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**Strays**

by [snarklyboojum](http://archiveofourown.org/works/7907179)

**Summary**

After finding himself alone for the first time in decades, the Winter Soldier learns how to be a person again. Mostly through caring for an orphaned kitten, countless rounds of YouTube roulette, and stalking Captain America.

Or: Bucky Barnes, accidental millennial.

**Notes**

This follows the MCU timeline through the end of Age Of Ultron but goes sideways from there. Certain elements from Civil War were integrated after its release, so spoilers for that.

See the end of the work for more notes.

There’s a sound.

It’s small, high-pitched, and so blatantly sad it stops the soldier in his tracks when he hears it. The
muscles in his legs lock and his jaw clenches so hard it creaks when he turns to look into the darkness of the alley. No one else seems to hear it; even Rogers continues to amble politely through the crowd, empty canvas bags swinging from his giant shoulders, oblivious that his tail has let him go. The soldier’s not worried; a man like that’s easy to find once you know what to look for. And he’s certain that he does.

The sound comes again, plaintive and beseeching, and the soldier has no choice but to follow it. The skin at the back of his neck tingles, exposed, and he has to force his shoulders out of their protective hunch around his ears. There was clearly no one else in the alley – just the strange shadows bouncing off the walls from the neon signs and a dumpster parked next to a service entrance – but he felt sure something was there. Something was going to reach out and –

“Holy shit!”

– something was touching his leg, shit shit, something was on him, some Nazi fucking thing was crawling up his back and –

Laughing? Somewhere under the quivering branch Morita was laughing behind his fist, damn near choking by the sound of it, trying to keep it quiet so the troops loitering below them didn’t hear and come a calling.

And he can’t move, can’t even turn his head to see what the fuck’s got him because if he does the snow blind they’d spent ten minutes building is going to collapse. He whispers, as loud as he can: “Morita! Morita, help me, I swear to fuck!”

The soft weight continues up his back – tap tap tap please God not a spider do they come this big Jesus – and settles right between his shoulder blades. His hair moves – daintily, too faint for just the wind – and the goddamn spider-thing was sniffing him oh god he was gonna get eaten in a tree Steve was never going to let him live this down.

“Morita!”

Morita – helpful sort that he was – leans until he’s in Bucky’s line of sight, eyes watering, just barely holding it together enough to whisper back. “Looks like you made a new friend, Sarge.”

There’s the faintest of vibrations through the heavy layers of his coat and a puff of warm air on the back of his neck and...purring? The spider-thing was purring in his ear. There was a – a goddamn cat had crawled up a tree in the middle of a goddamn mountain and decided the random sniper it found there would make a good napping spot.

It paws at his shoulders, repetitively, purring like the jeep after Dum Dum’s had a go at it.

Bucky wiggles as much as he can, the leaves from the branches above smacking him wetly in the face. He tries blowing through the side of his mouth at the thing but it only snuggles closer. It meows at him, loudly.

Further down the hill one of the Hydra fucks turns and looks directly into the tree line.

Bucky freezes. The cat licks his ear.

He can actually feel his blood pressure rising. Below him Morita’s either hyperventilating or dying, but at least he’s doing it fucking silently.
Hydra Fuck #1 turns away again, shaking his head at Hydra Fuck #2. Bucky kicks the tree trunk as much as he dares; a little cascade of snow falls below, hopefully right into Morita’s stupid laughing face.

“You are the worst lookout ever. Get this fucking Nazi cat off of me!”

“Aw come on, don’t be like that, Sarge. He’s not hurting anybody. Just wants a little attention, that’s all. Besides, when was the last time you got a little tongue?”

“I am heavily armed, private – “

“I would if I could, Sarge, but I can’t reach you all the way up there, not without climbing up myself. And that branch can barely hold you let alone you, me, and your boyfriend.”

“I hate you. I hate you both.”

He tilts the scope a millimeter to the left of the Hydra Fucks, until their general’s steady in the crosshairs. He was supposed to wait for Steve and the others to signal their positions but the wind was right, he’d done the math, and fuck this fucking cat tree bullshit.

It’s a beautiful shot, clear between the eyes, and the general’s hat doesn’t even fall off as he topples backward into the snow. The kickback comes with the bonus of knocking the cat off his shoulders; its claws scrabble at his coat but can’t get a grip in the dense material. It falls out of the tree and straight onto Morita –

“Shit!”

– who jerks out of the way and loses the radio over the side of the hill. Bucky aims again (so long Fuck #1) and again and again and –

– again. He flinches and loses his balance – not out of a tree but onto his knees at the end of an alley, the smell of rotting garbage overpowering both the clean scent of that faraway forest and the abrasive grunt of gunpowder. The soldier half expects his panting breathes to leave mist in the air.

It seems that while his brain was shuffling through the dregs of memory and reminiscing about how oddly textured cats’ tongues were, the soldier’s body had crawled behind one of the nastiest dumpsters he’s ever seen. There’s not enough room for any substantial light to make it through, but even in the murky darkness it’s clear there’s something terrified and small flinching away from him. He stretches his arm into the gap between the dumpster and the wall and the tiny thing tries to actually climb up the wall, claws scraping the bricks in its desperation to get away from him.

He wedges further into the dampness, the plates recalibrating to extend his reach, and nabs the back of its neck when it tries to lunge past. The pressure sensors indicate the grip shouldn’t be too hard but the animal mewls and growls at him anyway. Some quiet thing rumbling around in the back of his head makes him tuck the animal close against his chest, cradling it between his palms. It sits there, shaking, huddled and pathetic, resigned to its fate.

The soldier slumps against the wall and marvels at the tiny creature. “Where’s your mama, little cat?”

The kitten flinches at his voice – rough around the edges, too full of screaming to sing – and hisses from behind the cage of his hands. It leans into the warmth of his body, purring phlegmily; its heart is beating so fast the soldier can feel it in his fingers.
He looks around at the empty alley full of trash and refuse and no other signs of life. Brooklyn is no place for something so small to be alone. The kitten will come back to base with him.

+++

Of course, base was a … loose term. Back when the soldier had first begun monitoring Steve Rogers he’d observed a three block radius and found a surprising number of Hydra lackeys staked out in the tiny apartment across the street. It was simply a matter of moments to ensure he was the only one watching Steve. Quite nice of them really, to have it all set up and ready to go. One of the computers even had a few games on it, to the soldier’s frustration; it was harder to beat the agent’s score in GALAGA than it had been to dispose of his corpse.

Upon returning the soldier sets the kitten down on the floor of the main room while performing a perimeter check. Once the alarms have been reset and he’s satisfied nothing interesting’s happened in his absence he makes himself comfortable on the floor with his back to the wall.

The cat’s clumsily licking a paw clean when it notices the soldier watching. It squeaks and then runs the hell away from him as fast as its little legs will carry it. It disappears under the couch in a flurry of dust and angry sounds.

The soldier waits, silently. It’s a skill he’s very practiced in.

After only eleven minutes punctuated by the occasional wailing growl the kitten slowly makes its way out from under the far side of the couch. It hisses at him to stay put and the soldier complies, keeping his eyes downcast and shoulders slumped to make his silhouette appear smaller.

The cat growl-whines again but slinks off to explore the edges of the room. It glares back at him every so often. The soldier maintains his nonthreatening body language. It’s good practice.

After every inch of the room has been sniffed – except for a three foot diameter around the soldier - the kitten sits and curls its tail around its feet. The soldier’s heart stutters when their eyes meet and the kitten meows plaintively instead of hissing. He keeps his breathing steady until the feeling goes away.

The sound of a door opening startles them both badly. It’s just the Captain returning with bags full of groceries, the clang of keys in the bowl by the door tinny over the laptop’s speakers. It’s the third time this week’s he’s had to replenish his pantry; surely the benefits of having a car with decent trunk space outweigh the difficulties of finding a parking space in New York, let alone dealing with all the cabs and tourists and insane pedestrians. Of course with the way Steve eats he’d have to go for a damn truck to haul all the protein bars alone. Maybe even something with a trailer hitch.

Though it’s a good thing, he supposes, that Rogers’ appetite is finally catching up with the rest of him. Scarcity and rationing was a terrible thing for someone with an enhanced metabolism. And smaller men were never as hungry as they should be.

Movement on the floor shakes him out of his thoughts. The cat inches a closer, hesitantly padding one tiny paw after the other. The tip of its scraggly tail is a nervous exclamation point. It glances up to his face every few steps until it reaches the toe of his boot.

The soldier is very careful not to move.
The cat sniffs his pants leg with a quiet *mmrr* sound. It paws the air until the soft weight makes contact with the fabric, then it looks up at him and repeats the noise.

“What?”

The cat flinches and scurries back at the sound of his voice, its ears flattened. It makes a different noise, louder and more aggressive. Hisses again. Clearly, the soldier fucked up somewhere.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what you want.” He settles slowly down on the ground again, extending a hand palm up.

The kitten stares at him for a long moment, eyes bouncing from his hand to his face and back again, but it approaches him in fits and starts. It sniffs his fingers, and the soldier doesn’t realize the metal could frighten it further until it’s too late to swap it out for the other hand. But the kitten just sniffs at him daintily before rubbing its cheek along his fingers. The soldier wiggles them experimentally and the kitten immediately ducks its head so the space between its ears is being rubbed. Its eyes are closed and it *mrrs* at him again.

The soldier has to remind himself to breathe.

The cat licks at the crease of his thumb and then starts to chew at it with tiny teeth, its paws kneading at the soldier’s wrist. Its stomach gargles.

Oh. So *that’s* what it wanted.

Right. Rationing was hell on a man’s metabolism.

The soldier raids the base’s kitchen for something edible. He’d been working his way through the supply of protein bars he’d stashed in his pack, but he was fairly certain they weren’t appropriate for cats. Plus, they tasted absolutely terrible. He’d seen a leftover sandwich on the top shelf of the fridge that still looked okay; the meat from that could do in a pinch, right?

He shreds some of the lunchmeat – turkey by the smell – and sets it on the floor. The kitten zooms in and eats it fast, making little *num num* sounds as it chews. Absently, the soldier eats the rest of the piece so that it doesn’t go to waste. It’s salty, a little slimy, but so much better than those fucking protein bars. He devours the rest of the sandwich in three bites, soggy bread and all, and his stomach rumbles at him for more.

It’s almost embarrassing; he’s been staying at the base for a week and hasn’t even bothered to evaluate the food supply. It just… hadn’t seemed important up until now. What was he missing out on?

The fridge is despairingly empty, other than a few bags of something sliced – salami, and practically ambrosia – hidden at the back of a little drawer and a half-empty box of fried rice. The soldier breaks off chunks and eats it with his hands.

The kitten’s licking its chops and watching him eat with rapturous attention. He reaches down slowly, careful to broadcast his every move, and scoops it up around the belly. It flinches a little when its legs leave the floor but settles once the soldier lets it go on the counter.

The cabinets are just as empty as the refrigerator except for a few dusty cans of something claiming to be beef stew – “a hearty meal!” according to the label. It smells all right when he pops his index finger through the lid and the gravy doesn’t taste too bad. He pries the lid all the way off and scrounges a spoon out of one of the drawers. Stirring gets rid of the bit of grease congealed over the top, and it’s all good from there.
The kitten’s looking at him again.

“This is good. Try some.”

He dollops out a bit of meat and sauce onto the counter between his own bites, the kitten eating enthusiastically until it’s so full it’s just sniffing at the food and curled around its feet, sleepily blinking at him and burping. He scrapes the last bit of carrot out of the can, licking the spoon clean, and watches it – her, he thinks. The soldier’s not always a good judge of these things, but he’s pretty sure the cat’s female.

She’s purring, much louder than she had in the alley. He offers her his hand again, the right one this time, and she leans into his touch. The soldier hadn’t realized how small the kitten actually was under all the ratty fur. He knew, of course, he wasn’t an idiot, but he didn’t comprehend. Curled up like this her whole body fits in the palm of his hand.

Warmth slides down from the soldier’s neck to his chest, settling in the heavy weight of his full belly. His eyelids feel heavy and his face is doing something he can’t identify. He takes a deep breath and rubs the inside of the kitten’s dirty ear. She shakes her head, sneezes, and leans into his hand again.

It feels good. That’s what the warmth is. It’s good.

+ + +

That night he learns that kittens should not eat beef stew. Also that a litter box is essential equipment. Ugh.

It’s not a pleasant experience for anyone involved, really. The food bothers his stomach, too, but at least he can flush away the aftermath. Their meals will have to be more properly planned in the future.

He cleans up as best he can – only gagging once or twice – and settles in to rest next to the surveillance equipment, the kitten curled next to him on the couch. The next morning small red bumps have appeared along his side with even smaller black insects hopping up and down his arm.

It’s a small consolation that the kitten’s as miserable as he is. “You couldn’t have picked the other arm to cuddle up to, huh?”

The itching drives him to distraction before Rogers is even finished with his ridiculous pre-dawn jog. Something has to be done.

+ + +

The internet’s a goddamn godsend; honestly, he has no idea how people got around without it in the early days. Typing “cat supplies nyc” into the search bar gives him over five thousand results, everything from grooming boutiques to hole-in-the-wall places selling homemade treats. It’s easier to be ignored in large public places so the Petco looks to be the best choice. He can even cut through the park to skip some of the busier streets and save some walking time.
It’s a lot. The soldier’s willing to admit he might have made a bad decision about five seconds after stepping inside.

The store is one overwhelmingly large room full to bursting with animals and their owners, the bright lights shining down onto unnecessarily colorful packages of food and kibble and whatever the hell veterinarian approved diet mix was. There’s three aisles of medicine and he has no idea if any of it will kill the motherfucking fleas making him crazy. And the kitten was so small – what if the poison hurt her, too?

While he’s trying to understand the fine print on the back of a box of flea collars a dog – a big, dark, toothy dog – starts pulling at its leash and barking, nails scraping against the concrete in its bid to escape the foam corral its owner is trying to force it back into. He feels the kitten stiffen in his pocket and try to merge into his stomach straight through the lining of the sweatshirt.

The dog is looking right at the soldier. Barking. Moving closer. Teeth.

They chase you in the snow if you don’t do what you’re told. Barking. Growling. Teeth.

They chase you anyway.

“Sir?”

There’s a woman at his side, careful, carefully not touching him.

There hadn’t been women with the dogs. At least not like this, with a scarf on her head and knowing eyes. They had come later or perhaps before. The soldier isn’t sure.

“Sir? I’m going to need you to move away from the dog pen, please.” The woman gestures to their left and waits for him to walk away first, clearly anticipating he’ll follow her orders. He does – the hint of authority hitting his spine like a shock, echoing through his shaking limbs.

He cups his hand over the wriggling lump in his pocket. The kitten burrows into the pressure.

The woman’s wearing a red polo and her nametag reads KIMA with a smaller MANAGER engraved below it. Her smile is guarded but pleasant on the surface; it’s the look of someone who knows this is a potentially dangerous situation and has no choice but to engage. The soldier’s seen it before, sometimes even reflecting in the shiny barrel of his own weapon. It’s painful to identify it under the thin veneer of polite servitude she forces to the forefront.

The soldier hadn’t realized it before, but surely she’s a survivor of one disaster or another. The alien attack was only two years ago. And who knows what catastrophes befell New Yorkers before that.

He didn’t mean to scare her. He didn’t want to scare anyone. All he wanted was some damn supplies. He knows he’s not right yet but he’s trying, he’s trying.

Kima joins him a few aisles over, this one full of plastic skulls and plants. For fish? Fish. Or maybe lizards. “Thank you. It’s an obedience training session; it’s best if we don’t distract them too much.”

The soldier’s mind stops. After twelve seconds of blinking on its own, his body does, too.

Obedience training.

“Sir? Are you all right? Was there something I could assist you with today?”
The kitten shifts against his palm, kicking his thumb through the fabric.

Not –

Yes. There was a reason he voluntarily entered this seventh circle of capitalist hell and it wasn’t this.

“Cat food. Stuff. Cat stuff. Where?” And he’s regressed to monosyllables again. Goddamn this fucking place.

Kima blinks and tilts her head, her smile angling a millimeter lower. “Aisle six, I’ll show you. Was there a particular brand you were looking for?”

The echo-memory settles back into the foggy depths it came from and the soldier feels his cheeks getting hot; it’s ridiculous, the show he must’ve made. He ducks his chin so she can’t see his face behind his hair.

She stops in yet another colorful aisle smelling strongly of yeast and dander, like the rest of the store. “Here we are. Did you want some recommendations? What kind of cat do you have?”

There were different types of cats? Did that make a difference? The soldier slowly reaches into the pocket of his hoodie and tugs the kitten free. She puts up a fight, digging in until there’s a string attached to her front claws from where she’s refused to let go of the lining. He carefully unwinds it from under the scratchysoft pad of her foot.

Kima’s face crumbles into something much softer and far more relaxed. She makes a noise that’s somewhere between an awww and an ohhh. She pats the kitten lightly on the head with one finger.

The cat shies away and cuddles into Soldier’s hand, batting at Kima from behind the safety of his curled fingers. When Kima seems sufficiently scared off, the kitten curls into his palm to chew on the meat of his thumb.

The guarded look disappears from Kima’s expression. “She’s adorable. And that explains the dogs, I guess. Did you find her outside?”

The soldier shifts, grunting. The kitten’s fur is a little matted and dirty. He never thought about what she must look like to other people. Just that she was healthy – that was why he came to this godforsaken shithole of a building in the first place.

He looks up to find Kima has worked her way within grabbing distance, closer than anyone’s been since the banks of the Potomac. She’s let her defenses down enough to enter his kill zone and – perhaps even more surprising – he’s done the same. They’ve both let themselves become so vulnerable because of a motherfucking cat.

The space between his shoulder blades goes tense again and he takes a large step back. His heels bump into the bottom shelf behind him.

There’s a tiny pinprick of pain from the kitten’s teeth breaking the skin. He transfers her to his left hand where the only thing she can bother is the glove and rubs between her ears with his thumb until the sting goes away. Her whole head moves side to side with the motion and she flops over onto her back to wrestle with him instead.

Kima’s smiling still. “She looks like she’s pretty much weaned, so that’s good. And she’s comfortable with you holding her, which is another good sign. Were her eyes gummy when you found her? What about her ears?”
“Uh. Smelly. A little. Her ears, I mean. Her eyes are okay. I think. But there’s fleas.” The soldier holds the kitten up for Kima to see, just in case he missed something in his earlier check. He forces his shoulders and neck into a submissive pose, so as not to worry her again. It’s harder now that the urge to obey has faded.

Kima looks at him shrewdly, a little less professional, a little less on edge. Her voice lowers a whole octave. “Look, I’m going to be honest. Caring for a stray kitten this age is a lot of work. Getting her healthy and keeping her that way can be expensive. I know… I can tell you just want to help, but there are options available if it’s too much. The store works with a really nice no-kill shelter. They bring in animals to adopt on the weekends. I can give you their number? She’s cute, it’ll be real easy to adopt her out.”

He’s painfully aware of how he must appear to her, with the shadows under his eyes and layers of clothes. He hasn’t been maintaining himself as well as he should have. But he’s trying. And he’s not going to abandon some poor orphan cat into someone else’s hands. What if they mistreat her? What if she’s adopted by some asshole kid who pulls her ears? What if she’s alone forever?

He’s not going to let her down. He can do this.

The soldier squares his shoulders and looks Kima in the eye. “I have money. Whatever it takes.”

Kima meets his eyes for a minute, then nods, a small smile quirking up the side of her mouth. Her eyes have somehow softened and warmed all at once. “All right, then. Let’s get you two set up.”

+++

In the end the soldier just buys one of everything Kima hands him, including two tote bags to lug it all around in. There’s wipes to get the dark crud out of her ears and (thank fuck) flea shampoo that won’t irritate an animal so young. Special food for her little tummy and a dish to hold it. The necessary litter and box. A tiny scratching post. Some feathers on a string. Little plastic balls with bells inside. Toys to keep her happy.

