The Crucible

by Dreadnought

Summary

Therapy's a bitch, but PTSD is worse. An in-depth character study of Bucky Barnes as he reconciles his years with Hydra in the wake of Civil War.

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I don’t really know who I am. I do know that James Buchanan Barnes is dead. He’s a pile of bones at the bottom of a ravine. He’s a side bar in some other guy’s museum exhibit that might not even exist anymore. James Barnes would puke if he could see what he became. His parents and sister and friends would cry.

I don’t know what’s left over now, but I know it’s not good. And I don’t think it can ever be good.
"Guilt and shame can tear a self into pieces, to the point that one loses sound judgment about who one is and who one can be. The task is to recover lost goodness, to renew a desire to live well, and to find meaning at home.

That is a kind of invocation of community, within one [sic] self and in one’s own company. Service members long for that, too - to recognize themselves when shorn of the uniform and the side arms, when their old civilian self seems unfamiliar, alien, and maybe even hostile. Those of us who have not worn the uniform, and have sent others to war in them, have a sacred role in this peace process."

Bucky does not like this. Not one bit. He checks the exit at the end of the hallway, which leads back the way he came. Through that door, they’ll all be sitting there, probably expecting him to come slinking back, to chicken-shit out again. Maybe some talk about money changing hands will happen very, very quietly. Steve will smile and maybe say “Maybe next week, pal,” like he did last time. The rest will look at him like “What the hell?” because they really like Steve and are sick of seeing him disappointed. Nobody will actually say such a thing to Bucky, because Bucky’s sure they’re all at least a little afraid of him. Maybe not Steve.

But maybe Steve. Bucky can’t get a valid read on him. He tries, but the guy’s all smiles of various intensities and stories and attempts at reassurance. His face is like the windows at Bucky’s old apartment, taped over with newspaper. The funnies section. Or maybe a human interest story about a little boy who spent all his allowance money to feed homeless people bologna sandwiches. There’s light behind it, yes. Steve seems to be made of pure light sometimes - his eyes, his smile.

But Bucky knows that like any good soldier who has been to war and back, Steve has a box full of the bad stuff – grief, remorse, guilt, anger, a slew of terrible memories and emotions he hasn’t processed. The box gets stuffed under the bed, maybe in the back of the closet. Steve hasn’t let on that such a thing exists for him, but Bucky knows better. Bucky’s original box, the one from his old life, is now nothing but a shredded tangle of was-box, an artifact from when one modest box was actually enough to hold all the bad. He had to find a new box, an industrial shipping container, to put all this Hydra mess in. Keeping that thing from blowing apart – from blowing him apart – is almost a full-time job.

Bucky’s also pretty sure that some of the stuff in Steve’s box is about him. Steve has alluded to the worries he has, but he’s been careful not to provide a lot of substantive evidence that Bucky causes him heartburn. Bucky doesn’t even know how to begin to broach the subject. All of his human relations files have been corrupted, and he’s not highly motivated to fix them. The wall between Steve and him is actually pretty comfortable. Safe. For everyone.

He startles when he hears a sudden noise down that hall. Startle doesn’t show much in his body; he’s got a good handle on that. They made him get a good handle on that. Only his blue eyes dart right to glance in the direction of the sound. He feels a surge of electricity throughout his body, his limbic system spooling up like a wild motor that has time and again propelled him violently toward whomever was unfortunate enough to be in his way.

Although he wore a mantle of solid menace when activated, nobody but his programmers and handlers knew that the Winter Soldier was powered by pure fear. Why rewrite nature’s little survival handbook? Why not simply harness the power of evolution itself? Too easy. Just like Little Albert, if he was a homicidal maniac.


The noise is Sam. Laughing. Good lord, that laugh. Is it even real? Is it an actual reflection of joy? Bucky thinks it might be a little too loud. He wonders if something darker kicks it up a notch, a minuscule overcompensation. What’s underneath? Sad? Empty? Maybe it’s real. Maybe there’s nothing underneath but happy. Bucky tries to remember if he ever laughed like that, what was underneath it.

… Yeah… Yep. That guy laughed a lot.
Underneath? He can’t really remember.

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Down that hall and out that exit, Steve, Wanda, Sam, Clint, and Scott are sitting in the communal living room in the guest wing of T’Challa’s palace. Steve has his gaze trained to the door they saw Bucky go through about five minutes ago, as if staring at it will ensure that Bucky doesn’t walk back out anytime soon.

“I hope he stays this time,” Wanda says. She’s sitting cross-legged on the couch next to Clint. An open magazine sits on her lap, but she hasn’t looked at it since Bucky went back.


“A lot of help,” Sam mutters under his breath.

“He’ll stay,” Steve says.

Sam snorts. “What makes you think so? Why this time?”

“I just know it.”

“The best predictor of future behavior is past behavior,” Sam counters. “He’s 0 for 4 so far. I give him three minutes before he walks through that door.”

“Can you really blame him? Last time he sat across from a shrink alone, things went pretty bad, right?” Scott says.

“This guy’s different, starting with being an actual psychiatrist,” Clint says.

“Psychologist,” Steve corrects.

“Whatever. He’s got a license. And he’s good.”

“I’ve never seen such a young person try to look like such an old person. It’s like he saw a picture of his granddad and said ‘yeah, that’s the look I’m gonna go for,’” Scott says.

“It’s the style now,” Wanda says.

“Where? In the lumberjack community?” Sam asks. “The chubby, bald lumberjack community?”

Clint crosses his left ankle over his right knee. “As long as he can get the job done.”

“Job? Barnes is not a busted water heater,” Sam replies. “I don’t think anyone can fix,” he pauses and makes a gesture toward the door, “you know, all that.”

“You’re quick to sell him short,” Steve says, frowning at Sam.

“And I think you overestimate him sometimes,” Sam says. “Look, I know he’s your friend, but you’re blind if you can’t see that – ” He stops himself.

“See what, Sam?”

Sam looks down at his hands, then back up at Steve. “That he’s messed up. Like, really messed up.”
“He’s made progress,” Clint says. “He worked his ass off for those first six weeks.”

“The stuff the docs asked him to do, man,” Scott says, shaking his head. “I never could have done that. It was pretty much the worst thing ever to watch.”

“Damn right,” Clint says.

“This is different,” Sam says. “He’s really good at following orders. Doing things that people tell him to do. But therapy’s a whole different animal.”

“Is Dr. Bard even a therapist?” Wanda asks.

“Well, his CV could be on the university’s website,” Steve says, referring to the university in Wakanda’s capital where Dr. Bard is a visiting professor. He finally takes his eyes off the door to reach for the tablet on the coffee table in front of him.

Sam and the others pull out their phones to look as well.

“UCLA undergrad, Boston University Ph.D. in clinical psychology,” Wanda reads.


“Three years of training at the VA National Center for PTSD in Boston,” Sam says. “Impressive.”

Steve scans down the CV. “He’s worked in Rwanda, the Hague, and Bosnia. Published a bunch of stuff on genocide and…perpetration trauma? I’m not sure what that is.”

“I think it’s when you’re traumatized because you do bad things to other people,” Sam guesses. “Maybe Beardo is just gonna hug him and say ‘it’s not your fault, it’s not your fault’ over and over until Barnes starts crying. Boom! Cured.” He smiles broadly. “Can you even imagine that?”

“C’mon, Sam,” Steve chides gently.

“I’m pretty sure that’s not actually a cure for psychological trauma,” Scott says. “Though I think if Robin Williams ever hugged me like that, all my problems would go away forever.”

Wanda looks over at Steve. “Dr. Bard seems like a good fit for him.”

