Captain America, slowly but surely, just like Steve had known he would. But he also understood, just like Bucky did, why Steve needed to walk away from it. Sam and Bucky did get along, even if they did tend to snipe at each other whenever they were in the same room. But Sam had supported Steve, and offered Bucky resources when Bucky hadn’t known how to help himself, so even though Bucky grumbled about it, he always made sure to prepare a raspberry swirl cheesecake, Sam’s favorite, when he knew Sam was coming.
Besides Bucky, Sam was Steve’s closest friend. But he wasn’t the only one, not anymore, and Steve quickly came to know and appreciate all the people in Bucky’s life. He adored Betty and Paige, and they often spent evenings together, sharing dinners while they talked and laughed. Steve was fascinated by Paige’s talent as a tattoo artist, and they spent a lot of time talking about art. He also watched and asked plenty of questions whenever Betty worked on Bucky, wanting to know what she was doing and why, so he could be the one to help whenever Bucky’s shoulder flared up on him.

He also grew to know and respect Teresa, admiring her calm wisdom and appreciating her unique sense of humor. He would join them on the couch, when they settled in for a telenovela marathon, grumbling about their choices, but always asking them to turn on the English subtitles so he could follow along. Teresa liked to tease him, gently, in that way of hers, but she also said there was something in Steve that reminded her, just a bit, of how Pedro had been during his younger years. Steve had blushed, but as Bucky matched Teresa’s approving smile with one of his own, he recognized it for the complement it was.

Two weeks after Steve moved in, Bucky dragged his ass to Second Chances and introduced him to Yuna. Because enough was enough, and Bucky absolutely refused to be seen with anyone who thought corduroy pants were a viable fashion choice. Yuna’s smile had been wicked, and her eyes had gleamed when she first saw Steve. Steve had sputtered when Bucky practically shoved him at Yuna with a gruff, “Fix it. You see what he’s wearing. It’s embarrassing. Me and my dog can’t be seen with anyone who thinks brown corduroys and a green plaid shirt actually match.”

“Hey!”

“Give me an hour.” Yuna paused to run a critical eye over Steve’s outfit. “Make that two. This is going to take a while, and I need to make sure everything he walks out of here with actually fits.”

“Hey!”

While resistant at first, even Steve had to admit Yuna was good at her job. They left that day with four bags full of clothes, and Steve quickly learned to accept Yuna’s advice. While he never wore jeans as tight-fitting as Bucky’s, he had developed a fondness for soft and faded denims, that showed off his long legs and highlighted his very slim waist. Combined with the snug t-shirts, Henleys and sweaters Yuna picked out for him, in whites, warm tans, bright blues and soothing greys, Bucky knew they now both turned heads whenever they went anywhere together. Steve never quite became the clothes horse Bucky was; he never had been in the past. But he did have his own rack of leather jackets and sharp fitting suits in the upstairs room that now served as their walk-in closet.

And then there was Tara; charming, sweet, irresistible Tara, who never failed to bring a smile to both their faces whenever they saw her. Bucky still taught classes with Andy two nights a week at Petco,
and he walked her to the train station, stopping at whatever food cart they were in the mood for on the way. But Steve now joined them. While they now lived together, sharing their days and all the most intimate aspects of their lives, Steve made sure Bucky knew he still viewed their relationship as a courtship, that he would spend the rest of his life courting Bucky as a way to say thank you, and that Bucky was his person, and he was never going to let Bucky forget that. He would always meet Bucky after work or one of his shifts at the ASPCA, so they could travel home together. And he was just as particular about any dog food they purchased as Bucky was. While he waited for Bucky to finish, he read labels and chatted with Tara, the both of them smiling when he and Sarge finally emerged from the basement level.

“Empanadas or crepes today?” Bucky asked as they made their way down Fourteenth Street, Tara’s arm wrapped around his.


“Oh god, what did Meghan feed you for breakfast today?” Bucky grumbled.