The soldier never thought about buying her toys.

He pays in cash and nods at Kima when she waves goodbye.

+++

The soldier gives the kitten a bath in the sink. She is less than thrilled but he’ll take her glaring pathetically and crying for an hour over fleabites any day. Once she calms down he’s sure she’ll agree. She doesn’t seem to mind the rubdown with the dry washcloth afterward, anyway.

Once her fur is as fluffy as it should be they settle into the chair he’d positioned for prime observation of Rogers apartment. The kitten – newly fresh-smelling and so very soft, tummy full with a scoop of age-appropriate mush – falls asleep curled in his lap, the soldier’s thumb rubbing gently and repetitively down the length of her back. His mind drifts a little, watching the streetlights reflect off the darkness of Roger’s windows.
The kitten needs a name. Names are important; he’s learned that from his interactions with Steve, if nothing else.

The soldier picks her up in one hand so her limp little arms dangle between his fingers. She *mrrs* grumpily but doesn’t bother opening her eyes. He takes a good long look at her, trying to figure out what – who – she reminds him of. She’s a small scrap of a thing, ginger-golden to the core, fur going a little frizzy around the tips. And she was so very brave, not taking any shit from anyone no matter how much bigger than her they were. And, of course, she was dumb enough to hitch her wagon to someone like him.

He glances back across the street. Well. The similarities there are obvious. But even he knows that would be really, *really* weird.

There’s a glimmer of something else in his head: another echo-memory, too far away to see the shape of. It leaves behind the taste of sugared apples on his tongue and a name that settles into his heart like a stone in the water.

“Sarah.”

But no, that’s not right. Something about offering up that name doesn’t settle, the ripples expanding further and further away. It ain’t right.

He rocks his wrist a little bit, the kitten’s limbs swinging back and forth. The warmth spreads through him again, tugging up the corner of his mouth. "Shitcan, how about that for a name?"

She opens one eye to glare at him. The soldier sets her back down in his lap and fidgets until he’s comfortable in the chair with head resting against the back, scrunched down enough to block out the streetlights but still see them reflect off Steve’s window.

“Ginger. How’d you like that? Like Ginger Rodgers. And the color.”

The cat flips onto her side and burrows into the space between his arm and his stomach. He rubs his thumb along her spine, slowly, slowly. Soft.

“Natashenka.” Not quite. Close, but not right yet.


Her ears twitch and swivel his way. She blinks at him, sleepily, and rubs her paws against his belly in apparent bliss. The purring tickles.

The soldier runs back through what he just said. Of course. Of fucking course. Of all the names in the world it’s that one she picks.

But she deserves the right to choose for herself. He’s certainly not going to force anything onto her she doesn’t want, even a name.

He’d been called a lot of things over the years, himself, by handlers and scientists and commanding officers. *Soldat* – while certainly the most common and potentially devastating – had just been one callsign of many. *Subject* was his least favorite.

Steve had called him Bucky. And it felt *good*, which had been confusing at the time but something the soldier associates now with warmth in his chest and soft things in his hands.
There wasn’t anyone left with high enough clearance to give him orders anymore, and he wouldn’t listen even if there was. He could choose a name for himself if he wanted. Close his eyes and pick one out of the phonebook or from one of the other dozen languages and places he’d been to.

But. He supposes the kitten has a point – there’s only one that feels right. On the cusp of sleep like this he can acknowledge that it’s really more of a reclaiming than a choosing. The name was his and he was going to take it back whether it wanted him or not.

If the kitten wants to be called Carter, than Carter it is. His eyelids slide shut and he lets himself sink into the calm rumble of purring on his stomach, sleep stealing around the edges until it has him where it wants him.

+ + +

If the pet store taught the soldier – Bucky, he was Bucky now, he had to try to remember, just try. If the pet store taught Bucky anything it was that if he wasn’t careful he could very easily attract the wrong kind of attention in public. Also to always carry adequate space for supplies, but some lessons are more valuable than others.

He’d scavenged anonymous clothing and had been careful of his body language, but that’s clearly not enough to curb any lapses in training around civilians. (Kima had gotten his number like that.) It’s not that he plans to spend that much time away from base but he can’t very well lock himself inside and never leave; it’s tempting, but ultimately not very practical.

So local reconnaissance is necessary.

He picks his time and his perch carefully, waiting until Steve’s sequestered safely in Manhattan on one of his frequent trips to Stark’s gaudy tower. There’s a brownstone just a few blocks away from Steve’s apartment with the perfect vantage point of the neighborhood’s busiest street. He makes himself comfortable on the highest step, taking notes on what the men of similar age and ethnicity to his physical appearance look like, how they move, and what they say to one another. No one notices him watching, or if they do they ignore him in that particular way all denizens of big cities tend to become immune to weird shit. He fills page after page of the little book until a pattern emerges.

- Long hair, sometimes unkempt, pulled into a bun or topknot.
- Thin pants, denim material, leaving little to the imagination. Damn.
- Wide variety in color, texture, style, often reusing popular fashion trends from prev decades. Why.
- Cell phones, visible and used frequently.
- Bicycles. (NOTE: GET ONE.)
- Poor vision no longer stigmatized. Glasses cool YN?
- Lots of coffee. Travel mugs or paper cups from Starbucks place. Often looks guilty for drinking, obv derive pleasure from doing so. Unknown as to why. Investigate further? Why is there one every two blocks if no one wants it there?
- Facial hair a necessity; beards more common than not.
- Multiple layers or lots of skin showing. No in between. Weather does not appear a factor.

New York’s changed while he’s been gone. Hell, the whole world’s changed. A few short decades
ago a man would’ve got punched walking down the street with his pants cut that way, let alone get
smiled at by pretty girls.

Style trends are weird. At least this decade looked more comfortable than all those polyester suits in
the seventies; Bucky’d hated that. And the soft fabrics were also more pleasing to the eye than the
asymmetry popular in the eighties. Before that’s a blur of thin cotton and sweating through the sharp
lines of a dress uniform. Bucky tries not to think about it.

Still. It should be fairly simple to integrate into popular society if this was what he had to work with.
And it clearly needed to happen sooner rather than later – none of the pretty girls smiled at him. Even
the pretty boys ignored him, all looking forward or down at phones that had been silent a moment
before. It was a lot like they avoided eye contact with the homeless man in the shadows of the deli on
the opposite corner. He was invisible because they didn’t want to see him, not that they didn’t notice
he was there.

Bucky makes a list of necessary supplies, drops a fifty in the man’s cup, and googles the best places
to go shopping in the city.

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He quickly learns that he prefers the dusty thrift stores in the outer boroughs to the garishly trendy
shops along the touristy streets; mostly because while the staff in each would leave you alone when
asked, the former were much less manic about doing so than the latter. It takes him all afternoon but
eventually Bucky purchases the staples of a new wardrobe. It’s a near thing but he somehow keeps
from swallowing his tongue when he sees the cost of a pair of jeans.

The bike shops are even worse. (Honestly, if he wanted to spend that much money he’d just buy a
damn car.) The first place he goes in wants him to ride some vaguely bike-shaped *machine* to
measure his biking needs. He glares at the “cycling technician” and walks right back out the door.
What Bucky needs are two wheels and a frame to put them in and that’s *it*. None of this fancy
ridiculous bullshit.

It takes him three more tries to find an out of the way place selling refurbished “city bikes” that meet
his requirements and don’t cost an arm and a leg – Bucky’s already lost one of those, thanks. It’s run
by a man without a nametag that asks him to “just call me Kurt, dude.” He shows Bucky how to
adjust the seat and perform routine maintenance to keep the bike running smoothly. Kurt offers a
hand to shake after ringing up Bucky’s purchase, and Bucky only hesitates a moment before taking
it. Aside from petting and caring for Carter, it’s the first nonviolent physical contact he’s had since
pulling Steve from the river. He splurges on a double scoop of cookies and cream ice cream from the
shop next door to celebrate.

The final phase of Operation Blend In is the easiest by far. The stubble’s practically permanent on his
chin and his hair’s already long enough to pull into a small bun at the back of his head. An hour of
copying the top-rated YouTube videos reveals his hands are adept at more than just knife work; it’s
easy to pull all the errant strands together, though he prefers to leave a few hanging on either side of
his face. There had been men on the street with strands of color dyed in, and even more had the hair
under the knot shaved away. Bucky thinks he’ll save that for later in case he needs to change up the
camouflage a little.

The ability to choose feels exquisite.
Overall Bucky likes the look. He can keep the combat boots and it’s easy to hide bits of gear in plain sight. The bun keeps the length of hair out of his face and away from any potential enemy’s hands. Once layered with a new-old sweater and jeans he likes it even more. It’s deliberately casual, as though he understands the effort of dressing extravagantly but ultimately values comfort over style. Though sometimes achieving both if he chooses the right color palette.

He attracts just the right amount of attention biking down the street. It feels both familiar and completely new. Catching glimpses of himself in shop windows sends a flutter through his chest.

Carter greets his return each day by rubbing her whole body against his ankles, twining and meowing until he has no choice but to pick her up if he wants to move without falling. Claw marks on the windowsill imply she spends most of her time waiting and watching for him there – and ignoring the perfectly good cat bed and scratching post combo he wasted thirty bucks on. She curls into the sink when he sets her on the bathroom counter to administer her eardrops and cries pitifully until Bucky gives her another proper cuddle. She only really quiets down when they’re settled together on the couch and she’s too busy purring to make any other noise.

Bucky’s… Well, he’s not worried, but he’s pretty sure cats are supposed to be more independent than this. Aren’t they? He supposes she could be needy for his attention because she was abandoned so young but what if it was something more serious? He’d forgotten to get her toys, for fuck’s sake, it’s not like he’s an expert.

The internet has a lot to say about kitten developmental stages. It’s unfortunately easy to get distracted – there are even more websites devoted to stray cat care than there are to stores in New York – and he loses hours reading page after page about the process of socializing strays to become comfortable living in a home. It appears to depend almost entirely on increasing the animal’s comfort and trust through positive reinforcement. If a cat has become feral then it will behave defensively and have no desire for human contact.

Bucky decides he doesn’t like the word feral.

He watches Carter’s little body curl in anticipation as her eyes follow the ripple of light reflecting off his arm. A twitch of his wrist has her on her feet, paws batting at the couch cushions. He shifts again, but this time it sets the plates to readjusting with a muffled clank that echoes in the quiet of the base. Carter falls over backwards, scaring herself, and pounce-runs back to wedge herself in the darkness between his crossed legs. She knocks the laptop askew and steps on something he really wishes she hadn’t on the way there, too.

Bucky breathes deeply for a minute. By the time the tingling goes away Carter’s sitting on the keyboard and stretching to sniff at his left wrist. He picks her up and sets her on the cushion next to him, rubbing between her tense little ears with his other hand.

The arm recalibrates again. Carter slaps it once with her paw before running back into the safety of his grip and doing a little barrel roll against his knuckles. She darts out to bat at it again and again, standing on her back two legs before flinging bodily at his forearm and kicking with all she’s got. He can’t feel the chewing, not really, but it brings the heat from his chest into his face.

He thinks this might be happiness. Bucky’s glad he gets to feel it.
The bugs Hydra planted in Steve’s apartment make stalking him really convenient.

(Bucky doesn’t actually like that word: *stalking*. It has negative connotations and his intentions with Steve are completely honorable. Mostly honorable. *Monitoring* is a better description anyway.)

Some of the equipment also has SHIELD logos and login IDs, which throws Bucky for a bit of a loop at first. The subroutines allowing access to Hydras databases remained active regardless, but it wasn’t until the Black Widow Senate Hearings that it made any kind of sense. Hydra always enjoyed hiding in place sight, ever since that red-skulled fuck created it in the first place.

The bugs don’t exactly help when Steve’s on the move, though; for that Bucky has to get involved physically, which is… not exactly his favorite thing in the world. Jogging in the morning, training in Manhattan during the afternoon, late night insomniac trips to the grocery store – it’s a lot of risk. Each time Bucky leaves the base he runs the risk of Steve seeing him or one of the billion CCTV cameras tagging him and bringing the wrath of every acronym organization down on his head. The good news is that Captain America – when not training in Stark Tower and *completely* impossible for Bucky to track – tends to limit his time outside the apartment to very short bursts. He runs, he eats, he trains, he eats some more, he pretends to sleep. He wanders through the boroughs in civilian gear, often getting stopped by tourists and children asking for autographs; he smiles pleasantly each time, but Bucky can tell the difference between a real and false one, now that he’s experienced both.

For all the time he spends in the apartment Steve doesn’t actually appear to be *living* there. It’s surely not healthy to be so disconnected.

Bucky’s aware of the irony there.

He’s actually become aware of quite a lot of things recently. It’s as if experiencing happiness opened the floodgates to all kinds of conflicting feelings. It’s hard to understand most of them, though the internet remains an invaluable resource in identifying the burgeoning emotions Bucky’s brain is suddenly producing.

He suspects one of the many ways Hydra fucked him over was by somehow repressing the signals bouncing around his limbic system that allowed him to feel things deeply. When he thinks back over the last decade or two it’s difficult to really get a grasp on things; his thoughts settled on top of his mind like oil slick on a river. He remembers being angry when a target wasn’t where intelligence suggested they would be, or resigned when they pushed him back in the chair, or pleased when a challenging fight was going his way, but other than that…

Now that the drugs and chair aren’t an option it’s up to Bucky to muddle his own way through the whole spectrum again. So far he’s had mixed results.

The websites tell him that meditation and internal calm can help, but it’s harder than he anticipated. He tries to find his *inner place of feeling* and his *center* but every time he thinks he’s close static and panic inevitably drown out everything else. It’s frustratingly pointless.

Until one afternoon Bucky watches Carter basking in a sunbeam and thinks *why the hell not?* He joins her on the thick carpet, paying attention to his breathing as they said he should. He tenses and releases each muscle from his toes upward and lets the heat from the light sink into his skin.

Carter chirrups and rolls onto her back, fluffy belly in the air and side pressed lengthwise against his arm. The tension floods slowly out of his shoulders and down his back, body falling limp at last. He thinks, if he were capable, Bucky would be purring, too.
Technology is amazing and Bucky’s become a huge fan of the internet and all its possibilities – so much information and culture just waiting at his fingertips. But one of the major drawbacks in having a society so entrenched in a technological subculture is that it’s fucking everywhere. It’s not that he’s worried about all the cameras in every single person’s phone or how one slip up could blow his cover for good, it’s just… a pain in the ass. Everything is digital and mobile and immediate. He has to wear hats and ugly-ass sunglasses any time he’s in public to disrupt facial recognition software. The beard comes and goes, depending on his mood, but it does its itchy part, too. It makes Bucky feel like a douchebag. Who wears sunglasses in the wintertime?

The slouchy hats are kind of nice, though. Not great for keeping his ears warm, but a nice scarf can do that. Bucky picks the softest knitted gray one he can find and doesn’t leave the base without it.

He’s twelve videos deep in YouTube Roulette when a window pops over the True Facts video warning that there’s an incoming call through the Hydra line. The alarm chime scares the shit out of him and the cat, who were snuggling quite happily on the couch and listening to Steve eat a sandwich in the background. Bucky lets it ring for awhile. The blinking icon sends shivers over his skin and the urgent desire to curl into a ball and protect his vulnerable spots. The back of his neck is far too sensitive and his breath shortens, fight or flight instincts releasing useless adrenaline. He thinks the websites would call this terror.

He tries to imagine if he picked up the call and used declarative statements to describe his perspective like a lot of the articles suggested. Something like: “It was very overwhelming when you shot me full of unknown substances and implanted coded reactions into my subconscious.” Or maybe: “I feel horrified and nauseous at the thought you might take me back.” Or even: “It really hurt my feeling when you performed nonconsensual brain surgery and repeatedly electrocuted my prefrontal cortex so that I wouldn’t be upset about car bombing an orphanage that one time.”

The line goes dead and zefrank goes back to describing anglerfish mating habits. Distantly Bucky’s aware the narration’s funny. More immediately he can’t stop hyperventilating long enough to pay any attention. It’s a shame, really; he’d like to try laughing, just to see what all the hype was about. The app chimes again. And again. And again. The lack of breath is unsustainable. Bucky forces himself to look away from the screen, placing one hand on his lower abdomen and the other on his chest. Purses his lips and takes a deep breath in, feeling the air push his belly upward. He counts through the inhale and exhale.

There’s a way to use this to his advantage, if he lets himself. The motto among the lower echelon operatives was order through pain, so intimidation was not likely to work. Except. He’s learned over the years that they generally prefer that the pain be someone else’s.

He lets the calm blankness settle over his body and clicks accept.

The operative is speaking before the connection’s even complete. “–amn it, Thompson, you’re late with your report again. You better not be playing that fucking game instead of – “

“Thompson’s dead. And so is everyone else in your little cell.” Bucky opens up the webcam but leans back so that he’s away from the street light shining through the window.
The man on the other end of the video is unremarkable, save for how quickly his skin drains of blood and his face pales. His mouth bobs open once or twice but Bucky cuts him off before he can say anything.

“Considering how easy they went down I’m assuming your men weren’t fully trained field agents. Which means that either you’re strapped for resources in the wake of the helicarriers’ fall or you don’t value reconnaissance on Captain America as highly as you should. Or, perhaps, everything they said about the Winter Soldier is true.”

Bucky hunkers close to the screen, letting the hollow anger seething under the surface show plainly on his face. The man flinches, growing impossibly paler. He recognizes Bucky. Good.

“This is my mission now. Come near Steve Rogers again and I will set fire to your children and salt the earth after I’m done. Comply or be annihilated. Do not doubt that I can.”

Bucky terminates the call and falls back into the cushions, breath coming in little gasps. He rubs his eyes so hard there’s little spots of light in the darkness behind them. The colors are comforting for awhile.

He lets his arm flop back down with a sigh. Since Hydra forced his hand he only has two options left. He looks down to where Carter is inching back into the room. “Well, they officially know we’re here. Should we run or let them come to us?”

Carter meows and attempts to scale the arm of the couch, her claws making a mostly successful go of it until she makes it to the curve on the underside of the arm where she dangles pathetically until Bucky untangles her. He drops her into the crook of his elbow so he can scratch behind her ears. She lets him – for a minute – then bites happily on the meat of his thumb. The purrs vibrate all the way through the metal up to his shoulder. It tickles. He smiles at her.

“Yeah. That’s my pick, too.”

Across the street Steve’s living room light goes out and Bucky loses visual through the closed bedroom door.

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It’s a whole other week before the cadre of agents storm the base, far later than Bucky’d been expecting. They pause just past the doorjamb, rifles raised to an empty room. The tarp crinkles under their boots… until one of them trips the sprinklers. Bucky has to turn the volume down on his headphones. Then he has to take them out completely and turn off the video streaming on the laptop; the screams give the echo-memories bad ideas.

The system was a nasty little cocktail, something liberated from a Hydra base back in the beginning when he still fancied revenge a thing he was interested in. He took it mostly so the assholes wouldn’t have it more than with any intent to actually use it himself. It’d been in storage ever since at a place in Queens, along with his overstock of high caliber bullets and missile launchers. This had been a prime opportunity to get rid of the stuff, really.

He’s lucky the American branches are still in disarray after the whole Insight fiasco. What he’s really worried about is when the European and Asian branches get their collective heads out of their asses.
long enough to check their email and figure out what’s going on over here.

Bucky winds up the slack in Carter’s harness leash and scoops her into his backpack, dusting the bits of dead leaves out of her fur. He takes a deep breath of the crisp park air to better fortify him for the next step in his plan. Hopefully the tarp had helped localize the damage to the floor, though it’ll still probably take all night to clean up and dispose of whatever’s left. (He’ll have to leave them somewhere public to get his point across.) Carter will have to be locked in bathroom for the duration, which she’ll hate beyond a shadow of a doubt. Nothing quite like living with a pissed off cat.

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Hurting Hydra like that doesn’t feel as rewarding as he’d hoped. It’s certainly necessary, but the momentary pulse of satisfaction doesn’t make up for the sick churning in his gut.