“Sure does,” Steve agrees quietly. “Just gotta get him through that second door.”

Although he’s been through most of the grueling deprogramming process… well… not a lot has actually changed. While he was in cryo, the Wakandans and Steve’s Avengers – ornery and energized after being busted out of the Raft – made pretty fast work of figuring it all out. Someone made the inspiration suggestion to go back to Siberia and collect every shred of paper, every hard drive, and every piece of equipment that wasn’t destroyed as they tore the place apart during their fight. The team made several trips there with the Quinjet and unloaded the whole macabre collection into a hangar just south of the main complex where they were all staying.

They also brought back what was left of Bucky’s arm. He was surprised that Stark hadn’t taken it so that they couldn’t reverse engineer it. It was probably an oversight. Stark was probably too woozy with rage and pain after seeing the guy next to him brutally murder his parents with emotionless precision. Having his parents’ murderer and his friend then tag-team him afterwards
and beat the crap out of him probably didn’t help things, either.

After they raided the Siberian bunker, the team sifted through a staggering number of boxes full of mission reports, medical records, experimental data, and meticulously documented programming procedures. Since nobody on the team was fluent in Russian except Bucky, Natasha created and emailed a cheat sheet of key words and phrases so they could separate out the different categories of documents. Steve was able to make his way through Zola’s notes with his knowledge of French and German.

The documents were scanned into a computer and run through a translation program. They were then encrypted and restricted only for the use of the consultants T’Challa hired to short circuit whatever was in Bucky’s brain that allowed him to be primed for orders using that ten word sequence. Steve had been the one to insist on the encryption and strict compartmentalization, Bucky later learned.

The thoroughness of the records helped the consultants crack the Bucky Code with Hydran efficiency. It only took them three months to sort, translate, and interpret the documents and put together a plan of action. Then they woke Bucky from cryo and brought him up to speed. All the stuff they salvaged also would serve another purpose, according to Sam:

“If the Americans, Russians, or whoever eventually track you down and decide to hold you accountable for all that Winter Soldier stuff, this is all gonna save your ass.”

Bucky couldn’t even begin to think about that, but it sounded smart. Good strategy.

The psychologist consultant T’Challa hired to help with the deprogramming was something else. “Doc Beardo,” most of them called him behind his back, since he has no hair on his head but a mighty outcropping of it coming from his face. The moniker stuck so powerfully that Bucky doesn’t even remember what the man’s real name is.

“I bet he uses conditioner on it,” Wanda said to Bucky during one of her many attempts to strike up conversation with him.

Doc Beardo explained to Bucky and the team that Bucky was the way he was because of conditioning (the psychological kind), and that the way to deprogram him was to “target the processes and environmental cues that facilitated that conditioning.”

Repetition – reinforcement = extinction = good, Beardo wrote on a white board for all of them. Using the information they gathered from Hydra’s records, they would replicate the conditions of programming and run through the priming sequence over and over again, without providing any of the reinforcements that trained the Winter Soldier to prime to receive orders in the first place.

“There’s a lot more to what they did,” Beardo explained, “but this will at least make it so that someone can’t say a bunch of words and hijack your mind. Which is your goal, right Mr. Barnes?” He looked at Bucky expectantly. Bucky responded with a nod.

So Bucky had to sit in The Chair over and over again, which they had reconstructed from the paper schematics and whatever they could dig from the rubble. Someone had to inject him with The Paralytic over and over again, titrated to the same level Hydra used, which was high enough to prevent major injury but also tempered quickly by his accelerated metabolism. He had to chomp down on The Guard and put his head in The Vise over and over again, though because of the obvious deleterious effects of The Vise, they rigged it to emit only a low voltage electrical current that would cause discomfort but no damage.
The cognitive science consultant told them that The Vise was probably based on the early research on electro convulsive therapy in the ‘30s and ‘40s, where therapeutic doses could cause mild memory loss. Of course, the dose the Winter Soldier got was orders of magnitude greater than that, causing severe retrograde amnesia.

“Creating the perfect blank slate upon which to construct new behavioral paradigms and protocols,” she put it.

After The Vise, Bucky had to hear The Words, over, and over, and over, and over again. Natasha coached Clint over the phone to say The Words perfectly, having been selected for the task based on his vague, white guy resemblance to Karpov. Throughout the whole process, Beardo documented everything in a log, including any deviations from the priming sequence, behavioral observations, and duration of each component of each trial. Just like Hydra.

Steve was always blessedly absent from these trials. Doctor’s orders. Bucky was beyond relieved, even though the look on Steve’s face when he found out made the pit of Bucky’s stomach clench. Steve had been an explicitly identified target for termination at numerous points, and they had to eliminate all potential confounds that could disrupt the extinction process. Same with Sam. That left Clint, Wanda, Scott, T’Challa, and Beardo to run the protocols. Bucky refused to have Wanda there, so it was just the four men posing as his programmers and handlers.

Each trial was a gut-wrenching test of will. Bucky would tremble, wide-eyed, terrified, choking down the contents of his stomach, trying desperately to hold himself together in front of Steve’s friends. Worse was knowing that he could walk away any time, that he was subjecting himself to this of his own volition based on some psychological theory that Beardo was sure would help him.

Scott pulled Bucky aside after one of the early trials and told him that he thought he was really brave but that he shouldn't feel obligated to continue. He almost gave Bucky a friendly clap on the shoulder but stopped himself. Scott clearly didn't have the ability to pretend to be unaffected by a man suffering in extremis, which Bucky respected, though it didn’t help him much. Bucky would sometimes look at T’Challa’s face when he felt like bolting, which was like a warm and stern reminder that he had to soldier the fuck up if this whole shit show had even a small chance of working.

The first 34 times going through the priming protocol, Bucky primed successfully. But when no mission was given, when no report was requested, when no reinforcement was offered, when no conditions of compliance or noncompliance were given, he just sat. Breathing, sweating, waiting. And they would let him sit until he noticed the first indication that autonomous functioning had resumed.

At first, it was hard to tell when the priming wore off. The first few times, he sat there for hours on end as the attending Avengers exchanged unsure looks. Beardo reassured them in his soothing psychologist voice that this was all perfectly normal. As the trials went on, Bucky began to notice a subtle change when the priming faded. Usually his first cue was a thought – any thought. One time it was “I wish I could itch my leg.” Another time it was “I wonder if I need a root canal.”

Every time the priming wore off, he was supposed to say a code word or phrase so that they knew without a doubt that he was lucid. There was a short debate among the Avengers about what the code should be. The first suggestions were typically adolescent:

“Excelsior!”

“Heeeeeere’s Johnny!”
“Who farted?”

Steve shut down the crap pretty fast and suggested “O’Shaughnessy’s Market,” because he and Bucky used to pool their pennies together to buy saltwater taffy there when they didn’t have enough dough to make a day of Coney Island. Bucky felt a ghost of a smile on his face, remembering the market and the times they went there. Inside him, a dim light started to glow. But as soon as it fully registered, it snuffed out, and that flicker of warmth never quite reached his eyes.

The 35th trial, nothing happened. As soon as they said The Words, Bucky said “Well, that didn’t work,” then quickly corrected himself to “O’Shaughnessy’s Market.” The team exchanged some whoops and smiles. Bucky just sat with the sobering shock that this whole insane process had actually succeeded.

After trial 35, Bucky primed intermittently over the next 8 trials until he hit a streak of 15 non-responses, which Beardo deemed to be sufficient proof that extinction had occurred. He recommended that they do a trial once a week for the next three months to ensure that there was no spontaneous recovery, which they all agreed to.