“Quinoa and kale,” Tara sighed. “My piss is back to being green. And every time I burp, I can still taste it.”

“Oh Jesus Christ, she’s still at it?” Steve shook his head. “I thought she learned her lesson after the twelve pounds of ribs you ate at Thanksgiving.”

“Yeah well, she said since you guys are taking care of my protein intake, she has to make sure I’m getting enough fiber to flush out all the toxins.”

“Bleh,” Bucky shivered.

“You’re telling me,” Tara went on. “I mean, she licks my clit like a champ, but pussy shouldn’t taste like lettuce.”

“And I’ll be right back with those hotdogs!” Steve turned on his heel and quickly walked away.

“He really is a bit of a prude, isn’t he?” Tara asked, staring at Steve’s retreating back.
“Not really,” Bucky said, following her gaze. “He sucks dick like you wouldn’t believe. He just doesn’t like to talk about stuff like that outside the bedroom.”

“Well,” Tara sighed. “It’s good to know at least somebody’s getting some good meat on a regular basis.”

Bucky cackled. “God, I adore you.” And then he bent forward to press his usual kiss to her forehead. “You were the first person who ever looked, and actually saw the real me.”

“You made it easy Bucky,” she smiled at him. “You came into my store with your arms wrapped around a puppy you had just rescued from the street. That’s the only thing I needed to see to know you were a good person under all that hair.”

“Thank you,” he whispered, giving her another kiss, this time into her hair.

“You’re welcome,” she told him, before she urged him to follow her with a tug to his arm. “Now let’s go tell your boyfriend all about tampons, see if we can’t freak him out some more.”

Finally, there were the MWs. They never became Steve’s new unit, like they were Bucky’s. But Steve got to know all of them as well. Especially Timmy, and his boyfriend Tommy. Bucky, not having forgotten Tommy’s casual aside about the meal of Kraft Macaroni and Cheese and hot dogs Timmy had prepared for him, had taken it upon himself to teach Timmy how to cook. He knew Timmy’s finances were tight, but he also remembered how one of the first things he had taught himself as a means of self-care was how to eat well on a budget. So twice a week, Bucky took Timmy shopping with him, pointing out sales and items he could combine together to make not only filling but tasty meals. Then he would bring Timmy to his house, and taught him how to use a chicken to make enough meals to last a week, add breadcrumbs to chop meat to so it would last even longer, or how cabbage, beans, rice or potatoes could be combined with almost anything so you could go to sleep with a full belly at the end of the day, and not cramps of hunger.

“He used to cook like this too, back in the Forties when we lived together,” Steve said, from where he had perched himself on one of the bar stools at their kitchen island, watching as Bucky instructed Timmy on how to perfectly mash potatoes. “We never had much, but he could stretch a dollar like you wouldn’t believe. We never went hungry, thanks to him. Learned a lot of that from his ma, I think.”

“And the internet,” Bucky added.
“And the internet,” Steve smiled. “He was always resourceful.”

“Yeah well, I never knew you could do that many things with beans,” Timmy said, his gaze intent on the bowl in his hands. “And that it could be so good too. So much better than ramen.”

“Ramen has its uses,” Bucky told him. “And if it’s all you can afford, then it’s better than nothing. But if you scramble up and egg or two, or have a can of mixed vegetables you can toss in there, it makes it last longer. Healthier too.”

Tommy would often join them, after his shift at Barnes and Noble was over. He was still a prickly little cat, but once he realized Bucky was happy being someone else’s papi, and had no interest in Timmy in that way, he started purring, just a little bit. Especially whenever Timmy placed the results of his latest lesson in front of him with a bashful smile. They had both put on a bit of weight, still lean for the most part, but it was obvious Bucky’s lessons were having a positive effect.

As for the rest of Bucky’s unit, they came over for dinner, whenever Bucky felt like testing his culinary skills, or a game of cards. Bucky loved to cook, and to both of their surprise, Steve really enjoyed playing host. So evenings with a full house, filled with chatter and laughter, with people who knew what it was like to be a recovering vet.