Bucky is well aware that he’s hurt people – hurt a lot of people, in fact – and mostly for no better reason than because someone told him to. Soldiers. Diplomats. Subversives. Witnesses. Collateral damage.

People. Families.

He tries not to think about it most of the time, otherwise the guilt would rise up and swallow him whole and he’d never get anything done. The fact that he’s still capable of doing so in the first place explains a lot about how he was able to make it through the war. Or all the wars, really. Or Brooklyn.

Sometimes Bucky thinks of his brain like a box. He keeps shoving the bad things into it, but there’s so much in there now that the lid won’t shut right and the sides are all warped. Shit seeps out sometimes. The box is what makes him a good soldier. Hydra tried to lock it closed and Steve tore the hinges off after he let Bucky beat the shit out of him on the helicarrier.

He’s discovered that being a person is a lot of hard work; being a good person even more so, especially when the base personality isn’t that great to start with. But if there’s one thing Bucky’s never been afraid of, it’s hard work.

It stands to reason that if he’s a bad person and his first instinct is toward aggressive action, than the key to becoming a good person was the opposite. So after the Hydra goons are taken care of, Bucky makes a promise to strive for nonviolence. He reads up on Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela, and all those other people who changed the world peacefully while he changed it with bullets and fire, taking notes and creating a game plan of non-combative resistance. He makes an effort to distance himself from anything that might trigger his shittier instincts.

He lasts three days.

But seriously, there was a man throwing rocks at the ducks in the park. Rocks. At the ducks. Who the hell does that? A fucking psychopath is who. They weren’t even bothering him, just looking for a little bread, maybe a pretzel, and he threw fucking rocks at them, even after they’d run back into the water. What was Bucky supposed to do, just sit and watch that?

So he shouted and threw a rock, too. It was bigger and his aim was significantly better. He’s pretty sure the hit was nonlethal – pretty sure – but he doesn’t stick around long enough for the guy to
regain consciousness, either.

Guilt’s an emotion he has no need to identify. Gandhi would be so disappointed.

In the end there’s no difference between the guy in the park and those Hydra agents. Violence begets violence. Ignoring it simply allowed more suffering and did nothing to help the victims of it, be they innocent people or ducks or Bucky himself. Violence should be avoided. But defense? Defense is different. Defense is essential, both for oneself and others.

Someone has to stand up for the little guy.

And it feels so good to help. Bucky wakes up the morning after the ducks feeling whole and rested for the first time since cryo, despite all the nightmares.

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Bucky doesn’t go looking for the bad things, even though he refuses to pass them by when they inevitably find him. Steve, on the other hand, doesn’t have the same philosophy about violent situations. The little shit actively seeks them out, biting his thumb at the injustices of the world and giving Bucky a minor embolism every time he comes back to his apartment concussed and bloody.

Not that he actually spends a lot of time there. Every so often Steve wastes a day watching television or reading on the couch but even in the middle of winter he’s all about exercise and training and eating shitty food on the go. Hell, the man barely sleeps most nights; the serum just tucks the dark circles under his eyes away with the tight corners of his bed sheets every morning – if you call the obscene hour Captain America wakes up as “morning” and not “still the night before”.

It’s not fair. All the websites say proper sleep is key to recovery of both physical and mental health, but Steve is bright and shiny before Bucky’s even properly had one REM cycle. And because God hates him, Bucky gets the privilege of following Steve around Prospect Park at ass o’clock in the morning.

Their runs are usually lonely things, though they are occasionally beautiful; the sunrise dappling over the lake and settling in the early fog, the tap tap tap of gym shoes mingling with birdsong. Bucky would probably appreciate them more if his eyes weren’t still swollen shut from pillow creases and cat hair half the time. (Carter’s taken to sleeping on his head most mornings. Bucky’s come to accept it.)

Steve’s often the first in and the first out, except one morning he lingers at the entrance, stretching and retying his shoes unnecessarily, until a man walks toward him. He looks vaguely familiar, like Bucky’s seen him around town maybe. There’s a tiny gap between his teeth when he smiles and waves a greeting. It makes Bucky think of wings and fragile bird bones.

Steve’s welcoming smiles fades when he sees what the man is carrying. “A frappuccino. Really, Sam, at this hour? Hitting the hard stuff a little early, aren’t you?”

“Shut up, Steve. If you’re gonna make me run at five in the morning I’m gonna treat myself. Especially considering my body still thinks it’s one in the morning because a certain someone can’t wait until the jetlag wears off.”

“Sorry.”
Now, Bucky’s sleep-deprived and hiding behind a decorative column without a clear line of sight, but Steve doesn’t sound very apologetic to him. Sam doesn’t seem to buy it, either, raising his eyebrow and giving Steve the stink eye.

Steve’s poker face crumbles under the onslaught. His tilted grin sends warm sparks up and down Bucky’s spine. “Fine. I’ll treat you to breakfast after, assuming you haven’t thrown up all that dairy before then.”

Sam takes a sip through the straw, scraping caramel out of the bottom of the cup. “Don’t even try to shame me, Steve, it’s not gonna work this time. Starbucks gives me life.”

Steve’s voice takes on that particularly earnest quality politicians have been trying to emulate for years. “Sam, did you know that 90% of Starbucks white cups are made from trees and because of the inner plastic liner are not recyclable? They serve over four billion cups a year, Sam, do you know what that’s doing to the environment? Not to mention the toll corporations like this are having on small business owners and the unethical sourcing of beans from –“

Sam mmms in enjoyment, slurping loudly through the straw, holding up a just one minute finger.

“The whip cream alone has 130 calories, Sam.”

“Oh, like you give a crap about calories, Mister ‘I Just Put This Smorgasbord Out Of Business’.”

“That was one time and I apologized. I let them put a picture of me on their wall, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, and all over twitter, too. Pretty sure that place is a chain now.” Sam sets his drink on the bottom edge of Bucky’s column with a little pat on the lid; all the better to finish after Steve wears him down over the park trails. “Besides, I’m pretty sure we’re gonna burn through anything I just gained from that in the next ten minutes.”

“Aww, I’ll take it easy on you.”

“Yeah? I’ll believe it when I see it. Today you’ll run like God and Nike intended, especially if you plan on actually having this conversation instead of just standing around talking around it.”

Steve’s cockeyed grin rolls right off his face. He bends his head toward the trail and they start off at a jogging pace. As soon as they’re around the first bend Bucky sneaks a hand out, snatches the drink, and licks the bottom of the straw. Just to see what all the fuss is about. It’s not bad; more like desert drink than actual coffee, but he could see the appeal.

For all the teasing, Steve runs alongside Sam at a much more sedate pace than his usual. Bucky hears snatches of conversation when they pass his spot every lap – mostly about where Sam’s been and what he’s been doing, as far as Bucky can gather. He hears things like “no concrete evidence” and “cold trail” and “just have to keep going”.

Sam – only mildly hyperventilating and acceptably sweaty – joins Steve on the cool-off walk back to Crown Heights. They stop off at a bakery just opening up and enjoy some fancy orange scones along the way. Steve refrains from mentioning calories this time. He also buys.
If Bucky’s honest with himself - and he’s really trying to be - then he’ll admit: keeping Steve Rogers under surveillance is a pain in the ass. And Hydra’s a pain in the ass, too. Their equipment may be conveniently placed but it’s also absolutely shitty. The feed’s audio only and the signal comes in spotty at best, covering only the living room, kitchen, and hall. His handlers never would’ve stood for crappy intel like that, even before they stopped letting the soldier plan his own missions. One would think they’d have a little more initiative on keeping someone as high profile as Captain America under observation, but nooooo, it was fucking amateur hour over here.

If Bucky wants it done right, he’ll have to do it himself. And, of course, good equipment isn’t cheap. He has to raid three more lockboxes and fence some artwork just to afford the good stuff. And to pay for a taller cat tree to accommodate Carter’s latest growth spurt and as a reward for her improved pouncing skills. And a tiny hat from etsy for her to wear, just because. (It had an A on it like Steve’s helmet, how was he supposed to resist?)

He sneaks into the apartment the first night Steve’s gone on an actual Avengers mission and guaranteed to be away for an entire twenty-four hours. It’s a lot easier than he thinks it probably should be; for a superhero, Captain America didn’t seem to be very concerned about home invasion. Bucky’s forced to leave Carter napping at the base because fuck, that kitten does not understand how espionage works.

The apartment doesn’t look that much different from the inside, though there’s a weird moment of déjà vu when he looks out the large picture windows to the base across the street. There’s an orange blur in the otherwise darkened windows – Carter unexpectedly awake and waiting for his return, no doubt.

It’s a miracle Steve hasn’t gotten curious about his only other neighbors on the block and come knocking. The base’s tinted windows were a bit of a peculiarity considering the whole street had been damaged in the Chitauri attack, even though Steve and Bucky’s buildings managed to avoid the worst of it. The Bring Back Brooklyn movement made a lot of talk about renovation and revitalization before the big funding scandal brought everything to a screeching halt; the construction crew just left one morning and never came back.

It didn’t take long for the little gallery on the ground floor of Steve’s apartment to go under with zero foot traffic coming down the street, so Steve was left with the whole building to himself - a solitary slice in a city where privacy’s at a premium. Bucky would’ve given his right arm for a place like this back in the day, but it doesn’t look like Steve’s using all the space to his advantage.

There’s hardly any furniture in the living room, just a couch in front of a dusty TV and a few half-empty bookshelves against the walls. The single interesting thing is the heavy coffee table, made out of a reclaimed wooden door from some building or another. There’s nothing there that says Steve Rogers lives here.

The bedroom’s a little better; there’s clothes hanging out of the hamper, a dry plant in the corner. No art on the walls, though, which seems… wrong, somehow. Instead there’s a photo album on the little table next to the bed arranged in a timeline of black and white photos alongside brighter prints, some clearly taken on a phone and printed special. The album’s spine crackles when Bucky opens it, too new under his hands. Steve clearly keeps the pictures close but either can’t bear to look at them or hasn’t felt the need to.

He recognizes Sam from the park and the redhead from the bridge, the whole gaggle of Howling Commandos from the Smithsonian and his own battered recollections. There’s Steve’s mother, in a white dress outside a church. Peggy Carter in her curls. Bucky Barnes in his uniform.

The Winter Soldier in his ice.
Breathe. You have to breathe.

Bucky’s body moves to the kitchen to fill a glass of water. He pours it, slowly, over the yellowing leaves of the plant. It’s moist and cool when he touches the dirt, muddy blackness seeping into the whorls of his hands. Grounded things. Growing things.

The dirt gets stuck under his nails even though they’re trimmed short. He used to wake up with blood like that.

Breathe in for three, out for six. In for three. Out for six.

It’s not a large plant; the water’s already coming out the hole in the bottom of the pot by the time Bucky can wrestle himself away from the echo. This time wasn’t so bad, really. It was getting better. He could do this.

He notices a door after he’s dried and replaced the glass back in the cabinet. It’s opposite the bedroom and just out of sight from the front windows; despite all the hours Bucky’s spent watching this place he had no idea there was another room hidden away there. He’s certainly never seen Steve go inside it before.

The handle turns easily but there’s dust everywhere, little motes dancing through the still air and reflecting in the beams of sun from the eastward-facing window. There aren’t any blinds or anything covering it, which would have definitely been a problem if there were another building left on that side of the street. A fucking kindergartner could make the angles on a shot like that, but Steve didn’t bother putting up any defenses at all, even one as ultimately useless as a fucking curtain. Idiot.

Bucky shakes his head and looks around. There’s an empty easel set up in the center of the room where the light would shine just right to highlight a canvas. Palettes and brushes are neatly arranged along a bench against the wall. Above it’s a shelf full of sketchbooks, the pages left carefully blank. The stool’s leather cushion doesn’t have a single crease.

Bucky’d taken an art class once, years ago, mostly so Steve wouldn’t have an excuse not to go along with him. He’s seen studio’s before. But never one so purposely crafted and left to rot. He looks between the brush in his hand – fine-tipped, expensive – and the creamy canvases waiting next to the tubes of color with names like BRIGHT CRIMSON, CADMIUM YELLOW, and PHTHALO BLUE.

Steve never saw colors right when he was younger. He’d come down with the flu right after the teacher called him out on his crappy combinations; Bucky hadn’t the heart to bring it up since Steve wound up having to drop out anyway. After that it was back to pencil sketches and goofy cartoons. Even those petered out during the war.

Bucky hasn’t seen Steve draw anything since 1943, and he’s been actively looking.

He scrapes a finger through the dust on the window, then another. A curve and a curve. He looks at the two Bs silhouetted against the sun for a long time.

He makes sure to close the door behind him when he leaves.
The paint sticks with him, those full tubes of strangely named pigments waiting to fill their purpose. He looks them up the next morning after he’s carefully arranged his new moth orchid on the sill for optimum light absorption. He likes the look of it there, and the lady at the shop said the tinted windows wouldn’t really be a problem so long as he kept an eye on it. Bucky has to shoo Carter away a few times but she loses interest after he sneaks her a little bit of his scrambled eggs.

He gets lost in YouTube for three hours. His breakfast goes cold and there’s toast crumbs all over the keyboard but he doesn’t regret a damn thing.

Bob Ross is a fucking gift. Why didn’t they play *The Joy of Painting* 24 hours a day? Bucky’s sure that if Steve painted some happy trees his compulsion to hit things bigger than him would diminish tenfold. (It probably wouldn’t do anything to keep him from running his mouth, though; if nuns and the army and Sarah Rogers couldn’t do that then nothing could.)

Bucky’s irrationally proud when the little thumbs up icon turns blue after he likes his first video. Bob Ross, man. Totally worth it.

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Apparently, tiny baby kitten tummies need a different type of nutrition than tiny teenage kitten tummies. Diarrhea in a litter box is surely a punishment straight from the devil himself for all the times Bucky’s fucked up in his life. Hairballs are even fucking worse than that, a feat Bucky did not think was possible.

He’s at his wit’s fucking end. A trip to one of the unfortunately named pet boutiques has got to be better than this.

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When not vomiting all over the place, Carter likes watching Steve putter around on the other side of the street. She comes right up to the laptop screen and curls up on the keyboard, watching him raptly until Bucky shoos her away and deletes the billion eeeees she inevitably types from the command bar.

Carter may love it, but Bucky has some reservations about the new and improved observational status of Steve’s apartment. On the one hand it’s nice to be able to keep an eye on Steve while maintaining a comfortable distance. On the other hand…

Steve has terrible taste in music. Bucky’s not sure if he’s trying to understand pop culture in the worst way possible or what but holy shit it’s bad. He’ll play the same horrible song over and over and over and it makes Bucky wants to kill himself. Steve first, then him, like one of those weird suicide pacts. Just to make it stop.

Honestly, he has no idea how Steve gets any pleasure from it. It’s all weird ass songs about crazy frogs or guys screaming “mahna mahna” like maniacs. Most of them didn’t even have proper lyrics, like the one where a bunch of prepubescent children thought scatting was cool and would give it a try.
Steve listens to this shit for hours.

It’s just. It’s so bad.

+ + +

Bucky’s bike dies after only three months of him riding it. The balance is the first thing to go, then tire rotation, then he can barely get the thing to move at all. He has to actually carry it back to base after the damn handlebar cracks down the middle during one of his supply runs.

He refuses to use the bike-machine. It’s a matter of principle. So he schleps it all the way down to Flatbush in the middle of the goddamn snow.

Kurt’s happy to see him – the genuine cheerfulness so very different from the other service people he’s spoken to – but alarmed at the damage done to the bike after such a short time. He strokes his handlebar mustache (by far not the strangest facial hair Bucky’s seen in this neighborhood) and takes a long assessing stare at Bucky’s torso and legs; the layers he’s wearing mask his shape a little, but the sheer mass of his body’s harder to hide.

Kurt’s gaze goes absent and fuzzy around Bucky’s shoulders. He shakes out of it after a minute or two and blinks sheepishly. Bucky shrugs. It’s a compliment, really. He’s had worse people staring at him in worse ways. Besides, Kurt’s harmless – he’s married to the ice cream man next door.

And hadn’t that particular social revelation thrown Bucky for a loop. New York, man. Best city in the world.

Kurt has Bucky step on a scale in the back room and proceeds to make distressed noises over the results. Bucky just shrugs again. Half his skeleton is metallic; he’s basically a cyborg at this point. Though, he probably should have factored on the weight of the arm and its components pushing down against the bike before he bought it. He hasn’t exactly been gentle with it, either. (So Bucky likes to go fast, big deal.)

Kurt eyes him again, lingering on Bucky’s left arm and the gloves covering his hands. There’s no way he can know, no way to connect Bucky with the masked soldier blowing up cars in downtown DC, but Bucky’s breathing picks up all the same. He clenches his fists and the servos let out a very faint protest.

Kurt makes another distressed noise. Then he pulls out a handful of dusty catalogues from a cabinet and starts talking about titanium frames and high thread-count tires. He blushes a little when he mentions the “double-butted steel spokes” but Bucky’s feeling generous toward him and doesn’t mention it.

They order components that Kurt swears will withstand any abuse Bucky can put them through. It will take some time for them to arrive and be assembled, though, so Bucky’s left walking everywhere he goes for a solid couple weeks.

Walking sucks. Running sucks – he doesn’t know why Steve likes it so much, except that he never really could run before so maybe he hasn’t figured that out yet. Or he just has no conception of what fun actually is.

Taking the train sucks, too, even more than running. Bucky should’ve known not to even try given
how the sound of it pulling into the station made his knees weak and hands compulsively tighten on the straps of his backpack. His body carries him onto the car and that’s the last he can think clearly for a long time. He has no idea where or when he is when he gathers himself together enough to get off. He’s just thankful the windows in his car didn’t open – who knows what a breeze on his face would’ve added to the mess broiling around in his head.

+ + +

And, as if having to walk all over wasn’t enough, the next week Hydra turns off his goddamn wifi. Sure, simply shutting down utilities at a base that had been captured by the enemy was less messy than sending another death squad but it was still a shitty thing to do. Passive-aggressive bullshit from the world’s leading terrorist organization.

Fucking monsters. Bucky knew they were sons of bitches, like, knew in the biblical sense, but to take away a man’s internet? That shit’s fucked up.

Steve’s wifi was still working but Bucky draws the line at camping out on his roof and mooching his signal, okay, he draws the fucking line. So he has to go down to the motherfucking phone company and set up a fucking account like an actual person and it’s not like he has a fucking photo ID handy so he has to make one of those first. And then he has to shuffle all of his stolen funds into new checking accounts under his shiny fake identity and manufacture credit cards for each one.

So now he’s officially on the fucking grid as some asshole from motherfucking Jersey thanks to HYDRA and their shit ass bastard ways. He supposes he should be grateful the building’s owned outright; he really doesn’t want to deal with some slumlord panting after rent money. He’s done that enough in one lifetime, thank you very much.

Christ. All this so he could keep up with Postmodern Jukebox updates and finish streaming The Big Bang Theory. It's almost not worth it.

+ + +

The power and water get turned off the next day.

Motherfuckers.

+ + +

As spring slowly creeps its way through New York, Steve spends more time with the Avengers in Manhattan and traveling to faraway lands to blow shit up and less time moping around the neighborhood. (Not that Bucky envies him all the excitement; the Local starts serving amazing peanut butter s’mores ice cream and Steve is missing out.)
While he’s gone, Bucky takes it upon himself to water the sad little fern in Steve’s bedroom. And dust, which seemed to be something Steve always manages not to do. And it’s not like Steve would know if he used the washer and dryer so long as he brought his own detergent, right? Right.

Honestly, he’s not sure how simply monitoring the apartment progresses to sneaking in through the window and sleeping in Steve’s bed. He’s not even sure what small bit of lunacy prompts him to sit on it in the first place other than the overwhelming desire to fuck up all those straight lines and angles. It’s just… it’s really comfortable, okay? Like, Steve’s mattress is amazing. He even makes a special trip back and forth so Carter can experience the sheets for herself.