The Book was one of the hardest parts for Bucky, for reasons he didn’t understand. The image of it in his head still brings a small wave of dread and nausea. When he saw it for the first time after coming out of cryo, he had a full-blown panic attack. So in addition to having Clint pretend to read from it during each priming trial, Beardo made him walk around with the goddamn thing 24/7 for three weeks straight. Even to the shitter.

“Habituation,” Beardo called it. “After a while, you won’t associate the book with the threat of harm. It will just be a red book with a star on it that used to mean something really bad.”

Fuck. You, Bucky thought.

But, yeah, seeing it doesn’t scare the bejesus out of him anymore. Doesn’t cause him to break out in a cold sweat or lose his lunch. That agonizing slog through 6 weeks of book-toting, chair-sitting, and word-repeating had actually worked. And yet…

And yet.

Suddenly, the doorknob rattles. Bucky tenses as the door directly in front of him slowly swings open. He looks up at the face – the beard – of the man who is expecting him, and he instantly regrets not chicken-shitting out of this.

“Oh, good! You stayed today. I was wondering if I was ever going to see you sitting in that chair when I opened the door.”

“Is it too late to back out?” Bucky asks.

“Nope. You can leave right now, if you want. There’s the exit.” Beardo points down the hallway toward the door that leads to Steve and everyone else.

Bucky clenches his jaw and stares down that hallway. He imagines the look on Steve’s face, on Sam’s dumb face, and all the rest of their faces if he were to walk back through that door, having obviously not even tried.

“I’m not in a talking mood.”

“No problem. You wanna come in and stare at the wall for an hour so your friends think you’re actually getting help, that's your choice.”
“They’re not my friends. Just Steve is.”

“Sure.” Beardo smiles. “Steve and his friends.”

The stubborn Irish in him wins out and he stands. “Okay, then,” he says with a sigh. “Lead the way, Doc.”
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Bucky gets a diagnosis. Steve is concerned.

Chapter Notes

I realize that chapter one was quite heavy on historical exposition, which can be a bit of a slog to read. This chapter and most of the following will be firmly grounded in the present.

Thank you very much to all who left kudos. It’s much appreciated.

Bucky follows Beardo into a mid-sized office containing a large bubinga wood desk, several matching book shelves, and two plushy chairs located in front of a large window overlooking the lush jungle outside.

“How are you feeling today?” Beardo asks.

“Okay.”

“How’s the arm?”

“Still dead weight.”

“What’s the next step?”

“Cutting my skull open and screwing around with my brain,” Bucky says. “Not quite ready for that.”

The surgeon in charge with the implantation of his new limb described the procedure to him in detail. Cut open the scalp, saw a circle into the skull, pull off the skull piece, cut open the dura mater, fuse the neural implant to the motor cortex, run a series of operational tests, and put everything back together with stitches and staples. All while Bucky is awake, of course. Then endure several days of pain and discomfort. At this point, having an arm-shaped piece of vibranium alloy pointlessly hanging off his shoulder is far preferable to even thinking about brain surgery.

Beardo takes a seat across from Bucky and opens a black portfolio. “I typically take notes in session. Is that okay?”

“Depends on who sees them.”
“Just me. Progress notes help me track what we’re doing and, if something were to happen to you, it’s my way of documenting that I did my due diligence.”

“CYA.”

“In a sense, yeah. Hopefully that won’t be necessary.”

“Don’t worry,” Bucky says. “I’m not planning to blow my brains out. Or anyone else’s. Take your notes.”

Beardo then explains to him that everything they talk about is confidential except if Bucky plans to kill himself or someone else or if he has or is currently abusing children or older adults. Bucky wonders if murdering old people is also reportable, because he has definitely done that.

“So you can’t tell any of them anything,” Bucky says, glancing at the door.

“Nope. Not unless there’s a significant safety risk, and only if you and I can’t troubleshoot that risk together.”

Bucky sits in silence for a few moments, then finally says “I think this is a bunch of crap.”

Beardo tilts his head. “How so?”

“It’s stupid to think that coming in here and just talking is going to do any good.”

Beardo nods. “If you were to come here and just talk, yeah, I don’t think that would do a lot of good.”

“And I don’t want medication.”

“Well, that’s good, because I don’t have a license to prescribe meds. Even if I did, I couldn’t make you take anything. Nor would I want to.”

Bucky’s confusion is apparent on his face. “What else is there?”

“The therapy I tend to use with people is very skills-based,” Beardo says. “We usually think about skills in a practical sense, like learning to ride a motorcycle or play piano. But we can improve our quality of life by learning new ways to think about ourselves, others, and the world. Just like building a practical skill.”

“You want to change the way I think.”

“Oftentimes therapy involves exploring patterns in our thoughts and beliefs to see how they relate to our emotions and behaviors. That’s the basis of cognitive-behavioral therapy, which is the type of therapy I use.”

It sounds like psychobabble garbage to Bucky, but Beardo’s confidence and enthusiasm keep him a little curious. “So I wouldn’t have to come in here and talk about how my dad was a drunk or how nuns used to paddle my ass three times a week?”

“If you want, but I’m guessing there are other issues you might want to address first.” Beardo studies Bucky’s face, which is neutral save for the minute downturn of the corners of his mouth. “What are some of the other concerns you have about therapy?” he asks.

Bucky shrugs. “I don’t know if you can help me. And I don’t even know if I want help.”
“No?”

“Why should I get to ‘improve my quality of life’?” Bucky asks. Something close to anger flashes in his eyes and disappears just as quickly. “Why should I get to feel okay?”

“You believe you don’t deserve to get better?”

“You study genocide, right?” Bucky asks. “You know I’m the Hutu who chops up his best friend with a machete because some person I barely know tells me to, right?”

“Interesting analogy.”

A series of images assault Bucky. Shooting Steve four times. Stabbing him. Breaking his face. Punching him down an elevator shaft. Choking him. Trying to land a helicopter on him, chop him to pieces with the rotor blades. His chest tightens and his face begins to feel hot.

“I’m not the victim here,” Bucky states firmly.

“I know you think that,” Beardo says. “While you were in cryo, I spent months reviewing all those Hydra documents so that we could plan the deprogramming process. I’m not naïve to what you did, and what was done to you.”

“And you want to work with me.” Bucky searches futilely for the connection between knowing the worst about someone – knowing how monstrous they truly are – and actually wanting to help them.

“I really think I can help you, but you have to want it, at least on some level. Some people can’t find a reason within themselves to get help, so maybe they find some motivation outside of themselves. Is that the case with you?”

Bucky thinks about the living room. Steve’s face, Sam’s dumb face, all the rest of their faces. “Well, I’m here, right?”

“I meant to ask earlier – why’d you stay this time?”

Bucky thinks for a few seconds, then distills it down to: “I’m stressing Steve out. I can tell. He really wants me to be here.”

“Then you have to decide if that’s enough.”

“Enough for what?”

Beardo makes hard eye contact with Bucky. “To get you to work. Therapy is a lot of work. I’ll entertain your coming in here and doing nothing for a couple of sessions to help you save some face with them, if that’s all you want. But at some point, you’ll have to have a come-to-Jesus moment with yourself and decide if you want to get better – for whomever – or if you want to maintain the status quo. Or get worse.”

Bucky says nothing. He fingers a crease in his jeans with his working hand.

“You’ve always wanted me to be straightforward with you, right?” Beardo asks.

Bucky nods.

“I think we’ve done good work together so far, Mr. Barnes.”
“Bucky.”

“You, personally, have done amazing work, Bucky. I can’t tell you how much I admire you for showing up every day and putting all your energy into doing that awful stuff. That’s one of the reasons I know I can help you, because you’re the type of guy who always gives 100 percent. And I can meet you there and do the same.”