There had been other vets, some who came and stayed, and some who only attended a few sessions, but the core group of them remained the same, as tight as they’d ever been. Steve never did end up accompanying Bucky to one of his meetings. He was a very private person by nature, in a lot of ways. And he didn’t want his past life as Captain America to overshadow the experiences of everyone else.

But he did have his issues, and they did need to be worked through.

While Bucky knew his recovery would forever be a work in progress, he had reached a state of equilibrium, where now, two years later, he only had a session with Dr. Callahan once every two weeks. It freed up both his and Dr. Callahan’s schedule. Which was fine, as Steve became her newest patient, travelling to her office in Midwood three times a week.

Those had been some dark days at first, the most difficult they’d had to endure, because there were a lot of things Steve needed to work through, had not been given the time to process, or ignored completely. He wasn’t comfortable with the idea of attending a VA meeting, but as he had always been artistic, art became the way he expressed himself. They ended up converting the second room on the second floor of their home into a studio for him, and for months he had poured his heart out into dark, ghastly images, filled with burning bodies, dead children, and Bucky falling from the train.
Sometimes Bucky would walk in and find him huddled on the floor, sobbing. It broke his heart, even if he knew it was a form of healing, release. He would wrap his arms around Steve, allowing him to howl his pain into his shoulder, while Sarge curled around them both, doing his job, what his heart had been born for, keeping them both safe. Steve never disassociated like Bucky did, but he did have some vicious panic attacks, and there were nights when his nightmares drew the both of them to Bucky’s kitchen, where Bucky baked, and the smell of chocolate was the salve they applied to their souls.

Steve also became very familiar with Bucky’s sledgehammer, and it was now Greg the Eighth they vented their rages on.

Some very dark days, for the both of them. But they worked through it, just like they always had, together.

But it hadn’t all been bad, and they were getting better and better with each week that passed. And their household, as small as it had been at first, had grown. Because Sarge was no longer the only dog in their life.

Steve, curious about how Bucky spent his days, and still unsure about what he was going to do with his own life now that he was no longer a soldier, had taken to meeting Bucky at the ASPCA for his shifts. Aside from Sarge, he didn’t have much experience with animals, his weak lungs and allergies making that an impossibility before. But it didn’t take long for him to understand why Bucky was so excited about his new career path, and he quickly signed up for a weekly volunteer shift of his own. Timmy was actually the one to show him the ropes and explain why certain procedures needed to be followed. While working with animals was not the perfect fit for Steve, he loved spending time with all the rescues, especially the dogs, and the shelter welcomed him with open arms.

Bucky had just wrapped up his day, and was looking for Steve, when he found him in one of the back rooms where many of the special cases were kept, kneeling in front of one of the kennels, with a look on his face Bucky had never seen before, but recognized.

“Hey,” Bucky said, crouching down beside him. “Made a friend?”

“Just saying hello,” Steve said softly. He was running the tips of his fingers over the paw the dog within had wedged through the grating. It was a midsized boxer mix of some sort, young from what Bucky could see. But also in very bad condition. He was underweight, the knobs of his spine and lines of his ribs visible beneath his coat, which was thin in some places from what had obviously been mange. Timid, hesitant, and probably a victim of abuse. But he had floppy ears, and soulful brown eyes that were staring back at Steve.
“Name’s Dodger,” Bucky read from the information card clipped to the cage. It confirmed Bucky’s initial assessment, as well as letting him know he’d been infected with heartworms and covered in fleas, his ears crusted with mites. He’d been found chained in the back lot of an abandoned crack-house for who knew how long, shivering, cold and afraid of everyone who approached him, discovered only after a concerned onlooker had placed a call to Animal Control. He had just been released from quarantine, and Bucky was scheduled to start working with him tomorrow. “Had a rough go of it so far, poor thing.” Bucky glanced back up at the card. “Little to no socialization skills, uncomfortable around people and has a tendency to bite if startled.”