Plus, turns out Steve was wasting those huge windows on not-making-art when he could have been discovering how perfect they were for sunbathing in the mornings.

The new bike is choice. There’s even a little basket on the front so Carter can ride in style. Kurt gets a high-five.

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So for awhile things are looking pretty good at the base. But then one day there’s a break in the routine.

Steve starts it off by being very quiet; no questionable music playing, no rushing out the door or meeting a quinjet on the roof. No exercise in public before even God and the birds were awake to complain about it. He lies in bed for an extra twenty minutes, just blinking and staring out the window.

His expression’s empty, tense, but his eyes… What had the girl in The Princess Bride said? Like the sea after a storm. Like the wind and waves churned up things under the surface, once better left alone. Blue, with just a hint of green. Poor and perfect.

Fuck. Bucky’s been watching too much Netflix. Whatever, Steve’s not acting right and Bucky’s not leaving him alone like this, no matter how sappy and sad it’s making him feel by osmosis.

When Steve finally gathers the energy to pull on shoes and head outside Bucky bundles himself up and follows at a discrete-enough distance no one notices. Of course, it’s Crown Heights, so it’s not exactly like anyone would say anything even if they did.

Steve doesn’t even bother with the casual-camouflage he usually layers in before he heads out, just simple jeans and a leather jacket to ward off the spring chill. He walks with his shoulders slumped and hands shoved in his pockets and it’s like the starch of Captain America that keeps his spine straight is left behind with the shield in a closet at home – he loses twenty pounds and four inches in five seconds. Bucky has to rub his eyes to shake off the afterimage of someone much smaller.

And then Steve gets on the subway. Because of course he fucking does.

It’s a short ride, thank god, but it’s still an exercise in controlling panic. Bucky breathes deeply and counts the joints in his left index finger with his right; it’s hard to feel the tiny ridges through the glove and he has to concentrate to get an accurate number. Keeping his eyes on Steve’s shoulders a few benches ahead help ground him, too. Steve sighs twice during the trip. Even the way his hair falls over his forehead is depressing.
They emerge onto the street somewhere in Red Hook and head toward the oldest diner Bucky’s ever seen, maybe even older than him and Steve, which is saying something for that neighborhood. It’s the kind of place with decades-old cigarette smoke yellowing the walls and scratches dug deep into the linoleum from even older tables long given up to the scrap heap. It’s familiar to Bucky in a way that not a lot is at the moment, except for the way Steve folds himself into a booth around his coffee.

Bucky orders his to go and settles in for the long haul on the stoop across the street.

Steve asks the waitress for some paper and spends a little over an hour writing on the back of an order sheet, crossing things out or staring into space. After she pointedly asks him twice if there’s anything else she can get him, he clears out and walks the last few blocks until he hits the river. The old grain silos are still standing, though the burned out shells are fenced off. It’s quiet, which strikes Bucky as being wrong somewhere deep inside.

The breeze off the water’s a little cool in March but Steve isn’t as bothered by the chill as he used to be. He sits heavily on a bench at the edge of the grass and watches the tugboats go by without even bothering to close his jacket. He stares out at the dock for a long time, worrying the paper between his fingers. Then he walks over to the railing and lets it go. The wind catches and carries it away.

It’s hell waiting for Steve to leave. Once the way’s clear Bucky jumps over the railing, grip careful to keep from falling all the way down. The paper’s caught on a shard of debris a dozen or so feet away and Bucky snatches it before the salt and muck can dissolve it away completely. It’s falling apart in his hands but the words are still legible. Steve’s cursive is achingly sloppy – he used to get the worst marks in penmanship, though nowhere near as bad as Bucky’s. Their mothers used to despair over it.

Bucky only gets one read-through before the paper dissolves into useless pulp against his fingers. He would have liked to keep it.

Buck: I feel like I should be letting you go, that I should have done that already by now. You were dead and gone and so was I and then suddenly here we are again. You’re a different person now, I think, under all that pain, and I should let you go. Respect your wishes to be left alone, if that’s what this silence means.

But the truth is god forgive me. The truth is that I’m selfish. I’m selfish and I want you with me always, no matter what. And today of all days I miss you so bad it hurts. I miss you. I’ll always miss you.

Please. Please. Come back. I love you.

+++

Bucky’s body huddles against the railing for a long time. His mind wanders somewhere else for even longer.

+++
When he finally returns to base, Steve’s mumbling to himself is almost drowned out by the sound of a pot banging into the sink. Carter bumps her head against his hand to say hello when Bucky shoos her off the keyboard to pull up the cameras.

It’s a mess over there. There’s something’s smoking on the burner but Steve doesn’t seem to notice - he’s covered head to toe in flour and standing in a pile of apple peels all over the floor. He’s cutting into a pan still hot from the oven, his tongue sticking out, laser focused, easing out a piece from the middle with a spatula. Bucky thinks he’ll be unhappy with it – the slice is a little flatter than it should be, or maybe too crumbly – but a cloud of steam escapes and Steve breathes it in deep, his eyes closing, face serene as any sunbeam Bucky’s been in.

Steve puts the piece of cake on a plate with a metal fork and an honest to god cloth napkin. He walks right past the comfy spot on the couch and straight out the side window, settling the little meal carefully on the fire escape, adjusting the fork just so. He smiles a little to himself and goes back inside.

The satisfied smirk melts into a pout when he notices the state of his kitchen. And that he’s trailed flour across the living room carpet.

+ + +

Bucky watches Steve clean up.

There’s.

He feels.

Adrift, he thinks. There’s something. Missing, maybe.

He opens up a new internet window and stares at the search bar for awhile, thoughts floating somewhere north of his head. His hands start to type “apple cake winnifred ba” but stutters to a stop before he gets any farther. There’s something different about the logo today.
Birds eat the slice of cake. Bucky watches them flutter around from across the street, getting their little feet all over the napkin. They fly away when the last crumb’s gone and don’t come back.

The empty plate sits there overnight until Steve carries it in the next morning.
Two days later things are back to normal.

“LET IT GOOOO, LET IT GOOOOOO.”

Normal in that Bucky’s planning to murder Steve in his sleep.

“I’LL RISE LIKE THE BREAK OF DAAAWWN.”

He’d actually enjoyed the first run-through of the latest in Steve’s collection of godawful pop music – the singer was amazingly talented and the lyrics were actually kind of nice. Taking a stand, the past is in the past, suffer no assholes – all that was pretty much tailor-made for Steven “Fight Me” Rogers. But the rest of it? When had Steve ever let anything go? The man could hold a grudge for fucking decades.

“HERE I STAND IN THE LIGHT OF DAAAAAAAY.”

But that was on the first listen. This Frozen shit gets real old, real fast. He doesn’t know how people deal with the constant replays. Carter ran off to hide under the couch or in a closet somewhere by the ninth repetition and Bucky hasn’t seen her since. He’s seriously debating joining her.

“THE COLD NEVER BOTHERED ME, ANYWAY.”


The last line fades into blissful silence. Bucky rubs at his temples, trying to ward away the ache building there. Please. Please, for the love of all things holy, don’t do it, Steve. Not again.

“THE STORM GLOWS WHITE ON THE MOUNTAIN TONIGHT, NOT A FOOTPRINT TO BE SEEN.”

“Oh, come on! Seriously?” Steve cannot be enjoying this, there’s no fucking way he’s actually enjoying listening to fucking Disney on repeat for three and a half fucking hours.

“DON’T LET THEM IN, DON’T LET THEM SEE.”

The laptop hinges creak ominously under his grip but the video feed comes up smooth as ever, glorious high definition and worth every penny. Steve’s reclined on the couch, reading a paperback that’s missing the front cover.

Wait. What?

“LET IT GO, LET IT GO. CAN’T HOLD IT BACK ANYMORE.”

Steve licks a finger and turns a page, the picture of lazy tranquility.

What?!

There aren’t any visible head injuries. The man’s clearly awake. How the fuck is his head not exploding?

Bucky takes a screenshot and zooms in as much as he can without the picture turning into a blur of meaningless pixels. There’s a thin black line tucked around the delicate shell of Steve’s ear; the light’s hitting it just right, otherwise the little bit of plastic would still be hidden by the jut of his jaw.

Earplugs. The motherfucker’s wearing earplugs. Playing terrible music for three and a half fucking hours and wearing earplugs.
Bucky hits *mute* so hard there’s a dent in the track pad the next time he logs on.

+++ 

Steve cycles through “Barbie Girl,” “Who Let the Dogs Out,” “Blue,” and “What Does the Fox Say”.

Bucky cycles his fist through the bedroom wall.

It’s not like they’re *bad songs* – okay, some of them are bad songs. Some of them are crimes against humanity and Bucky is a fucking expert on that shit, okay? But some of them are actually fun and catchy the first one or two times he hears them. By the tenth time it’s like someone took an ice cream scoop to his brain and inserted the Macarena. This shit *lives in his head*, like, *all the time*. He finds himself singing them in the john or tapping out the beat on the keyboard when he types. Hell, on “Call Me Maybe” day he almost crashed his bike because he was pedaling to the chorus.

Bucky’s spent too long cultivating his mindspace to let pop jingles ruin it. But there’s nothing he can do about it except blow his cover, kill Steve, or move. And the more Disney shit Steve listens to the more Bucky’s tempted to try out option number two.

The song on rotation for today has all the benchmarks Bucky’s come to dread: a quick beat, simple lyrics, and an infinitely repeatable chorus. His head’s already bopping along before the first play-through. Across the street Steve’s doing the same, scrambling eggs to the rhythm, his fancy earplugs having mysteriously vanished to parts unknown the last time Steve took off with the Avengers. (Bucky is shocked, just shocked at the news, wherever could they have gone, not down the garbage disposal, *oh no.*)

*Good idea*, Bucky thinks, propping the laptop on the back of the couch and heading over to his own kitchen. *Breakfast sounds pretty good right now.*

The music starts over as Bucky’s lubing the pan with cooking spray.

“OH, DON’T YOU DARE LOOK BACK, JUST KEEP YOUR EYES ON ME. I SAID YOU’RE HOLDING BACK, SHE SAID—“

“Shut up and dance with me.” Bucky twirls the pan around before setting it on the burner, shuffling over to the fridge. The eggs are fresh and he had plenty of cheese to whip up a decent omelet. Were there any mushrooms left from the last time he went to the Greenmarket? How long did those things last before they went bad, anyway? “Doo doo doo doo doo doo doo doo dee mm mm moomooh.”

He throws a little flare into chopping the mushrooms, feeling irrationally pleased with himself. He hasn’t messed around with a knife in ages. It’s actually pretty fun when his life’s not depending on it.

“SHE TOOK MY ARM.”

He flips the knife from one hand to the next.

“I DON’T KNOW HOW IT HAPPENED.”

Tosses it back to the right.
“WE TOOK THE FLOOR AND SHE SAAAAAAID.”


“THIS WOMAN IS MY DESTINY. SHE SAID OOH OOH OOH."

Shut up and dance with me.


– Bucky’s body reaches for someone not there, overbalances, and trips over his own feet onto the rug.

He can barely get a breath, lungs burning, but he’s grinning and crying and god Bucky’s never felt so weightless before. He looks across the road and through the windows to Steve, wanting to see his face but too far away from the screen.

He’s rocking back and forth in his living room, arms around an invisible partner. Right left right left rock. Right left right left back together. Bucky’s willing to bet money that he’s blushing.

He hasn’t seen Steve so softly happy in decades, if ever.

The phantom weight of bony hands itch over his palms. Steve had calluses on his fingers from where the pencils used to rub him sore. They were still there after the serum stole all his other scars.

+ + +

It’s like something wakes up in Bucky’s body after that, movement in his head and hips, bouncing around and shaking things loose. It’s good, so very good to have his brain and his body feel the same thing for once.

He scoots the coffee table to the side of the living room to clear a space and lets it sink into him, all the ways he can move without hurting. Carter spreads along the windowsill to watch him, tail swishing back and forth, eyes wide. Bucky’s favorite thing to do is queue up all the PMJ videos he’d liked ages ago and try to match his movements to the remixes; some of it’s beyond him – the little tap dancer sure can move – but some of it feels just right. The lindy hop, jitterbug, swing – his body knows them all.

One night a storm rolls in off the Atlantic while he’s trying to figure out a new-old rhythm that’s been creeping along the edges of this memory. The wind wails against the walls of the building and the tap tap of his feet echo back and back and back further still. His toes scrape and fall still, pointing at the floor.

Scraping. Pointing. His heels rise up.

There had been girls. He’d danced with girls. Small. Soft. Until they weren’t. Bass beat pounding in his head.


Red.


+ + +

He stands on pointe for hours, shaking. Shaking.

+ + +

It’s not the first time his body betrays him and it won’t be the last. The internet calls this muscle memory, something his body has been conditioned to recall through repeated exposure. Bucky knows this is a dangerous thing. His muscles tell his hands they’ll feel steadier holding a gun. They tell him to lean back in every chair, relax, open his mouth. They tell him pain is coming. They tell him to let it take him away.

The memories tell him a lot of things. They’re the main cause of all his problems – well, his current problems, anyway. Some red-skulled bastard seventy years ago was the cause of all his problems. Or the fascist that hired the red-skulled bastard after thinking ‘oh isn’t the Polish countryside lovely this time of year, let’s take it’ was the cause of all his problems.

Or, technically, the blonde shithead across the street was the cause of all his problems, considering how different his life would have turned out if he hadn’t pulled Steve out of a dumpster in 1923. Ironically remembering that little slice of life hadn’t bothered him at all; the memory slid right into place without any echo at all, like it’d always been there, a Steve-shaped hole just waiting to be filled.

He misses time to memories far less often than he used to but that makes it harder to know what to expect when it does happen. Each time’s different enough to knock him for a loop. Sometimes it’s only words or sensations. Sometimes whole years bloom inside him at once, missions and maintenance and mania echoing down through the decades.

He’d spent three hours hovering next to a stall in a greengrocers completely overwhelmed by the smell of peanuts, which he’d never really considered an actual smell before but somehow still left him a sobbing, snotty mess all the same. It had been the same with the smell of the East River and the taste of street hot dogs. The entire German language was squatting on the back of his tongue and only made itself known when a pack of tourists wandered by.

Thank god for Carter, because otherwise there’s no telling how long the echoes would have him. She always thinks the world’s ending if she can see the bottom of her food dish and raises hell until Bucky gets up to swish around the dry bits until everything’s covered up again. If the memories come when she’s not around – or if it’s after dinner and she’s napping off the ecstasy of her gooshy food – then it’s much harder to come back. It was worse in the days before he found the base and the cat and the Captain, harder to eat and sleep and think of himself as something other than what they
told him to be. He never wants to regress back to that.

A lot of the articles he’s read say keeping a journal helps to organize thoughts and relieve stress, so Bucky gives it a try. It’s just a scribble or two at first, more reminders and mission notes than private thoughts. *Bananas do not taste as good as you remember. Wearing green makes you look pale. Blue is your favorite color.*

He soon finds he’s filling notebook after notebook with sloping, looping handwriting, mixing English and Russian and whatever other language creeps in depending on the day. It’s more comfortable to write with his left hand despite everything in him yelling to hold the pen in his right. At first he thinks it’s because the prosthetic causes some kind of weird biotechnical loop in his brain but he’s pretty sure it goes further than that. The physical act of writing about the echo-memories causes one to happen; the sharp smack of a ruler on his knuckles every time a line came out wrong, a woman in robes scolding him to *learn to write properly or not at all*. The failing grades in penmanship concern for Bucky’s devious nature concern for deviant deviant *deviant*.

He has to buy a new pen after that particular memory resurfaces. And a new notebook, as ink is a less than forgiving stain.

It makes him a little nervous to have his whole life written down for anyone to see. But it is satisfying to know that it exists and what’s inside is as true as he can make it. The books go in the backpack he takes with him everywhere, tucked behind the hoodie and hat, a comfy nest for Carter to snuggle into on their rare excursions together through the city.

+ + +

Despite his dedication to driving Bucky insane with the most annoying songs from the past three decades, Steve only comes close to actually finding him once.

It’s the first truly warm day of summer – early enough in the season that the heat’s a novelty and not so ungodly ridiculous it drives Bucky to cut the legs off his second-favorite pair of jeans. In years past this was excellent beach weather, or just the perfect time to hang out soaking up the sun on the fire escape. But the base’s roof is too open for comfort and the outer wall too damaged to trust with his weight, so instead he and Carter are enjoying sunning themselves on the dumpster outside of Steve’s apartment. The metal heats up quickly in the sunlight, baking up through Bucky’s back and easing the stress of carrying all the metal in his skeleton around. (The Wolverine guy from the movies is full of shit, Bucky’s sad to say, impressive hair or no.)

Carter just sprawls next to him like a drunken starfish, having rolled around until she’s wrapped in a leash burrito.

Bucky’s developed a bit of philosophy about urban life: there’s Good Dumpsters and Bad Dumpsters. The dumpster Bucky found Carter behind smelled like three week old *nasty* that had been deep fried in *yuck* and left to liquefy in a bottle of *gross* for two weeks. The dumpster he’d found *Steve* in had been full of fish guts and fly larvae. These are examples of Bad Dumpsters. Good Dumpsters are emptied regularly, have only the minimal smell necessary, and perhaps a nice layer of cardboard to sit on at all times.

The dumpster on the side of Steve’s building is a Good Dumpster. It’s been empty since the gallery downstairs went kaput and before that held only recyclable paper, so the smell’s not bad at all. More
an ambience, really, like a candle some ritzy lady would light in her den if she wanted it to smell like garbage.

The sun’s just moved high enough that it’s not reflecting off the base’s windows anymore when Steve comes strolling around the corner two hours early from Manhattan.

Bucky’s heart stops for two seconds before it starts lub-dubbing double-time. The tension snaps his spine straight and frozen, like a stray in the headlights of a taxi. Steve’s looking down at his phone and tapping at the screen with his thumb so if fate’s with him then maybe –

Carter trills and lifts her head sleepily. When she sees Steve’s shoulder passing around the corner she bolts up like her tail’s on fire, prancing to the edge of the dumpster and the end of her leash. She meows loudly after him, dancing on her toes.

Steve pauses with his back to the dumpster and Bucky freaks the fuck out. There’s no other word for it. One minute he’s there watching Steve’s head start to turn, all thick neck muscles and sinful scapula, and the next he’s holding a squirming cat close to his chest and closing the dumpster lid behind him as quietly as metal fingers can.

Footsteps crunch through the dirt and grit not ten feet away. “Kiiiiitty? Heeeere kitty kitty kitty.”

Carter’s squirms level up, wiggling a paw and the arch of her spine out of his grip. She growls and sinks her claws in when he squeezes to keep her still.

The steps pause and then come even closer. Steve’s voice is soft and higher pitched than Bucky’s ever heard it before. “Come on, kitty, don’t be scared. I’m not gonna hurt you, I swear. Come on, where ya hidin’?”

Oh, Christ. Bucky is not equipped to handle this.

He thinks he might actually black out for a second when Steve leans on the dumpster to look behind it, talking in that voice all the while. It’s soothing and terrifying all at once; even though his heart’s making a bid to escape his ribcage his shoulders want to sink down into nothing and let Steve carry him away. Like the breadth of Steve’s shoulders would be perfect to rest his head on, the curve of his neck the best place for his face to hide.

Eventually Steve gives up the hunt and walks back to the door. He’s slow about it, taking his time to look around some more, until finally Bucky hears his keys in the lock and allows himself to slump against the inside of the dumpster. Carter’s claws are sharp little points of agony in his wrist but she’s gone suspiciously pliant. It’s probably just a ruse to lull him into a false sense of security, except –

Bucky’s holding her muzzle closed with left hand. Shit. Shit shit shit.

He forces his hands open, flesh knuckles creaking and metallic ones whirring. She slides down his legs to land in a heap on the floor, limp and barely breathing, and Bucky wants to die.

She shakes her head and stumbles to her feet, wobbling a step or two and sitting flat on her tail. She looks at him. Cries.