“I don’t know where you got that impression. I’m nowhere near 100 percent.” There’s weariness in Bucky’s face and voice.

“You give 100 percent of whatever you have. Some days, 100 percent might just mean getting out of bed in the morning. It’s all relative.”

Bucky gazes out the window, his expression blank. A few fat beads of rain slap against the glass as storm clouds make their way over the kingdom.

“Maybe we can start with having you commit to four sessions,” Beardo suggests. “After that, if you still think this is crap, or if you still can’t tolerate the idea of getting better, you can at least know that you gave it a real shot before quitting.”


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“Waking up early and not being able to get back to sleep?”

“Yeah.”

“How many nights a week?”

“Every night.”

“What’s going on when you can’t sleep?” Beardo asks.

Bucky thinks back to the night before. After his nightly checking routine (windows, door, pistol, KA-BAR, windows, door, pistol, KA-BAR), he crawled into bed. Closed his eyes. Tried to will his muscles to relax. Thought about how he probably wasn’t going to sleep that night. Checked the clock. Tried to sleep. Heard a noise. Sat up. Reached under the bed for his .45. Walked silently to the door. Listened. Checked the lock. Walked silently to the window. Listened. Looked outside. Checked the lock. Stood against the wall, tensed and ready for action, for about fifteen minutes until he convinced himself it was probably one of the others just walking down the hallway.

Then he went back to the bed. Tried to will his muscles to relax. Checked the clock. Somehow fell asleep at God knows what time, only to wake up panicked and covered in sweat after a nightmare about putting a bullet between General Essa’s eyes while he was on his knees, begging for mercy in a pool of his own piss. Bucky tried for an hour to calm down after that, at which point the sky was beginning to turn indigo and pink, so what the hell, might as well stay awake.


“How long have you been sleeping like this?”

“When I’m not in cryo. I guess right after Hydra I slept a little better, maybe 4 hours a night. Until I got my memory back. Then it got worse.”

“How’s your appetite?”

“Bad.”

“Any weight loss?”

Bucky thinks back to his last checkup for his arm. “Last week I was at 326. Right before cryo I was…” he makes a quick calculation in his head, “343, correcting for the missing arm.”

Beardo’s mouth falls open. “You weigh 326 pounds.”

“Muscle density increase from the serum,” Bucky explains. “Hydra had me down to 290, so it’s better than before.”

Beardo smiles as the information clicks into place. “Obviously you are the first, um, ‘enhanced’ person I’ve worked with. Is that the preferred term?”

Bucky shrugs. “Doesn’t matter to me.”

“Any thoughts about harming or killing yourself?”

“I said no.”

“Others?”
“Just in the past.”

Beardo then asks a long series of other questions about Bucky’s mood, energy level, concentration, traumatic memories, nightmares, physical symptoms, avoidance of trauma-related stimuli, and trauma-related thoughts and emotions. After looking over his notes, Beardo looks up at Bucky.

“So, do you want to know the verdict?” Beardo asks.

Does he want to know the verdict? Well, after saying “nearly every day” or “extremely” to almost every question asked in the past fifteen minutes, Bucky can already tell that he isn’t walking out of here without a new label or two.

“Sure.”

“You meet diagnostic criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder – PTSD – and major depressive disorder. As the name suggests, PTSD is a trauma-related disorder, and I would even get more specific and say that it’s complex PTSD.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Complex PTSD happens in the context of prolonged interpersonal trauma. Some people get it after being abused chronically as a child, some adults get it when they’ve been held in captivity for long periods of time or tortured or when they’re part of a cult.” He gestures toward Bucky. “So, basically, your experience with Hydra.”

“Great,” Bucky mumbles as he sinks further into his chair. Suddenly he’s feeling small and cornered and something else he can’t identify.

“What’s going on for you right now? In your body? Your thoughts?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, I think a good place to start may be with a therapy that helps you better understand your own internal experience. I have the perfect treatment in mind.”

“Four sessions,” Bucky reminds him.

“Sure. We’ll start with four.” Beardo smiles, showing a row of white teeth. “I’m going to assign you homework to do every week, so that you can practice the skills you learn in therapy in your day-to-day life.”

“Homework.” Bucky hasn’t done homework since 1935.

“Yep. Let me grab some handouts for you to read before next week.” He stands and walks over to his desk. “And, by the way, you’re welcome to call me Jason. Or Bard. Or just Doc. I’m not really a fan of Beardo.”

Bucky’s face flushes. “Sorry.”

Bard chuckles. “Please. You think you guys are the first ones to call me that?”

Bucky leaves the session with a folder containing information about PTSD, depression, sleep hygiene, and an activities monitoring form. He’s supposed to read everything and log how he spends his time each day. He also has homework to try to start eating enough to maintain his current weight.
Bucky walks back through the door to the living room and tersely fields questions about how session went from everyone there. Steve beams at him, and Bucky returns a small smile before going back to his room and closing the door.

As Dr. Bard puts the finishing touches on his progress note, he hears a knock at the door. He finds Steve Rogers on the other side of it and invites him to sit where he recently finished session with Bucky.

“Captain Rogers. What can I do for you?” Bard asks, taking a seat across from Steve.

“Please, call me Steve.”

“All right. Steve.”

“I wanted to talk with you about Bucky.”

Bard raises his index finger. “Let me just stop you now and say that I’m not at liberty to talk about anybody I work with. I technically can’t even acknowledge that I’m working with any particular person.”

Bard watches Steve’s face fall and follows with: “But I’m more than happy to listen to any concerns you have about your friend.”

“I understand the confidentiality thing,” Steve says. “That’s good. But I still want to let you know some of the things Bucky might not be telling you.”

“Okay.”

Steve takes a deep breath before beginning. “I’m concerned about him. When he first got his memory back in Germany, things seemed okay. He cracked a few jokes, smiled – a little bit, anyway. At least it seemed genuine.” Steve smiles now, though it’s tinged with sadness.

“Mmm-hmm.”

“But since coming out of cryo, he spends most of the day in his room, next door to mine. On the rare occasions we see him outside his room, he barely talks to us. I’m not sure what he does all day. The TV is never on. I rarely hear any sound coming from his room at all, except at night. Three of four times a week he’ll wake up so loudly that it wakes me up, too. Sometimes he wakes up screaming, sometimes hyperventilating…”

Steve’s jaw clenches visibly.

“I used to run in to see if he was okay, but he always said he was fine and asked me to stop. I know Clint in the room on the other side wears earplugs now, because it’s really tough to fall back sleep after hearing that.”

Bard nods. After realizing that he isn’t going to say anything, Steve continues:

“I stop by to check on him at least once a day, but he never lets me come in his room. I can see over his shoulder that it’s not very clean. Clothes on the floor, bed not made. Might not sound like much, but he used to be a neat guy. His apartment when we lived in Brooklyn was a dump, but it was tidy. Also, I don’t think he has a beard because he thinks it’s fashionable. No offense.”
“None taken,” Bard replies.

Steve then leans forward in his chair. His tone grows more intense.

“I feel like he’s always pushing me away. On one hand, I want to respect his choice to be left alone. I know he hasn’t been given many choices in the last 70 years, so I want him to feel like he has control over his life. But on the other hand, he’s clearly not okay. I feel like I’m losing him again, right after getting him back.

“I don’t know how to be a good friend to him anymore. It used to be so easy to be friends with him. But now I don’t even know how to talk to him. I don’t understand what’s going on with him, not entirely. I can make a pretty fair guess, but…” Steve shakes his head resignedly. “I just don’t know what to do.”