“He’s a good dog,” Steve insisted, as if Bucky didn’t know, as if he hadn’t said those words over a thousand times in reference to Sarge. As if all dogs weren’t good dogs. But Bucky could see it; Steve was already in love.

“Of course he is,” Bucky assured him. “But he’s going to be a lot of work. Tons of TLC and positive reinforcement, while working on his issues.”

“I’m not afraid of hard work,” Steve muttered out of the corner of his mouth, never taking his eyes off Dodger.

“I know you’re not Stevie,” Bucky said. “But you need to know what you’re getting into. It’s a commitment, an important one, vital if he’s going to do well.”

“Yeah well, I do live with the world’s best dog trainer after all. I’m thinking to two of us might be able to manage it, together. If he’d be willing to help me.”

Bucky took another look at Dodger, and he could see it; the way his coat would be a silky brown and white, with a fluffy tail, and a strong gait once he rebuilt his muscle mass. He would be a good dog, was already a good dog, just needed the right people to understand him. A dog for Steve to spoil, and a friend for Sarge to play with, once he was ready. A lot of work, yes, but a welcome addition to their home.

Bucky rested his weight on his heels, and grew quiet, wrapping himself in that calm that Andy told him made even the most volatile of dogs trust him. He sat there and he waited, patient and still, and when Dodger finally looked at him, his slipped his own fingers over Steve’s to allow him to get his first sniff. Dodger did, hesitantly, but then turned his attention back to Steve.

“You’ve already found your person, haven’t you?” Bucky laughed softly, before he glanced over his shoulder and nodded at Timmy, who had been watching from the door the entire time. Timmy, who had finally figured out what he wanted to do with his life, using the G.I. Bill to enroll in a Veterinary
Technician program and was interning at the shelter, nodded quietly back and turned to get the paperwork started. When Bucky turned to Steve, Dodger was gently licking Steve’s fingers. “Yeah, you have, haven’t you? I gotta say, you’ve made an excellent choice.”

“Yeah?” Steve asked, looking at him with eyes that were bright and already filled with love.

“Yeah,” Bucky nodded, rising to his feet. “You stay here and get to know each other better. I’ll start on the paperwork and see about bringing this boy home with us.”

“Thank you.”

It had been a lot of work, and it took a long time, but Dodger became a welcome addition to their family. Bucky really did have a gift when it came to working with animals, and Steve knew well enough to accept his expertise in the matter, and let Bucky guide him. And Dodger was a good dog, once he knew he was safe and with a pack that would care for him, and never hurt him. Sarge helped too; he was friendly, easy-going and calm, trained not to startle, and Dodger quickly learned to follow his lead. There had been some issues they’d had to work through, food aggression mostly, as well as a tendency to become frightened during a thunderstorm. There had also been a few accidents, and Steve grew very familiar with enzymatic cleaner, but now, sixteen months later, Dodger was a beautiful and healthy dog, energetic enough to accompany them on their morning runs and Saturday hikes, who loved to chase squirrels just as much as Sarge did.

There was also Lucy-Fur, the only female member of their furry family; a long, white haired angora cat with striking blue eyes. The matching blue eyes also meant she carried the mutation so common to white cats, and was deaf in both ears. Bucky had taken one look at her, read her information card, and decided right then and there to bring her home. Steve hadn’t said a word as Bucky explained his reasons why, just nodded with a smile, and the next day drove with Bucky to Petco so they could pick up everything they’d need to spoil her rotten.

She was a tiny cat, who relied on the vibrations around her to let her know when anyone was near, but she quickly became the queen of their household, ruling it with her fuzzy paw. Dodger could take or leave her, but Sarge adored her, and if he wasn’t at Bucky’s side, he could usually be found curled up in a sunbeam, his tail thumping happily while Lucy-Fur groomed his ears.