He wants to hold her, hold her so close and nice and safe but doesn’t know if she wants him to, if he should, if he has the right to ever again.

She sneezes, opens her mouth wide, and cries for him again.

Something in Bucky’s brain gives way. His body – lightly, so very lightly – scoops his hands under
her ribs and pulls her close. She meows forlornly, sad-eyed and bruised, and lets him settle her on his lap. He runs soft hands down her back. Thinks about Steve’s soothing voice. Doesn’t realize he’s talking until the words stutter out with a crackle in his throat.  

\[\text{sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm so so sorry baby please please breathe for me please please please I'm sorry I love you please}\]

\[+ + +\]

The left side of Carter’s little mouth is purple under the fur. The bruising doesn’t look very deep and she’s moving around fine but Bucky’s still terrified. He checks her teeth – as close as she’ll let him, anyway – and there doesn’t appear to be any damage. She eats her wet food with relish, same as always. He follows her around the base until she hisses at him to give her a little private time at the litter box.

She lets him pull her close after, sleeping curled in his arms on the cot in the bedroom. Bucky rests his flesh hand on her side and listens to her breathing. He doesn’t sleep at all.

Bucky makes a point of being extra sweet to Carter for the next little while. He bikes her all the way down to Love Thy Pet so she can pick out a new toy and get looked over by the owner. Everyone in the store loves her and he can’t say he’s surprised; Carter’s gown leaps and bounds since he found her and although her fur’s not nearly as fuzzy as it used to be she’s still the cutest thing since Becca turned four and her two front teeth fell out at once.

She’s officially old enough to give catnip a try, so they go home with a little packet. Carter reacts to the smell pretty much how he expects her to, rolling all over the carpet and chattering happily to herself. She stares at the dust motes stirred up by the central air for five whole minutes before shooting off down the hall. Something crashes in the next room over and Bucky leaves her to it. There’s nothing he gives a shit about in there, anyway, so why not let her have some fun?

When the high wears off she meanders over to where he’s monitoring Steve on the couch and plops her butt right on the keyboard, again. She meows in her most demanding tone and flips so her belly’s showing and her legs are pawing the air.

Bucky’s so far gone over this dumb animal that he actually falls for it.

“Hey, baby girl. That's a cute little tummy you got there. You want a belly rub? Huh? Who's a good little - ow, ow! Motherf**k - teeth! Teeth - fucking - god damn it! What the hell, Carter? You can't just go around biting people. Don't wiggle your belly at me if you don't want me to pet it, the hell’s wrong with you? Fuck, they're like razors. I've been cut open with scalpels that hurt less, Jesus Christ.”

“\text{Mmmooooowrr.}”

“Don't purr at me, Satan, I'm mad at you. I don't care how cute you are.”

She blinks at him, slowly, and rolls onto her back again. Her belly’s soft and fluffy and Bucky’s an idiot.

“Agh! Fuck. God - why did I do that? I'm an idiot. I'm a sap and an idiot. Here, chew on the metal one, I don’t give a fuck anymore. Yeah, that’s right, dig in, there you go. Finest advances in kitty cat
toys. The next model will have catnip in the center and rattle when you shake it.”

There’s a tug on his pinkie. Carter goes very still.

“Fuck.”

Another tug, followed by several seconds of frantic thrashing, then stillness again.

“You’re stuck, aren’t you? Please tell me it’s not your tooth.”

“Mragaam.”

“Goddamn it. Come on, I’ll get the pliers. Stop squirming, you’ll only make it worse! You want to actually lose that tooth? Geeze. I swear you’re more trouble than you’re worth sometimes.”

“Raarrwwrrrrmm.”

+ + +

After rescuing Carter from his hand and her own hubris he forces himself to reevaluate exactly what he’s doing with his surveillance of Captain America. The constant monitoring just doesn’t feel right anymore. They were both adults. Steve didn’t need watching over twenty-four hours a day; he always used to hate it when people thought he was too weak to make it on his own, and Bucky had tried to respect that.

Bucky decides – after a long shower and an even longer conversation with himself – to pull back a little bit. He’ll limit his monitoring to in-apartment only and trust Steve to wander New York unsupervised.

He doesn’t need to watch Steve to feel safe, anymore. Bucky will just have to work on managing the anxiety that creeps up his throat whenever he loses visual, that’s all. No big deal.

Besides, Steve’s a goddamn superhero. The man hangs out with billionaires and gods and shit, how much trouble can he get into?

+ + +

Turns out, a fucking lot. Bucky should’ve known better than to ask.

+ + +

The thing with the robots is on every channel, and thank god for that because otherwise Bucky might have a fucking heart attack.
This is why Steve can’t be left the fuck alone. He leaves in a cab in his Casually Killing It button-down shirt – presumably heading to either some superhero supermodel gig or one of Iron Man’s parties – and three days later there’s a fucking city floating in the air.

Not that it’s Steve’s fault, not really. From the looks of things the science side of the Avengers are pretty much front and center on this one, though of course, Steve somehow found his way into it.

Bucky doesn’t question how he knows the language the newscasters are speaking. The country’s one of the little ones the Soviet Union broke down into, so it’s hardly a surprise. (He thinks he might have spent a summer there, actually, though his predominant memory of the place is the taste of strawberries and his brain stubbornly refuses to supply anything else.) There’s no news getting out of Sokovia once shit goes down but there’s a pretty good view of it vanishing into the distance from the neighboring town’s water tower.

Bucky’s heart nearly stops when Steve goes over the edge of a bridge after a civilian. He’s just a blur of blue and red in the distance, even with the frantic zooming of the camera, but Bucky knows it’s him. Christ, Steve.

The city rises higher and Bucky can’t tell if the little dots flying around are robots or planes or Iron People. He cycles through all the channels hoping for a better view. He even tries Fox News, for fuck’s sake, though he only listens to the announcer for about a minute before he yells and throws the laptop through the goddamn wall. Then he boots up his phone and refreshes all the pages again, just in case he missed something the first time.

It’s the worst four hours of Bucky’s life. And yes, that includes the torture and ice and living through the eighties. Steve’s there and maybe dying and there’s nothing he can do. Absolutely nothing.

The big ship flies away and Sokovia ends with an explosion over the sea.

The media’s frenziedly repeating anything that sounds even vaguely plausible, some channels reporting thirty percent population loss, others complete loss of life. That the robots were attacking the city, still others saying they were defending it from out of control superheroes (fuck you Fox News). No one’s heard from the Avengers. No one knows anything.

And then, then, some kid journalist on instagram posts a video of the big ship docking and evacuating refugees to the nearest hospital. It’s chaos, the organized kind that means triage and life or death surgeries. A woman sobs over a body on a stretcher. A child cries for his parents.

And in the middle of it all stands a steadfast beacon of exhaustion, yelling at a man standing over the crying woman. Bucky turns the volume up as high as it will go and can barely hear him through the static. “Damn it, Clint, if I have to tie you to that stretcher then so help me I will!”

It’s the most beautiful thing he’s ever heard.

Steve’s alive. He’s alive and well enough to cuss out an Avenger for being a dumbass.

God. God.

Bucky plays the video through again, looking for bloodstains or scorch marks on the uniform, then again just to watch the way Steve’s jaw moves against the helmet strap.

Once the news starts coming in more reliably and reports concur that the danger’s passed for the moment Bucky forces his body to uncurl from its protective ball around the phone. He wipes his face, plucks the pieces of the laptop out of the plaster, and shuffles a sleepy Carter into the backpack.
Steve’s apartment is cold and dark when Bucky lets himself in. He turns on every light he passes for the illusion of warmth, even the little one over the oven. Steve’s books are on the shelves still, his clothes in the closet, the pillows more baggy on one side of the couch than the other. Bucky sinks down onto the bed and the comforter puffs up around him a little, soft down over firm mattress, and has to wipe his face clean again. The faintest hint of cologne and soap drifts up with the displacement of air.

Steve was coming home.

+++ 

For the first time Bucky slept like shit while over at Steve’s place (strange dreams about falling and bombs and other things he didn’t really want to remember) and it must’ve showed the next morning when he ran errands around the neighborhood. Martin at the computer store was actually nice to him when he came in to buy yet another refurbished laptop. Adi from the Greenmarket slipped a card for her yoga studio in his little bag of strawberries and told him to drink some tea and get some rest.

There’s no debate about heading to Steve’s place after he’s got everything he needs. The president is talking about humanitarianism and lending aid to the people of Sokovia when Bucky boots up the new device. He turns off the news and watches another Joy of Painting episode instead. This one has a guest appearance by a rehabilitated baby squirrel. Bob Ross remains a fucking gift.

He draws a hot bath and treats himself to a lopsided bath bomb from one of the market stalls, soaking in the warmth down to his bones. He pops the lid off of the emptiest shampoo bottle and lets the smell linger until the scent of lavender and the spicy kick of Steve unknots the tension in his shoulders.

Steve’s alive. He's coming home.

+++ 

But not right away, of course. There are loose ends to tie up, stragglers to hunt down, and committees to report to; the final bits of battle just as tedious as any other job.

Bucky stays at Steve’s for a solid week, moving back and forth to the base only when necessary. At first he just needed to be near Steve’s things, but he finds himself scooping up Carter and coming right back whenever he leaves. Steve’s plant improves immensely under his care.

Honestly, Bucky doesn’t understand why Steve never spends any time there when his apartment is so comfortable.

He’s lounging on the couch reading a book he snatched from Steve’s shelf – a scifi bestseller, which wasn’t normally Steve’s idea of a fun read even though Bucky's absolutely loving it – when there’s the sound of a key in the lock and feet trudging up the stairs. It’s exactly the tread of a weary supersoldier and one he’d recognize anywhere.

Bucky’s in his socks and spread out like he owns the place.
Fuck.

He shoves his feet into his boots as fast as he can – *goddamn fucking laces what the fuck* – and slings his bag over his shoulder. Carter’s playing in the other room, running up and down the hall like a maniac for no particular reason, and Bucky wastes precious seconds coralling her. He slips out the window *just* as Steve tosses his bag on the couch.

Twenty seconds later he sticks his head out the open window and eyes the screen landing in the dirt below. “What the fuck?” he says, slowly.

Just around the corner of the building, Bucky clings to the bricks with all the strength his metal fingers can produce and all the mental cussing of an atheist at Christmas mass. He has Carter’s neck scruff clenched between his teeth, the cat glaring as loudly as possible while hanging completely limp.

How is this Bucky’s life right now? He clamps his jaw a little tighter, praying Carter sticks with kitty-pouting instead of the full-on Meow of Piteous Doom he can see building up in her.

Bucky slow-crawls to the roof and lets himself have a little heart attack. He lies there on the flat of his back, panting, and Carter tumbles out of his mouth. Even exquisitely groomed cat fur did not taste well on the palate. He’s gonna have hair between his teeth for days.

Carter spits at him, shakes herself so hard she stumbles, licks her paw a couple times, and climbs up to sit on his heaving chest, purring and sniffing his fuzzy lips. She licks his chin and starts kneading his right pectoral.

“Jesus Christ, cat. You’re gonna be the death of me.”
Later he watches Steve prowl around the inside of his apartment collecting the dishes Bucky meant to clean up from lunch. He plucks a ginger hair from the carpet and eyes it like it just saluted a vehement seig heil.

“What. The. *Fuck?”*

The scratch marks on the legs of his coffee table are obvious even over the video feed. Bucky’s also pretty sure he forgot to make the bed that morning. Oops.

The next day there’s a dish of milk outside Steve’s front door and Bucky’s the worst ghost in the history of wetworks.

The day after *that* the bowl is filled with water and sitting on a familiar paperback. *The Martian* has a new bookmark in it, just where Bucky left off.

Ugh. Fuck you, Steve.

There was probably cat hair over every inch of that apartment; God knows it’s all over Bucky.

Seriously. The hell is his life?

It becomes clear after both Near-Steve Incidents that Bucky’s training has become a little lax. He can’t bring himself to feel that bad about it, though. He’s not letting himself go to pot or anything, he’s just… He’s taking a break. He’s *allowing* himself to take a break.

So what if he’d rather spend his time binge-watching *Friends* while eating a bag of kettle corn instead of the four hundred pushups from his old training routine? Bucky’s earned the right to a little laziness, a little roundness in his cheeks.

Actually, he’s kind of proud of the softness edging around the hard planes of his face. He’s in charge of his body now and eating what he wants is part of that. And the city has so many possibilities. There’s boxes of donuts at the fucking grocery store just waiting there. Bacon flavored everything. Mints with caffeine in them. Fucking 24 hour cupcake machines. Like, you stick in money and it gives you a fucking cupcake, no shit.

People don’t know how good they have it.

Carter, on the other hand, is in desperate need of adjustment. He’s hesitant to enforce any kind of
structure over her life other than what he has to but being available for proper evacuation is critical; he has zero intention of ever leaving her behind. He needs to trust that extraction can be as quick as possible whenever they go off-leash in public - prancing around Steve’s apartment being a prime example.

So: kitty boot camp.

The internet has a lot to say on the merits of training cats and how one should approach such a potentially herculean task. Bucky and Carter start out small, with two sessions a day and lasting no longer than five minutes per session.

Bucky focuses on encouraging her to come when called and hopping into the backpack at his verbal command. It takes longer than it should, mostly because Carter quickly loses interest and the dissociative echo-memories attempt to reinforce his own training every other session. The use of a clicker is impossible.

He only ever uses positive reinforcements and rewards her with many treats. He tries to tell himself it’s not the same type of thing at all.

It still makes him feel like a dirty son of a bitch for doing it, though.

+ + +

The doodle for Bucky’s birthday this year is extra special; he’s pretty sure Google’s biting its thumb at the dicks who wanted them to take the first one down for “supporting terrorism.” It’s almost like they plucked it from the hazy jumble of his own memory.
The “Support Our Veterans” link is a nice touch. Bucky donates a couple hundred from his cleanest account.

There’s no cake this time. Bucky can admit he’s a little disappointed – he’d really wanted to see what was so special about it, considering Steve didn’t even like apples.

But no: instead of baking and moping around, Steve returns mid-afternoon from a week at Avengers Playhouse in a surprisingly good mood. He’s whistling so terribly off key Bucky doesn’t even recognize the song. He sets up a load of gym clothes on the heavy duty cycle without bothering to separate out the whites and hangs a suncatcher in the front window so the pieces of red glass reflect the last bit of light clinging to the horizon. It’s clearly handmade, with little beads and circles strung together with fishing line, but something about it sparkles. Steve gives it a little twirl with a finger and wanders away to go through his mail. Bucky can see his satisfied smile all the way across the street.

He orders curry for supper and devours it on the couch leisurely flipping through his new Netflix suggestions – mostly *Mysteries at the Museum* and romcom sitcoms, thanks to Bucky. *You’re welcome, Steve.*
It’s a lot more anticlimactic than Bucky was expecting for his birthday. The video feed’s pretty much just background noise to Bucky’s own spaghetti dinner by the time Steve chucks everything in the dryer and goes to take a shower.

He’s still in the shower when Bucky’s finished eating.

A full forty-five minutes later – more than twice as long as usual – Steve waltzes out of the bathroom in a cloud of steam and naked as the day he was born.

Okay. So this is different.

Steve wanders around the apartment turning out the lights until only the streetlamps and the moon are left to illuminate the miles of golden skin. He stretches all the way up onto his tippy toes, groaning, and sighs when his body sinks back down. His hand rubs from the back of his neck to his collarbone and further down, until it connects with a nipple. He strokes it, softly, and pinches when it hardens.

Bucky gasps with him. He can’t not.

Steve’s other hand slides around the curve of his hip to trail slowly across each muscle in his abdomen, caressing down to the thin trail of hair there. He tweaks his nipple again and his whole body arches into it, his breath hissing from between his teeth, jaw clenching as his head tips back. One hand slides up to circle his neck – just holding it there, the lightest pressure – and the other, the other moves down, down to circle –

Oh. Oh, Bucky’s in trouble here.

Steve strokes once, twice, body relaxing and tensing and shifting all at once, then lets go with a sigh. He turns and walks through the dark to the bedroom; Bucky’s breath catches at the sight. Steve Rogers from the rear is a goddamn national treasure, especially when one of those errant hands fondles the globe of an asscheek just before he slips out of view.

Bucky’s hand twitches against the keyboard. Typing one command will bring up the cameras in the bedroom full screen. It’s only one key.

The microphones from the hallway pick up the muted creak of bedsprings. The rustling sigh of high quality cotton. Bucky knows the thread count of those sheets. He knows how good they feel against his skin. He wonders what it would be like to feel it all over.

His finger hovers over the key but doesn’t press down. He turns the volume up instead and listens very, very carefully.

There’s a shh shh sound, rhythmic, just barely audible under the dip of the mattress. A sigh, the kind that’s the closing half of a gasp. Bucky knows that noise, too, knows the combination of it viscerally, deep in his gut. It’s hands touching his shoulders, chapped lips on his skin, rasping breaths against his neck.

It’s muscle memory. Christ. Christ, fuck, Stevie.

Steve’s panting, strokes wetter now, faster. The bedsprings creak as his heels dig in – god, Bucky can see it so clearly, can almost taste it. The sound in the room changes, echoes, slickness moving in the dark.

“Mmm.”

That’s it, that’s good. Just can’t keep quiet anymore, can you baby? Gonna be soon, huh?
“Buck – Buck –“

*Steve.*

“Bucky!”

The noise Steve makes is indescribable, but it’s one Bucky’s going to spend hours trying to capture in his notebook.

His groan is bitten off into panting moans and then Steve is laughing, remarkably, laughing. A bark of one shaky breath after another, happier than Bucky’s heard from him yet. One last sigh. “*Whoo.* Happy birthday, Bucky.”

Bucky’s eyes are closed, his body curled so far over the laptop his forehead’s resting on the screen. He’s panting, too, though laughter is the furthest thing from his mind.

“Happy anniversary, Steve.”

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He tosses and turns all night, long after Steve drifts off into an exhausted doze. His resolve doesn’t last past midnight.

Bucky watches the bedroom footage.

It’s easy to sleep after that. No wonder Steve’s smiling the next morning.

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The thing is, he’s not such a fan of other people in Steve’s apartment. It’s not territorial, exactly, it’s just… hard to explain.

Sam gets a pass, mostly because he’s only there long enough to pick Steve up and leave again. The Black Widow makes Bucky uncomfortable for reasons it hurts to contemplate, the echo-memories promising something terrible if he ever delves any deeper, but she makes Steve smile so he’s made his peace with her occasional appearance, too. Once, Thor comes over and he and Steve eat twelve boxes of pizza and binge the entire *Steven Universe* series. It’s a good day for everyone.

The man who barges in as soon as Steve opens the door is less than welcome. He paces around the living room like Carter assessing a new location, feeling the need to touch *everything*, moving stuff around. His gait is familiar, like gun powder and exhaust fumes in Bucky’s sinuses. Like every bad thing he’s ever done rolled into one five hundred dollar pair of shoes.

And he won’t stop *talking*.

The echo is bad – bad, bad, bad – and Bucky has to breathe through his belly for a long time to hold it back. By the time he’s finished counting by threes Iron Man has done a full circuit of the living room and left an empty venti cup on the side table. He does not use a coaster. Bucky hates him for it.
Steve doesn’t look that pleased about it, either. “What are you doing here, Tony?”

“I was curious. A teammate disappears for days at a time, wanders off when there’s a perfectly good apartment waiting for him at the clubhouse, I’m not allowed to be curious? I’ve heard so much about it that I wanted to see Captain America’s hidden oasis in the city for myself.” He spins the suncatcher around and squints through the windows toward the base across the street. It’s not much of a view.

“Color me surprised to find you holed up in a shitty half-studio in Crown Heights, of all places. And not even the good part of Crown Heights. Is that building condemned?”

“It’s fine, Tony. I’m pretty sure there’s still people living there.”

“Jesus. How desperate must they be?”

“It’s fine, Tony. Not all of us can live in skyscrapers.”