Bard laces his fingers together and speaks his next words thoughtfully.

“I can talk in general about how one might hypothetically help a friend who is struggling psychologically.”

“Please,” Steve says.

“Social support is highly correlated with positive psychological outcomes, pretty much irrespective of the diagnosis. I typically recommend that friends and family try to engage their loved ones, even if they appear to not want to be engaged. The person is often ambivalent about wanting social connections, and they usually have barriers to seeking it out on their own.

“So, although you might feel like you’re being a bother, keep checking in. Keeping offering to spend time with your friend. He might tell you no 99 times, but maybe it’s the 100th time that he takes you up on the offer.”

Steve listens intently, nodding, his blue eyes fixed on Bard’s face.

“Of course, “ Bard continues, “being a friend to someone struggling psychologically can be very draining. Sometimes friends can’t sustain enough motivation to keep trying because they’re not using their own social support networks. So make sure you do that. As far as respecting your friend’s boundaries, that’s very thoughtful of you, but keep bugging him. Respect when he says no, but make him tell you no. Don’t be afraid to be bold, or honest. And it’s okay to just sit quietly together. Just sitting is very underrated.

“Finally, I’ll warn you that things oftentimes get worse before they get better. Therapy can be really powerful, but it can also really suck. Be present for him. Be patient. Keep letting him know he doesn’t have to walk the gauntlet alone.

“Hypothetically, of course. All of this.”

Steve waits a few seconds to see if there is anything else. When no more information is forthcoming, he straightens his spine, squaring his broad shoulders.

“Thank you,” he says to Bard, “for that and for everything else you’ve done for him so far. I’m really glad he has you. I don’t know the first thing about this stuff, but I trust that you’ll help him.”

“I promise I’ll do my absolute best.”

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Back in his room, Bucky is sitting on the edge of his bed, his .45 gripped between his knees. He uses his good hand to pull back on the slide and contorts his limbs to tip the chambered round out of the ejection port. He puts the bullet on the bedspread, next to the full magazine he removed earlier. Taking a deep breath, he clicks off the safety and presses the barrel under his jaw. He closes his eyes as a wave of nausea hits him. He focuses his energy on his index finger, trying to will it to press down. He’s pulled a hundred triggers a thousand times with spectacular ease, but this one fights him hard. His breath quickens. He thinks maybe he’s almost on the verge of being able to do it when –

“Buck?”

Bucky’s eyes go wide. He quickly shoves the pistol under his pillow, along with the bullet and magazine. After double-checking that they’re concealed, he stands and makes his way to the door. He opens it and sees Steve there, smiling that small smile that seems permanently plastered on his face. Or maybe it’s just the face he makes for Bucky, the face one might make when trying to charm a feral cat out from under a parked car.

“Hey,” Bucky says, positioning himself in the man-sized space between the door he’s gripping and the jamb.

“I just wanted to check to see how it went.”

“Um, it was okay.”

“Are you going to go back next week?”

“Yeah, I’ll give it a shot.”

“I’m glad.”

“Yeah.”

They stand in silence for a few moments before Steve says “I think we’re gonna watch a movie tonight, if you want to come. Should be pretty low key.”

Bucky smiles thinly. “Thanks, but I’m pretty tired. Think I’m gonna try to turn in early.”

“Sure, no problem. If you change your mind, we’ll probably start around 8:00.”

Bucky nods. “Okay. Thanks, Steve.”

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After saying goodbye and leaving Bucky’s room, Steve walks to the guest kitchen, where he finds Sam and T’Challa chatting.

“Did you invite him?” Sam asks.

“Yeah. I don’t think he’s coming,” Steve replies. “But we should try to start the movie around 8:00 in case he decides to show up.”

Sam crosses his arms and leans back against the counter. “Well, it’s been a big day for him, I guess.”

“I am glad he finally met with Dr. Bard,” T’Challa says.
“Me too,” Steve says. “He said we should keep trying to engage him, so that’s what I plan to do.”

“We’ll all try to do the same,” Sam says.

“He is vulnerable,” T’Challa says, “and he has had to be vulnerable and alone for a long time.”

“Well, he not alone anymore. We need to help him realize that,” Sam says.

“That was Dr. Bard’s advice. I remember Bucky said the same thing to me, after my mom died. About how I didn’t have to manage everything on my own,” Steve says. “I wish he would take his own advice.”

“That was a long time ago,” Sam reminds him. “A lifetime ago.”

“I know,” Steve says. “I know…”
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Bucky sits across from Bard, who is reviewing the daily activities sheets he completed from the last week. Bucky is struck by how ridiculous this whole thing feels, like he’s waiting for Sister Ignatius to check over his spelling homework, tsk repeatedly, and conclude with “Wrong, wrong, wrong. Oh James, why don’t you try harder?”

“First off, great job completing these logs,” Bard says, looking up at Bucky. “And how did the eating go?”

“Not so good.”

They talk briefly about ways that Bucky can cram in 4,000 calories each day, most of which sound both disgusting and like a huge pain in his ass.

Bard then returns his attention to the worksheets.

“On these, I’m seeing a lot of question marks. Like, hours and hours of question marks. What’s going on there?”

Bucky shrugs. “I don’t know. I guess I kinda check out.”

“Where do you check out to?”

“Sometimes I’ll look at the clock and hours have gone by, and I have no idea what happened. Sometimes I’m lost in thought.”

He doesn’t say that he’s really lost in the past. Sometimes the past comes to him as a stream of violence. Directed at others. Directed at him. Sometimes he’s back in Brooklyn. Sometimes he’s at war. Sometimes he’s with Steve. Sometimes with the Commandos. Sometimes with Karpov. Sometimes he’s on a table, defiantly mumbling his name and service number on endless repeat as he drifts in and out of consciousness. Sometimes he’s on another table, awake, screaming, as doctors saw through the mangled stump that used to be his left arm. Sometimes it’s him with some dumb fuck Soviet goons playing bad cop during “corrective training.” Sometimes he’s alone. Profoundly alone. Staking out a target for days. Staring through a scope for hours until the shot lines up just right. Waiting for the perfect moment to paint the wall with blood and brains…

Bard leans back and crosses his legs. “Have you ever heard the term ‘dissociation’?”

Bucky shakes his head.

“It’s basically where your brain ‘checks out,’ as you described when you lose time and have no
idea what happened. It can be a response to stress or intense emotions. It can also seem to happen randomly. It’s actually a coping mechanism, to protect you from whatever is going on. If we’re talking prolonged trauma like what you’ve experienced, it can be very useful."

“I’m not with Hydra anymore,” Bucky says. “Why do I keep checking out?”

“It becomes habit, like anything else. Maybe so many bad things happened that you learned it’s easier to just,” he makes a gesture with his finger, pointing from his head up to the ceiling, “leave the building, so to speak. The problems come when you’re checking out of your life all the time.”

“Is that so bad?"

“Well,” Bard says, “it’s not the worst way to cope. Some people check out in more destructive ways, like drinking or drugs.”

“If I could get drunk, I’d be drunk from the moment I woke up ’til I passed out at night,” Bucky says, dead serious.

Bard’s eyebrows rise. “Really?”

Bucky thinks about his dad, how he started drinking the day returned home from the Western Front and never stopped. Growing up, Bucky always strained to understand how just eight months overseas could break someone forever. But now, he wonders how he was ever so stupid to not see that breaking a man is simple, that the mind can collapse like a sandcastle once you blow out the scaffolding with enough bombs, gas, bullets, torture, solitude, or fear.

“Why do you think I wanted to go back into cryo after Siberia?” Bucky asks. “Yeah, the whole ‘I don’t have control of my mind’ thing. But really, what’s the chance that would happen here? This place is locked down tighter than Fort Knox.”