Somehow they had done it, built a life they never would have been able to imagine when they were younger, but that surpassed anything they could have possibly hoped for. Bucky cooked and tended to their garden, and Steve did the laundry and cleaned Bucky’s quirky little house, adding his own touches and keepsakes to it, so it became *their* home, and even quirkier than it had been before.
And now they were going to do something they had never done, and actually take a vacation, the first either of them had ever been on in their lives. Or well, not a vacation exactly…

The past October, Bucky and Steve had gone back to the Appalachian trail, the first trail they had ever hiked together. And they ate the lunch Bucky had prepared, just like they did that first day, on the same exact hill, this time with Sarge and Dodger lying at their feet. They had finished their food, and Bucky was once again taking in the view, remembering the feeling of peace he had felt on that day, and feeling it even more deeply in his bones this time. Steve had been quiet for the past few moments, lost in his own contemplations, Bucky assumed. When Bucky turned to smile at him, Steve was staring down into the valley beneath.

But he was holding his arm out, his fingers outstretched. And in his palm, he held a small, black velvet box.

“Stevie?” Bucky asked.

“We couldn’t back then,” Steve said softly, never taking his eyes from the fields of green below. “But I always wanted to. It used to be a fantasy of mine, the two of us together like that. But we couldn’t, not back then.” Steve blinked a single, slow blink, and then finally turned his face towards Bucky’s, to stare into his eyes.

“And I loved you so much, and it killed me when I lost you,” he swallowed. “I love you even more now, more than I ever thought it was possible to love anyone. And I don’t want to waste another second of our lives without you knowing that. But we can now. So I’m asking you, James Buchanan Barnes, if you’ll do me the honor of becoming my husband, so the rest of the world will always know what a lucky son of a bitch I am, and that you have always been the best part of me.”

Bucky didn’t answer him. Instead he lunged forward, wrapped Steve in his arms, and kissed him senseless.

“Is that a yes?” Steve asked when they broke apart for air, tears in both of their eyes.

“Yes, yes, yes, you punk,” Bucky laughed, wings in his eyes, on his shoulders, soaring from his heart. “It’s a yes.”

“Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”
That had been a little over three months ago. And in spite of Steve’s words, they had mutually decided to keep their engagement a secret for now. They were things they needed to take care of first. Bucky had his exam to pass, and Steve his own finals he needed to study for. After months of trying to figure out what he wanted to do with his life, and some private conversations with Mel, of all people, Steve had decided to enroll in college and pursue a masters degree in nursing, with a focus on pediatric oncology.

“I spent a lot of time in hospitals as a kid, Buck,” Steve had whispered to him the night he had told Bucky what he was planning to do. “And yeah the doctors were great. But it was the nurses, after you and my mom, who always made it bearable. They do great work, they always did. And there are kids out there suffering from cancer Bucky. I think I want to help them in their fight.’”

A tough career choice, but if this was the battle Steve wanted to fight now, then there would be no one better, more determined or understanding to help those children. It would take him a while to complete his degree, but that was all right. They had plenty of time (Bucky hadn’t said anything to Steve or Dr. Callahan about it, but had memories now, of conversations overheard, when his handlers and the HYDRA scientists who worked on him had commented on how he was not aging at a normal rate, in spite of the time he spent in cryo. And Steve didn’t look a day over the twenty-five he had been when he’d agreed to be injected with Erskine’s serum. Looked younger than he ever had, in fact. Bucky had no idea how long they would live, but he assumed they were going to have plenty of time together to figure it out).

There was also the fact that while Steve was no longer Captain America, there was still a lot of interest in his life. And Bucky’s life, his privacy had been violated enough.

So they hadn’t told anyone about their plans.

To celebrate Bucky finally earning his certification, tonight Steve was going to take him to their favorite steakhouse in Brooklyn, where they would laugh and talk and just be. They would spend the rest of the evening in their bedroom, where Steve would slide into Bucky’s body and Bucky would beg him for more, more, always more.