“No, no, all of you can. You can. You could. But did you? No. You moved to fucking Crown Heights.”

“I don’t want to live in a skyscraper, how about that?”

“And the modern multistory military base I so helpfully paid for that you said felt like home? How about that? Don’t want to live there, either?” Steve doesn’t answer but Bucky’s not sure if Tony even notices. “What the hell are you doing here, Steve? This place is two steps away from hipster central.”

“Hepster? I didn’t think jazz was still that big of a thing here.”

“What? No, hipster, like – you know what, never mind. I don’t think I could describe it inoffensively, anyway. Surely you’ve noticed things have changed about the old homestead. Or did I hallucinate the five hours you lectured me on gentrification?”

“It wasn’t that long. And it’s still terrible but this neighborhood’s not so bad.”

“Yeah, for a construction zone.”

Steve straightens from his slouch. “A Chitauri leviathan crashed into the street and took out most of the buildings with it. Three people died. The non-profit gathering funds to rebuild it turned out to be a front for organized crime, which turned out to be a front for Hydra. The people and businesses who are still here are some of the best you’ll ever meet. I’m fine with it how it is.”

Stark holds up his hands, face blank, and Steve deflates. He looks down and around until his eyes lock on the bookcase in the corner. The Martian’s on the top shelf, still bookmarked where he left it. “I’m sorry, Tony. I don’t know why I stay. I guess… It just feels like I need to be here. That’s all.”

Tony nods, unable to meet Steve’s eyes even behind his fancy glasses. His phone makes a small beep and he grabs for his pocket like he’s drowning for a distraction. He glances at it (a clear dark glass of some kind) and smirks. “Jesus, even the wifi sucks here. I’m getting more bars from the derelict across the –”

Screeching feedback blows out from the speakers, cutting off Stark’s comeback. Distantly Bucky’s aware of Carter taking off down the hallway but he’s more concerned with covering his ears and figuring out what the fuck just went wrong with the laptop.

The screen goes black for two seconds before streaming with command prompts and code he doesn’t recognize. A woman’s voice cuts through the static. “THIS CONNECTION IS
UNAUTHORIZED. STAND BY FOR HAL LEVELS OF BADNESS, DICKHOLE.”

What the - shit, shit, shit! The code’s scrolling faster down the screen and Bucky’s 90% certain the goddamn Iron Legion’s gonna be blasting in on his ass any minute now. He flails around, unplugging everything he can, even yanks the modem right out of the goddamn wall.

“NICE TRY, WANKER.”

Shit.

The feedback stops as suddenly as it started, though it’s hard to tell at first thanks to the ringing in Bucky’s ears. The speakers crackle and complain but Stark’s voice on the other end muddles through.

“– do you mean stop? There’s twenty-two unregistered devices in your apartment and you want to, what, keep them there?”

“Twenty-two? Really?” And there’s Steve, voice fading out in the middle but still noticeably calm. “That does seem a bit excessive –“

“Excessive?”

“– but I don’t mind, really. You can thank FRIDAY for doing the sweep but it’s not necessary.”

Silence from the apartment. Bucky hopefully taps the refresh key, then escape, but the screen stubbornly refuses to be anything but black.

There’s a hiss that he’s pretty sure is Steve sighing. “I’ve never been good at charades. You might as well say what you want to say, Tony. They already know you’re here, gesturing like an idiot isn’t going to change that.”

“You are an idiot!” The shout almost does in Bucky’s abused and sad speakers. “These bugs are still active, Steve! Who knows who is listening in right fucking now. Let FRIDAY destroy them like a good little Avenger and get the hell out of here.”

“My apartments have been bugged since I came out of the ice, Tony. I found the first one here when I was descaling my coffee maker a week after I moved in. Give me some credit.”

“But. But.”

“If we remove them then whoever put them there will just break in and do it again. They’ll probably do it anyway now that they know we know. I’m careful to keep my business outside of the apartment so no sensitive information gets through. And I swept to make sure there aren’t any devices in the bedroom or bathroom so I at least have a little bit of privacy. It’s a compromise I’m familiar with.”

“But Steve –”

“And we don’t actually know who they are. It’s probably Hydra. Or maybe what’s left of SHIELD. Or somebody completely new.”

“FRIDAY could follow the –”

“Or it could’ve been you, Tony. Although I’m guessing by your expression that we can eliminate that possibility.”
“I. Would never.”

“Mm hmm. And that little diversion you pulled on the helicarrier was what exactly?”

“You saw that, huh?”

“Please. Everybody saw that. And don’t tell me you didn’t just do the same thing ten minutes ago.”

Stark is quiet after that one. For all of fifteen seconds. Then there’s a thump and something shifting around. “Fine. Fine. But I’m getting the hell out of this rat trap. And FRIDAY’s scanning you before you set foot anywhere even Avengers affiliated again, capiche?”

“Capisco.”

“Show off.” The door opens and the stairs thump. But Stark can’t seem to leave without getting the last dig in edgewise. “No bugs in the bedroom, huh? Whatever could Captain America need privacy in there for, I wonder?”

Bucky, to his everlasting shame, blushes.

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It occurs to him as he’s waiting in line at the computer store exactly what that conversation meant. Steve knew he was being bugged. He knew he was being bugged and chose to fuck with whoever was doing it instead of tracking them down and taking them out. It explains the music, the nudity, burping through the alphabet – the thousand little things a person could do to piss someone off without being in the same room with them.

Steve listened to “Call Me Maybe” looped one hundred and forty-two times in a row.

Steve was a motherfucking asshole.

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He reboots his system. It reconnects to about half of the cameras in Steve’s place, enough to work with without having to make a special trip to restock. The video archive Bucky’s been keeping is pretty much gone, including the footage from his birthday. He’s sad to see it go.

The laptop’s wallpaper has been changed to an MS Paint drawing of a butt with an arrow and the word “you” next to it. It’s… charming, really, considering the source.

After reinstalling the new modem and external speakers – Martin had rolled his eyes at him but bagged them up without question – his first task is clear: google Captain America is an asshole.

The search doesn’t bring up nearly as much hilarity as Bucky had been hoping for. A few choice memes have apparently come and gone, thanks to the grindhouse of tumblr and buzzfeed. Most notably are “The A on Cap’s helmet stands for asshole,” “Son, just don’t,” and the artfully
photoshopped tour posters warning about VD. (Although, Bucky’s not entirely sure those last ones are photoshopped. The army’s a very strange place and shield puns are just their level of classy.)

About halfway down the results page there’s a link to an honest-to-god article, all respectful and professional looking. According to the date on the page this would’ve been a little while before Bucky was thawed for his last mission and shit hit the fan. Back when apparently Steve was seen as more of an icon of sparkling Americana than an actual person. And, according to Google, he used the word “asshole” in a very public interview and nobody said anything contrary about it.

Bucky opens the link in a new tab and makes a batch of popcorn to fully enjoy the idiocy that’s surely going to follow.

SON OF A LOST COUNTRY: CAPTAIN AMERICA TALKS PATRIOTISM, WAR, AND ENDURING FRIENDSHIP
A ROLLING STONE EXCLUSIVE BY FREELANCE AUTHOR DAVE RAMIREZ

Captain America is no stranger to interviews – since his dramatic reappearance during the Chitauri invasion reporters have begged him for sound bites on everything from the next presidential election to McDonald’s chicken nuggets. He’s been a public figure since the famous USO tour of 1943 and a metaphoric American icon ever after. This interview started off much the same, despite my attempts to dig a little deeper under the star spangled persona for a hint of the real Steve Rogers.

We met in a diner on his home turf, though he admitted he was planning to move to the DC area shortly after. He ordered coffee and pie (I’m sorry to disappoint America, but Cap prefers strawberry to apple in his baked goods) and brought up the same old party line: patriotism, freedom of speech, etc.

It wasn’t until I’d mentioned that I’d interviewed Jim Morita for a History Magazine piece that he began to show even the slightest bit of actual interest. One thing led to another and suddenly we were talking about Bucky Barnes, recipient of the Purple Heart and lifelong friend of Steve Rogers. I got the impression that no one had asked about him before and that while a very painful subject Cap had sorely needed an outlet to do just that. His whole manner changed, little ticks and gestures, even his Brooklyn Boy accent made an appearance, all because I said Bucky’s name. It was a rare peek at the person Steve Rogers used to be, and I feel privileged for having seen it.

Excerpt from the article. To read the full interview, look for issues on your local newsstand.

Jim mentioned you had a habit of doing stuff like that. (Jumping out of a plane, etc.)
Yeah, it’s never really improved over time, either. I’ve done some really stupid stuff over the years. Used to drive Bucky crazy.

Bucky Barnes? Why wouldn’t he approve of your shenanigans?
Well, Bucky was always cleaning up my messes, see? Even before the serum he always wound up dragging me out of some dumpster somewhere. Not that I didn’t give as good as I got, mind you. I’ve knocked out my share of teeth.
I still find it hard to believe you were ever so little. Believe it. Bucky used to say “little in face, little in brain.” Usually while he had me in a chokehold.

Hah! That’s like something my brother would do. He still listened to you in the field, though, did he? Bucky always listened to me, even when we were being jerks to each other. He’d let me know when I was being an idiot, when the risks were too high, but he’d follow me anyway if he couldn’t talk me out of it.

(Here the interviewer points out that Captain Rogers is often credited as one of the top strategists of our time. Rogers smiles bashfully and shrugs.)

It was still crazy. Just because it usually worked didn’t mean he approved. If he saw a flaw in the plan he let me know and we’d work to change it. I wouldn’t be half as good if I didn’t listen to my team.

Sounds like he was more instrumental in the war than we thought. You know, I don’t think I actually know a lot about Bucky? Not many people do. I mean, PS 181 does a whole unit on me – I had a kid ask me to sign his textbook, which was nuts – but not once does it mention Bucky? Like, at all? There’s folks on the street who know my shoe size but not that James Barnes existed. It’s like someone wrote him out of history or something. It’s not right.

All I can remember is that whole “Captain America saved his childhood friend” thing. And that, well… you know. That he was the only member of my unit to die. Yeah. I know.

What was he like? Really? Bucky was… Hell, Bucky was perfect. He was exactly what everyone wanted to be. Funny, charming, always smiling. Got along with everybody. And smart, too; you name it, Buck could do it. That’s what I thought, anyway.

(Captain Rogers is quiet for a moment. He looks out the window at the traffic and absenty tears pieces from a napkin.)

Thinking back on it, Bucky never had a bad day. Which can’t be true, right? Everybody’s got something. Makes me wonder what was real and what was just what he wanted me to see. He… I think he was really sad, a lot of the time, you know?

It wasn’t just during the war, either. I mean, it did change him, it changed all of us. That’s what wars do. But Bucky had a hard time shaking off the darkness of it, like it got caked under his fingernails with all that blood. He had trouble sleeping most nights; pulled double watch-shifts so the fellas could sleep just a little bit longer. Smiled less. I think the last time I heard him really laugh was even before Asshole started coming around.

Wait. Asshole? What, really? You don’t know about Asshole? How did those guys live this long and not mention that damn cat? Now there’s a war story for you. Okay, so there was this Hydra base in Italy we’d been watching for three days, right, and Bucky and Morita were positioned in a nest on this hillside, watching to see the right time to attack. And then this cat – some tabby housecat never been outside a day in its life – climbs the tree.
out of nowhere and makes itself at home right on Bucky’s back! We’re talking purring, kneading its paws, all that. Bucky’s beside himself, doesn’t know what the fuck’s going on, winds up getting so startled he shoots the general and his lackies ahead of schedule, starting off this whole fight no one was expecting and getting us all deaf for three hours from the resulting explosion.

**Hold on a minute. Are you talking about the Battle of Cisa Pass? I read about that in high school! A cat started all that?**

Yep. And here we are limping back down the mountainside, ears ringing, pissed as hell, and what should we find waiting for us at the bottom?

**The cat?**

The cat. Came right up and started purring like crazy, begging to be picked up and loved on. Not a fur out of place. It ignores us all completely and makes a beeline right to Bucky, who starts backing away like the thing’s on fire. He cusses it, kicks dirt on it, but that cat is determined to get even a little bit of affection. It climbs right up his leg and parks itself on his shoulder, happy as clams. I tell ya, it was one of the wildest things I’d seen up to that point and I’d personally witnessed a man rip his own face off, so my standards were higher than most.

**That sounds absolutely terrible, actually. That still the wildest thing or does something else top the list now?**

I don’t know, man. Aliens are pretty crazy. The internet’s practically a miracle. And - have you ever been close to the Hulk? It’s like, he’s a person but not. All that strength and energy hidden inside one guy. I swear you can hear his muscles moving. That shit’s pretty intense.

**Where did you think the cat came from? That area’s pretty remote, right?**

Not as much as you’d think. Maybe its house got bombed, its family killed off. Monty thought it might’ve been a pet since it wasn’t afraid of people. “Not the first thing orphaned in this bloody war,” he said. We never really knew for sure. It sort of adopted us, following us from camp to camp until Bucky just started carrying the thing in his pack, right next to his extra ammo. Called it Asshole so much he started answering to it and the name just stuck.

We all liked having something small and cute around to distract us between missions or on the march so we didn’t mind that it sprayed on everything. Picture Captain America and his Howling Commandos coming in hot from battle to film some newsies and we all stink like cat piss, every last one of us! The big heroes!

See, what people never talk about is how you look for things like that to keep your mind occupied in the downtime so you don’t dwell on the shit that’s actually happening. Everybody had their little hobbies, carving up lighters and such. For Bucky it was that cat. He kept it for weeks, even snuck it part of his rations to keep it happy. He used to talk to it, quiet, in the middle of the night when he thought no one could hear him. Honestly… I was damn glad that cat was there. If he couldn’t come to me at least he had something, you know?

**What happened to it? Please tell me there’s a happy ending.**

You know better than that. There are no happy endings in war. But I suppose this one ended sort of all right. We were on our way to meeting up with some informants and passed through this little town – shit, I don’t even know the name of it, it’d been shelled down to practically nothing, more rubble and loose limbs than an actual place to live.
And there was this kid sitting on the side of the road, just kind of quietly crying. Very dignified for someone who had absolutely nothing. Or maybe he’d reached the point where the crying was just a reflex and there wasn’t any feeling behind it anymore, I don’t know. But Bucky sees this kid and stops in his tracks, just watches him for a minute, then looks down to where he’s carrying Asshole, rubbing on his chin a little.

I don’t know what Bucky said to the kid – I was hauling up the back, covering our flank just in case – but next thing you know Buck’s grinning and handing Asshole over, plopping him down right in the kid’s arms. He has to pry the thing’s claws from his jacket to make it let go but he’s still smiling. Tells the kid to “look out for the little ball of scruff” and just walks away, whistling like he was on some Sunday stroll and not ankle deep in some puddle of muddy farmer or something.

The kid was so happy, just beaming. Asshole let himself get pet for a second until he realized Bucky was actually leaving him there. Then he meowed something awful, the most pathetic thing you ever heard. And Bucky tripped over nothing. I could see his knees fucking shaking from down the line but he kept going anyway. Just kept going. Whistling.

He wasn’t the same after that. It was hard to tell, though, really, because there wasn’t that much time. The mission led to information on Zola’s whereabouts, which led to the train. I think… I think he knew. Somehow I think he knew. Like he’d been preparing himself to say goodbye all that time. Bucky never expected to come home from the war. And everything good he had was just something to give away.

(Captain Rogers is quiet for a minute, staring out the window. Then he shakes himself and straightens, smiling. Cap’s back.)

Sorry about that. Probably shouldn’t have said all that. Didn’t mean to get all maudlin.

That’s okay. It’s enough to break your heart, huh?
Yeah. You said it, pal.

Bucky stares at the screen until it goes to sleep. He follows it down into the empty blackness and floats in the not-place of thought for a long time. It’s only Carter chewing on his ankle to complain about the inch wide circle at the bottom of her food dish that drags him back up again.

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A month after that, on a warm day in June, Peggy Carter breathes her last breath.

Bucky knows it’s happened before the news reports or the hashtags, because Steve knows. He’s just come back from a scouting trip in Nigeria with the other Avengers when the phone rings.

“Hey, Sharon, what’s…” Steve’s face stills, falls blank. “I see. When?” He nods, breathing out one hard breath. “No. I’ll find my own way. Thank you for telling me.”

He hangs up, stares at the phone for a second, then taps the screen to make another call. “Tony. Yes, I heard. Are you going? Right. Can I… Of course. Tell him to honk and I’ll come out. Thank you.”
Steve ends the call and stares at the phone for one minute, then two.

His face crumbles, his other hand covering his mouth to muffle the sobs that try to break out. He drops the phone and runs to the bedroom. He slams the door and collapses on the floor as soon as it’s shut, crying like the world’s ending.

Watching him makes Bucky feel a little like it has. His eyes travel past Steve to the album on the table and he knows what’s happened. Knows one of the only things that could bring Steve so low.

Oh. Oh, Steve.

Bucky touches the screen, his heart breaking from the need to curl around Steve’s shaking shoulders. His arms physically ache to wrap around him, even the one that hasn’t really felt anything at all since 1945.

Muscle memory. Christ. It’s all he can do not to drop the laptop and run right over there, surveillance be damned.

A car honks outside, echoing through the security feed and out on the street. Steve wipes his nose and his face, reaching blindly to pull himself to standing. His legs are shaking and it takes two tries for him to make it to the dresser. He changes his shirt and gathers up bits and pieces into an overnight bag. His suit’s already hanging up. He takes a final deep breath before opening the door, back straightening slowly, painfully.

It’s hell watching Steve pull himself together enough to leave the private sanctuary of his bedroom. Bucky can see him shutting himself away, turning it off. Forcing himself to become a completely different person. Bucky understands the freedom in that, though he despairs that Steve had to learn it somewhere along the way. Captain America doesn’t cry.

Captain America doesn’t, but Bucky sure does, and is, sobbing like a child into his cat’s fur. It’s stupid. He didn’t even, he didn’t even know Peggy Carter, not that well, and he’d liked her even less. She’d been Steve’s girl and nothing less than a professional to Bucky. She’d called him Barnes for fuck’s sake.

It’s just – it’s so unfair. All of this. Why can’t Steve – why couldn’t they just be happy, just for once?

The car drives away and Bucky swears there and then to be at the funeral. It would probably be in DC, which meant it’ll be practically impossible for him to attend the service unseen considering the amount of security that will no doubt be involved. And of course Steve could never know he was actually there. But Bucky had to be there for him all the same.

The train’s not an option. He could rent a motorcycle and drive there but Bucky isn’t sure he trusts himself behind the wheel right now. There’s a bus that could take him straight to DC but that would mean over three hours on public transportation, potentially sitting next to a stranger. Maybe the bike wasn’t such a bad idea after –

Carter sits up in his lap, ears twitching. She hisses at the door.

The motion sensor alarm goes off. Someone’s in the building downstairs.

Bucky freezes, precious seconds he can’t afford to lose, then dives for the floorboard where he’d cached a duffle bag ages ago. The laptop follows its emergency program, bringing up the cameras trained on the main entrance. The agents aren’t even bothering to hide properly anymore now that their cover’s blown. Their faces are hidden behind dark ballistic shields but he recognizes the way they move.
He pulls out as many guns as he can, shoving extra ammo in the pockets of his sweatpants. He hits a button on the keyboard and the machinegun on the stairwell kicks up; the agents scatter behind whatever cover they can find. It won’t hold them off for long.

“Carter! Evac! Evac now!” Carter jolts up from where she’d been watching him tensely on the couch, sprinting into the backpack and making herself small and hidden. Safe. Good girl. One fucking thing in his favor.

Another alarm rings out. Fuck, they’ve surrounded the building. And those are just the operatives he can see; there are probably more on the roof and in vans down the alley.

His second and third exits are cut off and he’s fucked fuck fuck. He’ll have to go out the window.