Bucky pauses. His lips purse.

“When I said going back into cryo would be best for everyone, I really meant it’d be best for me. So I wouldn’t have to deal with it.”

“With what?”

“This. Any of this.”

Bard seems to find that interesting, because he scribbles something in his portfolio. He then asks: “What about after Hydra, when you were in Eastern Europe? Did you feel this way then?”

“That was different. Still slept bad. Still cautious. I had to be. But when I remembered something, it was like watching it on a screen. There was no emotion attached to it. When I wrote the memories down, it was like writing down pieces of someone else’s life.”

“How would you describe your life during those two years?”

“Not bad.”

“And how would you describe your life now?”

“Not good.”

“Just ‘not good’?”
“Bad.”

“Bad?”

Bucky sighs in frustration. “What do you want me to say?”

“I want you to be honest.”

Bucky searches for a word to encompass the numbness, fatigue, shame, burdensomeness, fear, humiliation, uselessness, and absolute hopelessness that he feels every single day.

“It’s hell.”

“There you go. We’ll keep practicing that.”

“What? You asking me a bunch of annoying questions?”

“If that’s what it takes to get you to reconnect with how you feel. There’s a huge difference between ‘not good’ and ‘hell.’ ‘Not good’ is how you might describe an under-seasoned entrée. ‘Hell’ is pretty much the worst place imaginable. Especially for a Catholic, right?”

“I don’t believe in that stuff anymore,” Bucky says. “But yeah, it’s supposed to be the worst place.”

Bard then talks at length about how people with PTSD struggle with managing their emotions, either by feeling them too strongly or not enough. He also talks about how relationships are affected negatively by PTSD.

“Who’s the most important person in your life right now?” Bard asks.

“Steve,” Bucky says without hesitation.

“How do you think things are going with him?”

“Not good,” Bucky says. Then, anticipating that Bard will press him for more, he continues. “It’s not really a friendship. It’s him always trying to help me and me shutting him out.”

“Why are you shutting him out?”

“I don’t want him to see me like this.”

“Like what?”

Bucky clears his throat, as if to shake loose the sudden constriction he feels there. “Weak. Pretty much unable to function normally or contribute in any positive way to anything.” He lowers his head, long hair framing his face. “I can’t snap out of it.”

Bard makes a small sound, like he’s about to say something, but stops.

“What?” Bucky asks, looking up after hearing Bard’s hesitation.

“Remind me – why don’t you want to try medication?”

“I don’t want anything else messing with my head.”

“Look, I know you’re sensitive to that, which makes sense. But the meds I’m thinking of wouldn’t
make you lose control. They wouldn’t radically alter your brain chemistry. For a lot of people, meds are like a safety net to support them during therapy.”

Bucky can’t stop himself from rolling his eyes.

Undeterred, Bard continues. “I was thinking something for depression and sleep and something for nightmares. Like I said, I can’t prescribe meds, but I’ve worked with many people – many veterans, in particular – who’ve found meds useful.”

Part of Bucky wants to fight the idea of meds on principle, to push against it like he didn’t push hard enough against all the things Hydra did to him. But parallel to that is a small, rapidly growing part of him that’s deeply dissatisfied with the way things are now. That knot of desperation just wants something – anything – to feel better, regardless of the risk. Whether he deserves it or not.

“What the hell,” Bucky says, too exhausted to struggle with himself. “Not like my brain isn’t mush anyway.”

“I have a psychiatrist colleague at the university who’s very discreet. With your permission, I can show her some of your medical records so that she can calculate a dose that’ll work with your metabolism. I can probably have her come in to meet with you next week before our next session, if you want.”

“Whatever. Fine.”

Bard shakes his head. “No, it’s not ‘whatever, fine.’ You’re not obligated to do anything you don’t want to. If you really don’t want to try meds, just say so.”

“I’ll try them. What do I have to lose?”

“Well, that’s not the worst attitude to have about all this,” Bard says, smiling.

Bard spends the rest of session explaining the rationale behind the therapy they’re doing, which will allegedly help Bucky reconnect to his emotions (an absolutely terrifying notion) and help his relationships. He gives Bucky several homework assignments: Practice deep breathing ten minutes per day, spend at least an hour outside of his room every day, and eat regularly.

After session, Bucky stops by the kitchen to grab some food, aiming for maximum homework efficiency by both eating and spending an hour outside his room. He searches through the cupboards, which are filled with boxed foods that have obviously been ordered from America and Europe. Cereal. Snacks. Various pastas and sauces. He finds a large box of chocolate peanut butter protein bars and grabs two.

The place is deserted. Not a disavowed Avenger in sight, which he’s thankful for. Therapy leaves him feeling bone-tired and even more averse to socializing than usual. It dawns on him that he hasn’t been outdoors for months, aside from the brief minute spent crossing from the main complex to the hangar where the trials are held. He remembers the arboretum just south of the guest quarters and decides to have his half-assed lunch there.

After making his way to the enclosure, Bucky takes a seat at one of the benches near the entrance. It’s quiet, save for the gentle sound of running water. The air is fragrant with flowers and fruit. He does five minutes of deep breathing, just the way they practiced in session, which leaves him feeling pleasantly lightheaded. For the first time in, God, he can’t even remember, his body almost feels relaxed. It’s only after releasing some of the tension that he realizes how cranked up he is all the time.
He bites open the first bar’s wrapper with his teeth and starts eating. Bucky has always had a sweet
tooth, but even he’s a little off-put by the cloying taste. He eats with focused intensity, an artifact of
his time as both an American and Russian soldier. “Shovel it in, boys, shovel it in,” he would tell
his men, repeating the words of the training NCOs who drilled it into him. As a leader, he learned
to eat lastest and fastest, as he used to put it, and it turns out Hydra was just fine with that approach,
too.

Just after he swallows the last bit of the second bar, he hears a noise behind him. His head whips
around, heart pounding. His right arm flexes and readies in case he needs to reach for the tactical
knife he has strapped to his calf. When he sees that it’s Wanda, he exhales his held breath. He
notes that every bit of relaxation he achieved in the past twenty minutes has flown right out the
goddamn window.

Wanda approaches the bench he’s sitting at. Her body language is stiff. Apprehensive. But her face
exudes calm determination.

“Mind if I join you?” she asks.

Bucky feels his jaw tighten. “Sure.”

Wanda sits down next to him, leaving a good arm’s length of distance between them. “I love
coming out here,” she says. “It smells amazing.”

“Where’s everyone else?” Bucky asks. Not because he really cares, but because he feels obligated
to at least try to make conversation.

“The boys are at the gym. They go together almost every day.” Wanda smiles. “It’s kind of cute.”

Bucky finds it vaguely amusing that she refers to them as “the boys,” given that they are all at least
a decade-and-a-half older than she is.

They sit in silence for a few minutes. The silence feels awkward as hell, and Bucky is seconds
away from screwing his homework and going back to his room when Wanda finally speaks.

“Why didn’t you want me to be part of the trials?” she asks, looking over at him.

Bucky keeps his tired eyes on the verdant scenery in front of them, deliberately avoiding her gaze.
“You shouldn’t have to see something like that.”

“Why? Because I’m a woman? Because I’m young?”

Good questions, but neither excuse seems to completely fit. “I just didn’t want you to see it,” he
says honestly. “Sorry I don’t have a better answer for you.”

“Do you dislike me?”

Bucky shakes his head slightly. “No.”

“Do you dislike the others? Aside from Steve, obviously.”

“No.”