Tomorrow morning, they would get up early, and load their bags into the back of Betty and Paige’s minivan, so they could be driven to the airport. Their wonderful and wacky neighbors thought they were just going on vacation, and were more than happy to look after Lucy-Fur while they were away. Sarge and Dodger would be joining them in first class on their flight to Las Vegas, where they both were looking forward to being married by an Elvis impersonator. Then they would take another flight to the Grand Canyon, a place they had both dreamed about travelling to in their youth, where they would spend the next four weeks not on vacation, but on their honeymoon. Four blissful weeks of just the two of them together, more battered and scarred than they had been back then, but stronger than they’d ever been, and more in love too.
When they came back, they would host a dinner and let everyone know. They knew they would end up getting shit for it, but for now they wanted to keep this one thing to themselves. They’d deserve it after all, after everything they had overcome to get here.

“Ready to finally make an honest man outta me, Stevie?” Bucky asked when they had broken apart from yet another kiss, both Sarge and Dodger happily panting up at them.

“I’ve never wanted anything more in my life Bucky,” Steve smiled at him.

And this time, he wasn’t lying.

FIN

Chapter End Notes

We have finally reached the end of A Year in the Life of Sarge’s Person. Before Bucky and Sarge (and Steve, Dodger, Lucy-Fur and all of the other wonderful people now in Bucky’s life) say good-bye, there are a few people I would like to thank.

First off, I once again want to thank the Mods for this Captain America’s Reverse Big Bang. This was the first time I have ever participated in a Big Bang of this size, and it was an unbelievably amazing and fun experience. And that was all thanks to the Mods. They were easy to work with, always quick to respond to any questions I may have had, and supportive throughout the entire process. These individuals devote an unbelievable amount of time and effort into this fest, and if anyone deserves any kudos, it’s all of them. Thank you so much for everything; I had a lot of fun participating, and I hope to do it again next year.

(Also, please make sure to check out the rest of the stories in this year’s Big Bang. There are some AMAZING ones already posted.)
Next, I once again need to thank my artist, the lovely TT_Angst_Queen. This story’s Bucky and Sarge would never have come to be if not for their lovely artwork **points to banner and picture at the top of this story** so really all of this, including Sarge’s turkey stealing, is their fault. I had just come off of writing a really long series, and had been going through a bit of a creative slump. Your beautiful art inspired me to pick up my pen (laptop?) once more, and start writing again. I can’t thank you enough for that. I hope, if nothing else, the results brought a smile to your face.

There is my lovely Katheryne, whom I love and adore, and was also unbelievably supportive while I was writing this. She’s stood by me through a very difficult spring and summer, and I hope everyone has someone like her in their life, because she is one of the best.

And of course, I can’t forget my amazing beta, Merry_rf. Guys, I can’t tell you how amazing Merry is, not only as a beta but as a person as well. Merry is funny, compassionate, kind and supportive, and provided so much feedback and advice during parts of this story I was struggling with. She took my lump of coal and polished it into a diamond. Thank you seems like such a paltry thing to say, but it’s all I’ve got. (That and a million, billion hugs.) Merry is a writer as well, and a damned good one, so you should definitely check out their work when you get a chance.

Lastly, I want to thank each and every one of you. There were some familiar faces as I was posting the chapters of this story, as well as so many new ones. (And so many wonderful and beloved friends – I hope you know who you are.) Some of you were even kind enough to leave a comment on every chapter, which never failed to make me smile. But whether you commented every day, only once, or not at all, I can’t thank you enough for taking a chance on me and this story. I hope Bucky’s adventures with his beautiful, brilliant, loving, and sometimes very naughty puppy (and no, we are not talking about Steve **wink**) ended up being worth it for you in the end. Bucky has come a long way in this past year, and he still has a very long way to go. But you’ll usually be able to find him in the kitchen of his quirky little house in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, looking FABULOUS (yes, even while he cooks, just ask Steve), with his dog by his side, baking some chocolate chocolate-chip muffins for the love of his life, who loves him right back. =)

With that said **passes out platter of still warm chocolate chocolate-chip muffins** until the next time. =)

**hugshugshugs**

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