The agents in the stairwell are setting up a machine just out of the gun’s range. He can’t see what it is but they turn it on just as he’s buckling the pack around his chest. There’s a squealing sound, then a man’s voice speaking Russian bursts through the speakers.

“LONGING.”

Bucky stops in his tracks.

“RUSTED.”

Fuck. That’s – that’s an old code, that goes deep. Bucky hasn’t heard it, hasn’t thought about it since the nineties, holy fuck. Where did they even –

“SEVENTEEN.”

He knows those words, knows what they’ll make him do.

(comply comply comply)

He has to get the fuck out of here. But – but first he has to make it through the next thirty seconds; the agents won’t attack en masse until the code’s had a chance to work. He’s got time. He can do this. He just, he needs a distraction.

“DAYBREAK.”

The last time Steve listened to music had been, uh, Tuesday, yeah, Tuesday. Bucky hasn’t compressed the files yet so they should be in the library still. His hands are shaking so badly he can’t use the tracking pad.

“FURNACE.”

FUCK.

Command keys, okay. He pulls up the video file and cranks the volume so hard the knob comes off. The latest pop nightmare Steve was listening to blasts out of the speakers but he can still hear the words playing underneath – maybe it’s because the burnt-out pit of his brain knows what comes next but he still fucking hears it.

(ready)

Bucky covers his ears and starts yelling along to the music.

“Oh Mickey, you’re so fine! You’re so fine, you blow my mind! Hey, Mickey! Hey hey hey Mickey!”
He stomps his feet to the beat between words.

“Oh Mickey, you’re so fine! You’re so fine, you blow my mind! Hey, Mickey! Hey hey hey Mickey!”

He stomps again, flipping the coffee table just in time for the door to burst in and a noiseless pulse to shoot through the room. His left arm goes heavy and dead. The echo-memories scream at him.

He can’t hear the code anymore, mostly because it’s been replaced by a high-pitched tone, the eeeeee getting louder and louder in his ears. They’re armed with electric prods and know how to use them. There’s guns, too, because of course there are.

Hydra’s not fucking around anymore. Neither is Bucky. Nonviolence can shove a stick up its ass.

He takes out the first wave in a spray of bullets and hellfire but they swarm in like locusts, breaking through the window and pounding up the stairs. It’s impossible to take them out one at a time, and wide shots without proper cover can only delay them until he’s out of bullets for the big guns. Instead he takes the fight in close and breaks every neck he can reach. He always did enjoy knifework.

One of the agents gets a lucky shot into his leg just before Bucky slashes his eyes out and he goes down screaming onto the prod of the agent behind him. It’s a dart, heavy and tearing through the muscle, sending god knows what through Bucky’s bloodstream.

It’s hard to think with the eeee noise in his ears. Something’s on fire or there’s gas in the air.

An agent tries to tackle him and gets disemboweled for his trouble, a noble sacrifice. But it knocks him off balance enough that the others seize their chance. They hit him on the head until everything goes fuzzy, the voltage to his gut and his throat (fuck that hurts) a familiar crescendo. He gets another dart of meds in the same leg, which is just a dick move on their parts. It immediately crumbles out from under him.

He goes down.

A beam of yellow light cuts through the smoke and the sound. It splits everyone standing in half, or at least Bucky thinks it does. He might be hallucinating, either from the head injury of the drugs, because a purple thing floats through the wall and straight towards where he’s laying slumped in a puddle of someone else’s organs and blood.

Unconsciousness has never come upon him so strangely, and Bucky’s been knocked out a lot.

His vision’s fading, black and red spots taking up the view, but there’s something he needs to worry about, something on the floor. He scoots toward it, dragging his arm and his leg behind him.

The backpack’s knocked on its side, notebook spines broken and pages fluttering out. Carter – there’s – Carter –

He hopes the purple thing kills him. He hopes he never wakes up. He’s not sure Steve can withstand fighting him off again. He doesn’t want to go back.

Steve.

He’s so scared.

Bucky comes to in a hospital. Which is a novelty, considering he usually wakes up shivering wet and surrounded by assholes. It’s clearly not a Hydra or Red Room base, unless they’re running things very differently these days, but an actual hospital.

His purple hallucination is sitting quietly in a chair next to the bed, watching as Bucky assesses the room around him for threats and comes up empty. His arm is working again, thank god; whatever jolt they’d given to it worn off. His other arm is connected to an IV. Bucky does not like it.

He takes a closer look at the purple thing, which is man-shaped but has the hard lines of a machine. It’s wearing a sweater like Mister Rogers.

“What the hell are you?” And there’s the damage to his throat from the stun batons; talking hurts like a bitch.

The purple thing must pick up on that because it leans over with an ice chip, resting it against Bucky’s lips. There are any number of poisons or sedatives that can be administered through something as simple as frozen water, but Bucky’s lost the ability to give a shit. He’s fucking thirsty.

Bucky opens his mouth. The ice is cool and perfect and melty on his tongue.

“A synthetic being created from organic tissue and enlaced vibranium.” Purple Guy waits until Bucky’s sucking on the chip before answering him. It has an English accent, which explains the sweater but not anything else.

“So. You’re a robot, then. Why are you purple?”

“I…” It blinks, the lenses in its eyes clinking musically as they realign. The sound’s almost lost over the machines Bucky’s hooked up to. “No one’s ever asked that question before. I’m not sure.”

“Okay. So who am I talking to, really?”

“Excuse me?”

Bucky shifts in bed. He’d rather be on his feet for this conversation.

The robot pushes him back down, gently but firmly. “Don’t try to get up. You’ve received serious muscle damage to your leg. The doctors are fairly certain you’ll recover but it’s best not to take chances. If you’d gotten even a percentage of that voltage nearer your heart you’d be dead.”

“They knew better. Wanted me alive.” Alive, compliant, and theirs. *Fuck you, Hydra.* At least he was momentarily out of the woods there. Except now he had to deal with whatever the fuck was going on with this random ass replicant rescuing him for no reason. “If you’re a robot then who’s controlling you? Who do you work for?”

“I don’t work for anyone. My thoughts and actions are my own.” It offers Bucky another ice chip and leans back in the chair, crossing its legs. The gesture is far too precise to be natural. “Mr. Stark had some concerns about Captain Rogers’s situation and left instructions for FRIDAY to continue monitoring the signals leading away from his location. Hydra’s attack set off several of her alarms but since Mr. Stark was indisposed I came instead.”

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Indisposed. Mr. Stark was indisposed because Peggy Carter was dead and he was going to her funeral. Stark. Stark and Peggy. He was –

*Howard Stark: flying car – going to the future – say goodbye.*
*Howard Stark: swerving car – grab the briefcase – say goodbye.*


Bucky breathes hard through the echo for a minute, watching the purple robot *not* breathe. It’s certainly… grounding to have the thing nearby. Howard Stark couldn’t have come up with something like that if he tried. So that meant it had to be the other one, the son. The one with the flashy goatee.

“Tony Stark.” The name’s hard to say, but letting the thoughts run loose in his brain is even harder. Another deep breath in and a seven-count out and Bucky’s back in business. “Why do you call him *mister* if you don’t work for him?”

The robot tilts its head, having waited patiently for Bucky to get a grip. “I suppose the title is a holdover from my base personality. It’s polite. I haven’t given it much thought, really.”

For all that it had the air of a philosopher it didn’t look like this thing was thinking about much, did it? “Uh huh. And what does he call you?”

“His Vision.”

“Vision. Sure.” Bucky plucks at the IV port. The skin’s healing around it already and he’s pretty sure it’s doing more harm than good at this point. The pain was manageable, anyway. “You just a machine or something with a brain of its own? ‘Cause I gotta tell you, that sounds more like a callsign than a name to me, buddy.”

Stark’s Vision sits up straighter, the affected casualness banished without a trace. “I have a brain. It’s more advanced than any.”

“Of course it is. But is it yours to think with or someone else’s?”

It blinks again, mouth hanging open slightly. The yellow gem on its forehead catches the light strangely – Bucky blinks the glare away, and Vision’s leaning back in the chair again, playing at being a person. “I can understand why you’d be concerned about that, considering what you’ve been through.”

“Just don’t want to spend my time talking to a toaster, is all.”

Yeah, no, the IV has to go. The tape around the edges peels away easy but the needle comes out less so; his blood pumps quick out of the vein and a few drops hit the sheet before Bucky can cover the hole with his thumb.

A pad of gauze hovers just inside his reach, stark white against Vision’s offering hand. “Thanks,” Bucky says, quietly, not looking up. “And thanks for the other stuff, too. Helping out in the fight, I mean. That was you, right? I wasn’t hallucinating that part?”

Vision nods and steeples his fingers together. “FRIDAY indicated they were using nonlethal
methods of detention, though they clearly weren’t being very gentle about it.”

Bucky recognizes an open-ended question when he hears one. He’s just not sure what the robot’s fishing for. He nods and immediately regrets it, a spike of pain traveling around the base of his skull. It passes slowly, like ice down a river, but when his head clears he feels significantly better.

He sits up a little straighter in bed. “So what happens now?”

“Now I imagine you’ll heal. The doctors—”

“No, brainiac, I mean with me. With you and me.” Bucky gestures around the room. The only guard is the Vision, which is probably sufficient given Bucky’s current state. There aren’t any restraints, either, something that sends waves of relief through Bucky’s chest. He’s not sure how he would’ve reacted if he’d come to being held down.

“You mean the fact that you are an internationally wanted terrorist or that you’ve been legally dead for seventy-one years?”

“Both.” Bucky sighs, letting his head thump back to the pillow. “Are you going to turn me in?”

Vision tilts his head and purses his lips. The gemstone glitters. “I’m not sure yet. Given the evidence it would appear that you acted under someone else’s authority. Perhaps more of a victim than a villain? Still. There needs to be balance in the world. Justice brought about.”

The huff of air irritates his throat. “Justice? For who? The people I killed? Their families? Me?” Bucky shakes his head. “I’ve been down this road before. It never ends, not really. There’s nothing I can do to make up for what I did. Nothing to take away the pain of it for anyone. Violence begets violence. It wasn’t my fault but I still did it, you know?”

“I wonder,” the hint of mischief in Vision’s tone draws Bucky’s attention, “what Captain Rogers would have to say about that?”

It startles a smile out of him. “I wouldn’t break out your ‘WWSRD’ stickers yet, man. Steve’s judgment tends to get a little skewed when Hydra’s involved.”

“And you. The Captain was willing to give his own life for yours, multiple times, correct? Assuming you are who he thinks you are.”

“Well. That’s the million dollar question, isn’t it?” Bucky looks down at where his hand’s been picking apart the gauze. The metal wasn’t initially designed to fidget but it’s certainly something Bucky’s trained it into over the past few years. “Time’s not a clear line, Vision. You live long enough and you see that. Who I am today is informed by who I was yesterday; whether or not I wanted to be that person is irrelevant. And if they take that person away, or parts of that person… you’ve gotta decide if you’re gonna fight to get yourself back. If you’re going to try to fit the old you into the pieces of the new. It’s a lot of hard work.”

Vision shifts in the chair, leaning forward. “May I ask: why do you stay?”

“What?”

“I…” Vision licks its lips and looks away for a moment. Bucky is struck by how human – and how very young the machine looks. “Mr. Stark believes that the world isn’t ready for someone like me yet. At first I agreed with him. But I have led a very sheltered existence up until now. I’ve spent no real time among people – strangers – and I wonder if I am letting myself remain… misinformed about the way the world works. You don’t seem to have such doubts. You could have taken your
freedom and done anything with it, gone anywhere. And yet you decided to return to the one place you knew the enemy would find you and defended it. Why?”

Christ. Bucky shakes his head and shrugs, staring up at the ceiling. “Why do any of us stay?”

There’s a thousand answers to that question, all half-truth enough to feel real. He could say it hadn’t occurred to him to leave or that he had nowhere else to go. That it was the place he just happened to stop running. That he stayed because he was scared to be free. Because the only time he slept through the night was when he snuck under Steve’s sheets. Because Steve was there.

But like names, there’s really only one answer that feels right.

“I stay because I don’t want to leave.”

Vision sighs. “You are a very noble man, Mr. Barnes.”

“Bullshit. I’m a tired man, is what I am. And enough with the mister shit, all right?” Bucky closes his eyes and leans back against the pillow. He feels exhausted and sick, bruised inside and out.

The room is quiet for a long stretch of time. Tears build unexpectedly behind his eyes. “When you were wiping the floor with those Hydra shits you didn’t happen to see a little cat there, did you?” Vision doesn’t answer and Bucky’s heart goes arrhythmic. “She’d have been small and ginger? The cutest thing you’ve ever seen on four legs.”

“I’m sorry but no. Though to be fair I wasn’t actually looking. Did… did you have a pet?”

It’s the fucking past tense that does Bucky in. He curls on his side, cringing and crying nonsensically, little sobs that drip snot and tears all over the pillow. Vision rests a strangely cool hand on his leg and Bucky sucks up all the awkward comfort he’s willing to part with. The crying fit passes, eventually, leaving Bucky wrung out and hollow. Vision touches the wall and the lights dim.

Bucky breathes into the silence. Vision does not.

Just before the exhausted darkness overwhelms Bucky again he hears Vision say, quietly: “A friend calls me Viz. I like it.”

Bucky holds out a hand. “Nice to meet you, Viz. I’m Bucky.”

They shake like two people meeting one another for the first time. Then Bucky tucks his hand back under his chin and hopes the dreams will be gentle with him tonight.

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Vision is gone when he wakes up, leaving Bucky to the mercies of doctors who ooh and ahh and are overly concerned with both the type of injuries he’s received and the rate at which they were healing. He checks himself out against their advice – shivering and blinking hard to keep the echoes at bay – and climbs out the window. (He has to break it first; hospitals didn’t believe in letting in a breeze nowadays?)

He takes the bus back to base, still in acceptable amounts of pain. The limp and blood-flecked cough isn’t anything to write home about but he still manages to put on a burst of speed when he gets to the
end of the block.

He can see the base is trashed from the street, but there’s no police tape blocking off the building. The dead agents are all cleared away – something else he owes Viz – but the damage and blood they left behind is still a problem.

It’s quiet. The backpack is still crushed and empty on the floor.

“Carter?”

There’s movement from the back room, subtle, something shifting. He tears the door off the broken hinges – the smell of the litter box is intense –

And Carter blinks up at him, sleepily, curled in a pile of his dirty clothes on the floor.

God. Thank god.

Bucky’s knees drop out from under him and he cradles her fragile body in his hands. Not a scratch on her. Thank fucking god.

He sinks his throbbing head onto her side and cries into her fur. She lets him, rolling until she can rub against his chin, her purrs vibrating against the metal in his shoulder. Then she mews, loudly, chattering at him and prying away from his grip. She bats him on the head until he lets her go.

She looks at him balefully and turns her back, cleaning her paw as if he wasn’t even there.

“Hey. Hey.” He touches her back and she hisses at him, growling, paw still raised and glaring, little claws just barely showing. His breath leaves his body all at once. He has to force himself to take it back in again.

Carter refuses to look in his direction no matter how he sweet-talks her. She hisses and growls when he comes too close to the pile of clothes.

Bucky tries to appease her by filling up her water and food dishes, which she ignores even though they were both empty. He’s still bloody and antiseptic from the hospital so he tries to wash the smell away with the hottest shower the pipes will allow. He cleans up the mess from the fight, picking up all the little slivers of glass from the window and tucking what was left of the orchid back into its pot. The rug is ruined but the floor underneath’s okay enough once he’s washed it. A sheet over the empty frames will have to do until he can figure out where to get more tinted glass. By the time he’s done his leg is bleeding again and the base hasn’t been cleaner since before he moved in.

Carter follows him from room to room but still refuses to even look at him and Bucky’s just – he’s so fucking sorry. He didn’t mean to leave. He never meant to leave her. He fucking promised he’d be there until the end and he left. It’s – fuck. It’s fucking him up.

He tries to touch her again, only once, but she hisses and yell-meows to keep him away. He doesn’t know what to do.

The sound of Steve’s keys clattering in the dish by the door have them both twitching, Bucky looking across the street to watch Steve slump inside and Carter’s ears swiveling. The laptop’s screen is cracked and battered but it still miraculously connected to the monitoring program; it’d been habit more than anything else that had him turn it on in the first place.

Steve looks even more exhausted than Bucky does, if such a thing were possible. He’s still nothing less than the picture of perfect health except for the dark circles under his eyes and the deep lines on
his forehead. He’s wearing a dark suit that does nothing for his pale color –


Steve lets the overnight bag drop next to the couch with a *thwump*, the tie quickly following it. He slips off his shiny shoes and stands there in his shirtsleeves staring at the empty apartment.

“Is – is anyone there?”

Oh.

“I know you’re listening. I know you can… Bucky? Is this you?”

Oh *fuck*.

“Please, Buck, I – I really missed you today, Bucky.” Steve takes a ragged breath and covers his mouth with his hands. When he drags them away there’s a smile there instead, wobbly, and tears are welling up in his eyes. “Of course, I always miss you. Every goddamn day, it’s pathetic. You’d make so much fun of me for mooning around the way I do.”

Bucky didn’t know about *that*. Then again, he didn’t know he was a sympathy crier, either, and look at him now.

“I feel like I’m disappearing, Bucky. I’m not…” His voice fades to a whisper, so faint the speakers barely pick it up. “I’m not all the way here. I need you.”

Steve takes a deep breath and shakes his head, wiping his face. “Ugh, I’m an idiot. I’m a fucking idiot.” He whips off his vest and throws it to the couch on his way to the kitchen and out of the camera’s line of sight. “I’m an idiot and this is fucking Hydra listening to me talk to myself.” Steve sniffs heartily and then lets out a deep breath. “Well, whoever the fuck you are, you left a bag of cat food in my cabinet.”

There’s the distinct sound of paper rustling open and dry food pinging off a bowl. Bucky freezes –

And Carter bolts right out the window, skirting under and around the sheet like it’s not even there.

He sits there staring after her, blinking. His heart's fucking breaking all over the place and now Carter’s running away? What the *fuck*?

Bucky jumps out the window, too, getting tangled in the sheet and damn near ripping his other arm off. He falls to the ground in a ridiculous heap, all of his bruises making sure he remembers they’re there. He spies Carter across the street, hopping from the Good Dumpster to the ledge under the living room window, a sizable chunk of brick where the gallery’s awning used to be attached and the perfect size for a cat highway. She rubs her back along the window, meowing.

Bucky climbs up onto ledge behind her and grabs her in a hug, shaking and crying. Carter twists until he loosens his grip enough to let her know she can escape if she wants to; it calms her down immediately and she settles into his arms, purring like a motorboat. Bucky’s so goddamned drained he slumps down exactly where he is, legs braced against the bricks and forehead thunking against the glass.

“God, god, don’t ever do that again. Don’t ever scare me like that ag– “

Bucky’s face isn’t three inches from someone’s feet. The toes clench onto the floor like the room’s suddenly spinning and they’re anchoring in. There’s kibble dropped all over the carpet.
Bucky knows those toes. It’s insane that he can recognize someone by their goddamn toes but he definitely can, even with the fancy dress socks. Steve always did have big feet; the serum didn’t bother to change that. He looks up from the knobby ankles to the hard calves, past the sinful thighs and hips, and then Steve’s kneeling there, obscuring the rest of his view.

Steve’s jaw moves and he makes a noise, aborted, maybe the first syllable of Bucky’s name. He lets out a breath that fogs up the glass.

Bucky sighs. “Hey, Stevie.”

He laughs a little, voice muffled but legible. “Hey, Buck. Long time no see.”

Both their foreheads are pressed to the glass now. They’re gonna leave streaks behind.

Steve rubs his thumb over the carpet, nervously, unconsciously. “I can’t believe you’re really here.”

Carter rubs her head against Bucky’s jaw. “And that you have a cat?”

This is just… unbearably awkward for a reunion. Bucky shifts his weight and damn near falls off the ledge. He flinches when he catches himself with his bad leg and Steve sees it, connects it with the bruises on his forehead, the burn on his neck. “Buck, what – what happened? Are you hurt?”