“We’re kind of like a family now,” she says wistfully. “We’re all stuck here. If our faces show up
on any CCTV outside of Wakanda, they’ll have us back in the Raft in a second. All of us.”

Bucky figures that they’ll bypass the Raft for him and opt to strap him to the nearest electric chair
they can find. That’s if they don’t just land a few slugs straight into his skull at the first sight of him.

“The thing is,” Wanda says, “you’re also part of our family. I don’t know if you realize that. We think about you. We want to spend time with you. We worry about you.”

Bucky feels discomfort in the pit of his stomach, and he’s pretty sure it’s not just from the bars that have settled heavily there.

“I’m not trying to make you feel guilty,” Wanda insists. “I just wanted to make sure you know that we care about you. That you’re missed.”

Bucky wonders how you can miss someone who’s never really been there in the first place, but the sentiment is so sweet that it’s painful for him to hear.

“Thanks,” he manages to reply.

“We have breakfast and coffee together around 8:30. Are you awake then?”

I’m always awake, Bucky almost says. “Usually.”

“You should come. You don’t have to stay long.”

“I’ll think about it,” he replies, finally looking at her.

Wanda smiles. There’s a pureness there that none of the rest of them possess, something untouched by the terrible things she’s seen and had done to her.

“I’m gonna go,” Bucky says, rising to his feet and starting back toward the building entrance.

“Maybe I’ll see you at breakfast some time.”

“I hope so!” she calls after him.

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Early the next week, Bucky goes back to Bard’s office for a medication evaluation with the very nice psychiatrist from the university. The appointment is short, since Bard clearly did his work briefing her on Bucky’s most pressing issues. She doesn’t make him go into much detail about anything and instead only confirms the targets for improvement. He leaves with a huge bottle of trazodone for depression and sleep and another bottle of an alpha-blocker called prazosin for nightmares. The doses are commensurately large, and he’s given instructions about how to titrate them if necessary.

After his appointment, his plan is to move as inconspicuously as possible back to his room so that he can shove the bottles in his medicine cabinet. Then maybe he’ll enjoy his last few hours under the illusion that he doesn’t need to take fistfuls of pills every day because he’s so fucked up. However, as soon as he comes through the doorway and begins to skirt the perimeter of the occupied living room, Scott’s voice cuts through the air:

“Hey, Sputnik!”

It’s the last thing Bucky hears before everything goes black.

=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-
“…Oh crap, oh crap, I’m so sorry…oh crap…”


“… It’s okay, Scott…” Another voice. Steve’s…?

A low groan escapes Bucky’s throat. Darkness becomes white with dark splotches as he slowly opens his eyes.

“Oh my God, I am so sorry!” he thinks Scott says.

Bucky blinks. The ambient light in the room seems to cut straight into his brain, amplifying what is swiftly becoming a searing headache. He grimaces as something slides down the back of his throat. He coughs, motions to Clint to hand him a tissue from the box on the coffee table, and proceeds to spit a large blood clot into it.

He’s lying on the couch. Somehow. Surrounded by Scott, Clint, Sam, and Steve. Scott is kneeling next to Bucky and reaches out his hand as if to pat him on the shoulder. But like the other times before, Scott stops himself.

“Are you okay?” Steve asks, crouching down next to Scott.

“What happened?” Bucky asks Steve.

“I’m sorry, I said the word and you hit the deck,” Scott tries to explain. “I shouldn’t have said it.”

Bucky lifts his torso. Over Steve’s shoulder, he sees one of T’Challa’s staff members and Wanda scrubbing at a brownish red stain on the rug. T’Challa is standing over them, speaking to the staff member in his native language.

“You went face-first,” Clint says.

“Shit,” Bucky mutters, letting himself fall back on the couch. He touches his fingers to the bridge of his nose, which is already palpably swollen.

“I know,” Scott says. “I’m so sorry.”

“No… I asked you to say it,” Bucky says. “Just like you did.”

’Sputnik’ is a ridiculously named kill switch of sorts for the Winter Soldier, a way to completely shut down conscious functioning in the event of extreme noncompliance. It was another word that they repeated over and over during the deprogramming process, but Scott was also tasked with saying it at random intervals to see if this exact situation would happen.

“Do you need a doctor?” T’Challa asks.

Bucky shakes his head no before assessing the damage. He’s had his nose and face broken several times, and after Hydra’s increasing neglectful care of him during his last few years as Codename: Winter Soldier, he learned that he can heal up okay on his own.

“I think we should assume you have a concussion,” Steve says. “To be safe.”

Bucky nods.

“We tried to drag your heavy ass to the couch,” Sam says to Bucky, pointing to himself and to Clint, “but we had to wait for Steve. So we just rolled you on your side until the bleeding stopped.”
Clint turns to T’Challa. “Sorry about your rug.”

“We caught a lot of it,” Wanda says, pointing to a bloody hand towel next to the floor stain.

“The two of us probably could have moved you, if Sam wasn’t so afraid of pulling your arm out of the socket,” Clint says.

“Hey, you just got that thing installed,” Sam says to Bucky. “I’m not about to go ripping it off.”

Bucky then looks over to the coffee table. On it sit his two huge bottles of pills. His face grows hot with embarrassment, and he tries to reach out to grab them before remembering that his left arm isn’t hooked up to his brain yet. He sits up quickly, too quickly, and his vision goes blotchy again. Stubbornly, he snatches up the bottles with his good hand and rises shakily to his feet.

In a heartbeat, Steve is there, wrapping his arm around Bucky’s waist to steady him. He smells like fabric softener. Bucky has the addled thought that Steve might even look like fabric softener, if fabric softener was a person. Bucky lets him discreetly coax the bottles from his right hand, taking them in his own. Steve then pulls Bucky’s good arm over his shoulder.

“There we go,” Steve says quietly, as if they’re the only ones in the room. His tone is intimate. Kind. Patient.

Like with Wanda, the words hit like peroxide on a raw wound.

But still. Bucky leans into his friend. He takes in the lingering scent of Steve’s shampoo and the warmth of his body. He relishes the physical contact, feeling like a self-indulgent piece of shit all the while. The walk back to their rooms is wonderfully slow, and once there, Steve bypasses Bucky’s door and leads them through his own.

Steve’s room is light. Clean. Tidy. Everything Bucky’s room is not. Steve walks him over to the edge his bed and sits him down. He places the two pill bottles on his nightstand.

“Stay here for a while,” Steve says.

“And do what?”


Bucky watches Steve leave. His head is swimming from more than just concussion. He glances over at the bottles on the nightstand and reaches for the trazodone. He manages to get the cap off one-handed and hastily shakes four pills onto the bedspread. He then swallows them dry and carefully places the bottle back the way Steve left it.

Steve returns a minute later with an ice pack, saltines, water, and several tablets of acetaminophen.

“Thanks,” Bucky says, taking the ice pack.

“Wait, take these first,” Steve says and tries to hand Bucky the painkillers.

“I’m okay.”

“C’mon, there’s no way that doesn’t hurt like hell.”

Bucky doesn’t reply, so Steve picks up his hand and puts the pills in it.
“Take them. Now.”

He does.

“I also got these, if you’re hungry,” Steve says, holding up the saltines. “Your stomach might be tetchy for a while.”

Bucky thinks this must all be part of the universe’s big galactic gag reel, Steve mothering him like this. Because this isn’t how things are supposed to be. Not at all.

Bucky sits frozen on the edge of the bed, holding the pack on his lap. Steve is still standing over him. Bucky wonders what Steve is waiting for, if he should be doing or saying something. His mind draws a gaping blank.

“Are you okay?” Steve asks.

Bucky nods. “I don’t think it needs to be set.”