“It’s a long story. Hydra jumped me after you left.”

Carter looks up when he says her name, meowing happily and pawing at his mouth. Bucky moves his head away and almost brains himself on the wall. “No. Not you, the other one.”

“Carter? You named your cat after Peggy?”

“Uh, yeah.” Shit. Bucky’s named his cat after Steve’s dead girlfriend. He’s a dickhead. “In hindsight that might not have been the best idea. It just… seemed appropriate at the time I guess, I don’t know. The cat liked it and I didn’t have the heart to tell her no, so –“

“No, no. It’s good. I think,” Steve sniffs and wipes at his eyes. It hurts Bucky’s chest seeing him trying to be strong. Or maybe not trying – Bucky’s sure there’s more strength in that sad smile than any serum could provide. “I think Peggy would approve. She’d probably laugh her ass off about it considering how much Asshole used to hate her.”

Yeah, well. Pretty sure that was mutual. What with all the sneezing.”

Steve gasps in a breath, the tears falling unchecked now. “Peggy was allergic. You remember that?”

“Yeah. Kinda. It’s like – echoes? But Steve,” Bucky breathes deep, gathering his courage, rubbing Carter’s ear. “It’s not the same, you know? Just because I remember bits and pieces doesn’t mean I’m the same person. There’s too much.”

“I know that, moron. You think I don’t know that? I care anyway.”

Jesus, this is stupid. They’re both so stupid. They’re having a goddamn heart-to-heart through a
window while Bucky’s ass is going numb from half hanging off a slab of concrete.

“I’ve got to – Steve, I’ve got to get off this ledge. I can’t stay here, this is ridiculous.”

Steve blinks and wipes his nose, backing away from the window in a hurry. The lovely openness of his face is shutting down again – Bucky thinks he’ll hate that look from now until forever. It’s even worse up close. Steve’s talking himself into letting Bucky go.

Fucking idiots. “You gonna open this window or am I gonna have to break down the door?”

Steve’s smile is like sunshine. “Oh. Shit, yeah, hold on.”

He actually has to crank open the second window over, since leaning against this one is the only thing keeping Bucky from falling twice. His leg cramps when he uncurls from his spot on the ledge and it’s somehow worse than getting stabbed there in the first place. He breathes through it. Bucky has to breathe through the anxiety of letting his hold on Carter go slack, too. If she bolts again –

But Carter just licks his chin and walks daintily straight through the opening without hesitation, a queen returning home to her grateful subjects. She twines around Steve’s ankles and mrrs at him. Bucky’s entrance to the apartment is a little less graceful, though he does wind up at Steve’s feet, too.

Steve helps him up and over to the couch. He only trips over Carter’s enthusiastic shin rubbing once, which is more than Bucky can say. She cries at them both until Bucky scratches behind her ears like she likes, then disappears down the hall. It’s quiet between them for a long minute, Steve slowly sinking until he’s perched just on the edge of the couch.

He looks at Bucky, taking in the sloppy hair and red eyes. Bucky’s sure he’s a mess – he hasn’t combed his hair out since the shower so it’s curling and messy as it dries, and there’s bruises all over. He didn’t bother getting dressed while he was cleaning, either, just threw on some yoga pants and a t-shirt. But Steve’s looking at him like he’s a marvel. “You’ve been here the whole time, haven’t you? I knew it. Somehow I knew it.”

“Yeah. Took up shop in the base next door. Could’ve saved your buddy some frequent flyer miles, I guess.” Bucky shrugs. He was here now. The reasons he stayed away don’t seem quite so important.

The corner of Steve’s mouth quirks. “Heh. Frequent flyer. I think that’s his gmail address, actually.”

“Should be. Considering. With the wings and all.” Fuck. Talking to people used to be easier than this, didn’t it? He used to be suave for fuck’s sake. And it’s not like he hasn’t been practicing, it’s just that Steve fucking ties his tongue into knots. “Was the, uh, funeral all right? I meant to come and show my respects, but.” Bucky gestures to his, well, everything.

“It was nice. Tasteful.” Steve sighs and sinks back into the couch. “Hard.”

“You weren’t there by yourself, were you?”

“Sam came. Frequent flyer, right?” Steve laughs a little, sadly. “Natasha showed up, too. The redhead from the bridge? With the thighs? I don’t know if you remember her.”

(girls with sticks – one, two – pointe – point – bang.)
“Yeah, I remember. It’s hard to forget someone like that. Peggy, too. She was real classy, Steve, and just as crazy as you are.”

“Yeah, she was.” Steve fidgets in his seat. He undoes one cuff, then the other, then just rolls his sleeves up altogether. Bucky just watches him. It’s a hard habit to break. “This is weird. We never talked about Peggy before, Buck. Even when we should have.”

Bucky tucks his hair behind his ears; Peggy had always been so put together and here he was looking like a schmuck. Steve, too, come to think of it; even covered in blood and mud and weighing twenty pounds soaking wet he was always worth looking at.

Bucky plucks a string from the hem of his shirt and lets Steve talk.

“After Azzano we didn’t talk about anything, really. And Peggy was… I mean, there wasn’t any – we didn’t – I don’t know why I can’t just talk to you.” Steve’s panting a little, overwhelmed.

Bucky’s familiar with the feeling. “Because we’re idiots. Both of us thinking we know what’s best for the other one and too backwards shit-scared to actually face it.”

Steve exhales and lets his hands fall limply between his legs, his whole body slumping in defeat and sinking heavily into the cushions. His mouth opens and closes a few times but no words make it out.

Amazing. Even after all this time Bucky still doesn’t understand how Steve can be both eloquent and a stuttering mess at the same time. Give Captain America five minutes and he’ll have you willing to jump out of a plane with a stirring sermon about how it’s your right to do so; Steve Rogers couldn’t string together two words about his personal life if you gave him an hour and a thesaurus.

Bucky sighs and winds the string around his index finger. It wraps twice around the left one and two and a half times around the right. Was that weird? That was probably weird. “I remember the look on your face when you talked to her, Steve. You loved her, plain as day, anyone could see it. Time ain’t gonna change that.”

Steve breathes in deep and lets it out in a sigh. “I did love Peggy. I do. We could have made a life together.”

“And that’s why it hurts. Way I figure it, she got the chance to move on before you did because of the ice and all. And that sucks. It’s hard when things change that you’re not ready for.”

“Amen to that, brother.”

“Amen. But you can’t blame her for it, Steve. It’s okay for you to accept that, though, is the thing. Maybe not today but you can accept that change happens whether you want it to or not. Yeah, it sucks and you’re allowed to think that. You’re allowed to hold on to what you love. But you’re allowed to accept its loss, too, when you’re ready. Otherwise you might as well just stay out in the cold.”

Steve scratches at his hairline. “How’d you get to be so smart about this stuff, huh?”

“Wikipedia.”

It startles a laugh out of him, a bark of sound quickly muffled behind his hand. Bucky glances up in time to see it shut down behind a guilty frown. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. That’s okay, too. Finding humor in dark situations is a common coping mechanism. S’nothing to be ashamed of. Wikipedia said that, too.”
Steve shakes his head. “You always know just what to say to make me feel better.”

“Well, I have been monitoring you for almost two years. What kind of assassin would I be if I couldn’t read you by now?” Steve whole body flinches and Bucky feels like a dick again. Probably not the right time to joke about that. It might never be the right time. He quirks the side of his mouth up into a grin, the imitation of a gesture that settles over him softly, like old paper falling to the floor. “Of course I know you, punk. I remembered your busted face before I remembered my own. Couple dozen years ain’t gonna change that.”

Steve watches his face, nodding a little, like a suspicion’s just been confirmed. The smile Bucky was aiming to bring out of him is nowhere to be seen. “I think we hurt each other very badly, somewhere along the line. I think we’re hurting each other still.”

The words linger in the back of Bucky’s throat like vomit. Don’t you worry about me, Stevie. I’ll be all right. The string’s so tight the tip of his finger’s turning purple. The ghost-grin fades away.

“You don’t have to look at me, Bucky, but I need to say this. You need to hear it.” It’s Steve’s Captain America voice, the one that makes the muscles between Bucky’s shoulder blades tense into knots. He hunches forward and the hair falls from behind his ears again. “I understand that it’s okay to let Peggy go. But I can’t. I’m never getting over her. That’s not how I work. There’s always going to be a part of me that loves her. Just like there’s a part of me that loves you. I love you, Bucky Barnes. I loved you then, I love you now – I love every bloody part of you, whether you let me see them or not. I hate that you’ve been so close to me all this time and never told me. I hate that we stopped letting ourselves love each other without a fight. We could’ve had a life together, too, if we’d just let ourselves be brave enough to take it. We could have it now, if you want. I love you. A couple dozen years ain’t gonna change that, either.”

Well. Shit.

How… how is Bucky supposed to respond to that? How does someone just come out and say shit like that? How do you scrape your heart off the floor and tell it to beat again?

He pulls the string off his finger. The blood rushes back painfully, tingling and purple. He prods it with his thumb just to see it turn white in the flush.

“I read your letter, Steve. The one you let go at the dock.”

Steve blinks. Probably not the response he was expecting. He starts to frown.

Bucky speaks up before Steve can get the wrong idea. “I’m sorry. I know it was private and a shitty thing to do and you never meant for me to actually see it, but I did it anyway.” His cheeks start to burn and he has to blink away the uncomfortable wetness in his eyes. “It helped, knowing for sure you still feel the same way I do.”

Steve’s so still he’s barely breathing. "Yeah? The same way?"

"Yeah. I wasn't sure at first, about what I felt. Wasn’t sure about anything.” Bucky closes his eyes and thinks about Steve. The familiar warmth settles on his shoulders like a well-worn jacket. Yeah. That’s what love is. It’s good.

He thinks he might be strong enough for this.

Bucky reaches over and takes Steve’s hand. He’s surprised for a moment over how rough it is; there’s hard ridges of callus along the top of the palm and the long fingers are scratchy along the edges. The shield did that, he thinks, and slides a finger over the softer groove of skin between
Steve’s knuckles. It’s just a touch, innocent as the day is long, but it’s enough. A single point of contact in a spinning world. Warmth, in the long dark cold.

After that, looking Steve in the eye is easy. “I think I’ve loved you my whole life. Even when it wasn’t a life worth living.”

Steve’s just letting the tears fall down his face without blinking. Like he’s afraid to move so he doesn’t wake up and lose the dream. His mouth opens, just a little. “And… do you still? After everything?”

It’s been so long since they’ve actually talked to each other they’re practically strangers. But Bucky’s done his research; he’s as sure of this as he is of anything. The smile rises to his face easy as breathing this time. It’s smaller than the ghost-grin but he can feel it spread all the way through him.

Steve’s grin catches on his own – a spark growing into a conflagration. He flips Bucky’s grip and they sit there like morons, smiling stupidly at each other and holding hands. Bucky finds it hard to feel too embarrassed, though; it’s the best he’s felt in a long, long time. Maybe ever. At least as far back as he can remember.

Carter pops up out of nowhere to jump in Steve’s lap. She immediately lays down, purring, and kneads at his leg. Steve yelps and goes rigid. He laughs a little and winces when her claws dig in especially hard.

Bucky can’t help but smile at his two gingers getting along. Ginger cat and Ginger Rogers.

Steve reflects it back like sunshine off snow, luminous in the light.

“Guess she’s making herself at home, huh?” His big hand plops onto Carter’s head and pets all the way down her back, smushing her ears flat. He’s a little rougher than she normally permits – Steve is clearly not used to handling small things – but she just purrs louder and stretches out under his attention.

Steve meets Bucky’s eyes and his expression changes to one that’s harder for Bucky to identify – not for the lack of emotion there, but because of the abundance of it. He’s not even trying to hide.

Bucky watches him, not thinking much of anything except how the light from the windows catches on the highlights in Steve’s hair. No camera can reproduce that, no matter how high definition. The couch had always been comfortable but it’s so much nicer with Steve on it next to him.

Carter’s purring up a storm. Bucky boops her on the nose and she doesn’t even bother opening her eyes to glare at him for it. “She likes you. You adopting my cat, Rogers?”

“Depends. You still picking up strays, Barnes?” Steve wears hope like a cloud wears sunshine and rain at the same time; it threatens to spill over everywhere if he’s not careful.

All at once the weight of the day drains right out of Bucky’s shoulders. He slowly, slowly slides along the couch until he’s eased himself into Steve’s personal space. He takes a deep breath.

Soap. Old Spice. Graphite pencil shavings. That spicy shampoo. A little bit of sweat from where he runs hotter than the deodorant could fix. This is what Steve smells like in the twenty-first century. Bucky breathes in his full. He lets his head drop down until it’s resting on the hard muscle of Steve’s shoulder.

Steve’s other arm comes up and then stops, his fingers fidgeting on air.
Bucky’s mind is quiet, humming. It’s a nice feeling. “You can touch me, if you want. But only when I say, okay? Only when I say.”

Steve’s arm curls lightly around Bucky’s shoulder, tugging him in close when Bucky doesn’t flinch away. The weight of it feels heavier than it should be, somehow. But the way Steve’s arms are shaking, the way his body’s so stiff and the noises he’s trying so hard not to make? That rests even heavier on Bucky than any arm ever could. Even an arm like his.

Bucky butts the top of his head into Steve’s chin. “Ask me, Steve. Ask me and I’ll say yes. I’ll always say yes.”

It comes out as a whisper, kissed into Bucky’s hair and almost lost. But Bucky hears him anyway. “Stay. Please just stay with me.”

Bucky pulls Steve close, tucking his head under his chin like it belongs there. Steve breaks down crying, pulling Bucky impossibly closer with his other arm and sobbing into his hair. Bucky tucks his other arm around Steve’s back and takes it in – his first hug in seventy years – and immediately makes plans for his next one. Hugs are amazing. Steve hugs equally so.

Between them Carter makes an offended noise and wiggles away, heading back down the hall with her tail straight up, kitty butt pointed in their direction. Bucky laughs. He can’t help it.

A day of firsts.

They pull apart from each other, wiping wet faces on shirts, trying to pull together some measure of dignity. Bucky looks out the window to the darkened base across the street. Steve really needs to install some shades.
Or. Bucky could do it for him. Now that Steve knows he’s here there’s not any real reason to go back over there was there? It was trashed anyway.

He pats Steve on the leg and uses the grip to push himself to standing. “Come on. If we’re gonna stay here I need to make a supply run back to base, pick up a few things. I’ve got an orchid that would look great next to your fern. And I should probably turn off all the surveillance crap I installed over here to save on electricity.”

Steve raises his eyebrow. “Surveillance crap?”

“Well, it was Hydra’s first, I just piggybacked into it – and you knew about it anyway, you dick! Playing the Spice Girls at three in the morning, what the hell’s wrong with you?” Bucky punches him on the shoulder and Steve flails away, laughing.

“I didn’t know it was you!”

“Uh huh. And would it have made a difference if you did?”

Steve makes a show of thinking about it, wiggles his hand back and forth in a maybe. Bucky punches him again, with the metal arm for emphasis.

“Ow!”

“Serves you right, you little shit.”

Although he supposes it was pretty clever on Steve’s part; blasting the most annoying songs in the world over and over has to be the best nonlethal form of torture not prohibited by the Geneva Convention Bucky’s ever come across. Like a passive fuck you every three minutes. You certainly couldn’t argue with the results, either. Nonviolence at its best.

“I really didn’t know who was listening in, you know. It coulda been anybody. But then there were all these signs and I hoped...” Steve shrugs, rubbing at his shoulder and ducking his head, gone over all bashful. “I thought. If it was you, then it meant you cared enough to keep an eye on me. And that’s okay.”

That’s… unexpectedly sweet. It tickles Bucky just right to make him blush, like a flower blooming in his throat and the perfume’s carrying up through his sinuses to reach for the sun at the top of his skull.

Steve always did make him feel poetically dumb. He rubs his eye – and then something occurs to him. His smile curves up at the corner, a wicked little spark lighting up behind his eyes.

“So that little teaser you gave the cameras was for little ol’ me then, huh? Or were you hoping to entice the enemy over to the side of good?”

“Oh god.” Steve blushes from his ears all the way down. “Crap. Can’t believe I actually – no, that was – “ He clears his throat. “Well, in hindsight I’m glad it was you listening in.”

Bucky laughs at him and nudges his shoulder. “I, uh. Did a little more than listen.” And now Bucky’s blushing, too. Neither one of them can meet the other’s eyes for a second or two. Like goddamn schoolchildren.

Bucky glances up through the fall of his hair, the smile back to twitching at the corner of his mouth. “I liked it, though.”
Steve smile bounces right back. The old familiar shit-eating grin. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” They look at each other some more and Bucky can see Steve’s eyes dilating, their breath coming a little faster. Bucky has a feeling he’s going to say yes to Steve touching him a lot. He shakes himself out of it. They have shit to do. “We better get going.”

“Buck.” Steve reaches out a hand, pauses, and Bucky completes the gesture to hold it tight. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Yeah. Me, too.” They smile at each other for another long minute before Bucky tugs on his hand. “Come on, you can help me carry stuff. Besides we should really set up Carter’s litter boxes before –“

A very distinct smell carries down the hall. Bucky’s grin grows wider the more distraught Steve’s expression becomes.

“Aw! Aw, no. No! Tell me she didn’t.”

Bucky claps Steve on the shoulder. “That’s what happens when you take in strays, man.” Carter saunters back into the living room, pleased with herself, and hops onto the back of the couch. She then sets to licking places god never intended a tongue to go.

Steve’s face crumbles and Bucky laughs again, mouth aching a little when the bruises stretch. He bumps Steve in the shoulder on his way to the supply closet. “I know, man. Come on. I’ll show you this trick I learned on the internet to get the smell out. You won’t even know she’s here.”

“Yeah, until she does it again.” Steve eyes the ball of fluff stretching over the sofa, tail flicking contentedly. His expression is so eerily like his mother’s Bucky can barely contain himself. “And stay away from my coffee table!”

Bucky laughs and laughs, until he has to brace a hand against the crick in his side. The muscles would get used to it, eventually. He takes Steve’s hand again, just because he can.

Leonie’s art masterpost on tumblr.

Whimsy’s art masterposts on tumblr and AO3.

End Notes

Postmodern Jukebox is amazing and one of my absolute favorite things at the moment. I feel like Bucky probably came across it somewhere in the depths of the internet (which is where I found them) and really liked the mix of modern and new styles. It’s a big ol’ metaphor but it’s also a very good one. PS - The dancer Sarah Reich sometimes performs with the band and I’m pretty sure Bucky developed a crush. She’s way out of his league but a boy can dream, can’t he?

Never heard of Bob Ross? Oh you poor, unfortunate creature. Get thee hence and love
This is the video that Hydra interrupted. Might I also recommend True Facts About the Mantis Shrimp, and the Leaf Katydid, and the - you know what, just watch them all. Seriously.

A genius on tumblr wrote "the A on Steve's helmet stands for Asshole" and I shamelessly stole it. As far as I can tell this is the original post. If this is you and you'd like credit then kneel and be knighted.

No offense to the songs used here; if one of your faves is called out then I apologize. I figure Steve – the little troll – just googled “worst earworms” and “most annoying songs ever” so that’s what I did, too. Honestly I’m just lucky someone had “Shut Up And Dance” on their list. I also apologize to everyone who has Frozen stuck in their heads after reading this. I feel ya, buddy.

I had the amazing good fortune to not only have one, but two amazingly talented artists collaborate with me for this story. Be sure to follow the links above and comment on their wonderful work! (And I'd like to give a special shout-out to Leonie, for "volunteering" to be my location beta. This fic wouldn't have been half as good without her love of Brooklyn steering me along.)

Anything else you want to know? Comment here or find me over on tumblr. Yay!

ETA: The lovely Leonie has graced us with yet another amazing Google Doodle in celebration of Bucky Barnes' 100th birthday! There's even more at the original tumblr post - swing by to check it out, and don't forget to tell her how awesome she is.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!