“I wasn’t talking about your nose,” he clarifies.

“How…” Bucky starts to say, then falters, unsure if he wants the answer to his own question. He looks up at Steve. That small knot of desperation deep inside of him is screaming, but for what exactly, Bucky isn’t sure.

“How do I seem?” he finally asks.


Sad? Of the few words Bucky could pick to describe himself, sad is definitely not one of them. But then, for as long as he can recall from recent memory, all of his sensory input seems to get crammed into a half-broken translator that only spits out four products: Numb, pain, fear, and tired.

“I’m definitely tired,” Bucky concurs.

“You can lie down, if you want.”

Bucky’s mind clumsily tries to process the idea of falling asleep in Steve’s bed, but it doesn’t come up with any reasonable objections. “What about you?”

“I’m helping T’Challa with a few things.” Steve tilts his head toward an upholstered chair a few feet away. There’s a small table next to it with a tablet resting on it. “I have plenty of reading.”

Bucky slowly toes off his shoes and situates himself on top of the comforter. Steve’s bed feels softer than his, and he sinks into it like he’s being swallowed whole. He presses the ice pack into his face, closes his eyes, and takes a few deep breaths.

“I’m gonna wake you up in a couple of hours and ask you silly questions,” Steve warns him. “To make sure you’re not dead.”

“’kay.”

Bucky listens as Steve settles into his chair. Bucky can barely – just barely – hear him breathing. A weighty calm settles over him and his limbs begin to feel heavy. He has the passing thought that maybe this sensation is actually a subdural hematoma slowly killing off what’s left of his brain. He then realizes that he doesn’t care if it is.
No. Not a hematoma.


Not bad at all.

Chapter End Notes

For those who haven’t read the comics, “Sputnik” actually is a verbal “kill” switch for the WS. Couldn’t have made that up if I tried.

Thanks so much for the kudos!
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Bucky has doubts. The Winter Soldier learns a valuable lesson.

Chapter Notes

There are many places where the Marvel Cinematic Universe and the comics are incongruent in the Captain America franchise. For those familiar with the comics, I’m following the MCU’s lead with Bucky’s handlers and decided to chronologically switch Lukin and Karpov (even though MCU Karpov is clearly not comic Karpov). Oh, canon. Why are you so difficult to follow sometimes?

Warning up front for descriptions of graphic violence and what I would probably classify as torture.

Thank you so much to all who left kudos and comments. I am deeply appreciative.

Session three starts with a review of last week’s homework and Bucky’s retelling of the Sputnik incident, which he describes with the colorless texture of a police report.

“Yikes,” Bard says, visibly cringing. “How’s the pain?”

“Okay,” Bucky says. His nose, right cheek, and the right side of his forehead have all taken on various shades of purple and pink.

“Well, the weekly trials have been going perfectly, so it would figure that something would go wrong somewhere else.”

Bard settles into his chair. He has a small stack of papers on top of his portfolio.

“Some time this week, lie down on the couch and have Scott repeat the word for a few minutes,” Bard tells him. “Do the same thing the next week. Then have him go back to doing it randomly. Preferably while you’re sitting.”

“I don’t think Scott wants to do it anymore,” Bucky says. “He feels bad about what happened.”

“He’s always been very eager to help you, as far as I can tell. Tell him that this is what helping looks like.”

“A smashed face?”

“Sometimes, yeah” Bard replies with a chuckle. “Okay, enough stalling. Let’s get down to it. Today we’re going to talk about feelings.”

“Do we have to?” Bucky replies.
He knows that the answer is probably yes. He also knows that he’s still under verbal contract to not beeline it out of the room. Whatever crap Bard has in store today to try to make him feel better, Bucky knows it’s likely to be both fruitless and annoying. But he tells himself to suck it up, that he only has to stay for two more sessions.

“To treat PTSD, it’s important to know how to name, describe, and understand your emotions,” Bard explains. “What do you think is the purpose of emotions?”

Bucky thinks about it. However, all the ideas he comes up with are probably not what Bard would want to hear. Emotions get you punished. Emotions make you careless. Emotions make you vulnerable.

“I don’t know.”

“Okay,” Bard replies. “Let’s pick an emotion that you’re familiar with. What emotion do you think you experience the most?”

Of course, Bucky can’t think of a single damn emotion. He starts to feel uneasy. Is uneasy an emotion? His mind then begins to race around the idea that he can’t even answer a simple question that a small child could field with zero effort.

Bard notices Bucky’s discomfort.

“Let’s try anxiety,” Bard offers. “What do you think is the purpose of that? When you’re anxious, what happens?”

“I try to do something to make it go away. Maybe leave a situation.”

Like therapy. Leave therapy and never, ever come back.

“Absolutely,” Bard says. “Many of our emotions help drive our behavior. If you perceive there’s a problem, anxiety could motivate you to take steps to fix that problem.”

Bard pulls a piece of paper from the stack on his lap and hands it to Bucky.

“I’ve noticed that you have a lot of trouble describing your emotions. You tend to use terms like ‘bad’ or ‘not bad,’ or ‘not good,’ which are judgments about something and not feelings. Other times you just say you’re feeling ‘okay’ or ‘fine’ when I think it’s clear you’re feeling something stronger. This handout can be a helpful tool to identify emotions.”

On the paper entitled “The Feelings Wheel” is a large circle cut into six slices. Toward the center are six core emotional categories: Angry, scared, sad, powerful, safe, joyful. As the circle grows outward, these categories are divided twice into even more emotion words in each category.

“You can start from the middle and work your way out for more specific words,” Bard explains. “Or go the opposite way and work your way inward.”

Bucky studies the sheet. It’s logical, but some of the emotions seem so abstract to him that he wonders if he ever felt them in his life. He notices that even some of the basic emotions in the center are out of his reach.

“I don’t feel most of these,” Bucky tells Bard, pointing to the six words at the wheel’s core.

“Well, what about some of these other words? Do you think you feel any of those?” Bard asks, directing him to the more specific words that fall on the middle and outer rims of the wheel.
A few jump out immediately at him.

“Empty. I definitely feel that one. Numb.”

Bucky bites the inside of his lip.

“Ashamed. Hopeless,” he adds quietly.

Bard nods. “Those are very common with PTSD. And what’s the core emotion in the middle for those?”

Huh. Guess Steve was right.

“What did Steve say?”

Unaware that he said that out loud, Bucky stumbles over his words.

“He… said I seem sad.”

Bard’s mouth falls open a little.

“Wait, you talked with Steve about feelings?”

“Not really.”

“Okay,” Bard says as the tiniest of smiles curls one corner of his mouth.

They continue working arduously through the basic emotions. For each one, Bard asks Bucky to try to identify where he feels things in his body, and Bucky struggles mightily with each one except for “scared.” He manages to identify muscle tension, shallow breathing, hypervigilance, and racing heart, if only because it’s the way he feels almost all the time.

“Why is this so hard?” Bucky says to himself.

“Remember when I talked about checking out last session? Another word for that is avoidance. Humans want to avoid discomfort and pain. In fact, we’ll do pretty much anything to get away from it,” Bard says. “One way to avoid painful or overwhelming emotions like anger, shame, sadness, or fear is to numb them out.”

“Makes sense,” Bucky says.

“The problem is that all our emotions live under the same roof, so when you numb out the bad stuff, you numb out all the good stuff too. If you get really good at that, as you have, then you have to do some hard work to reverse the process.”

Bucky thinks about the times when he was a kid, when he was in the Army, with the SSR, and with Hydra when numbing, compartmentalizing, and stuffing emotions down helped him stay alive, avoid punishment, or not drown in despair. After leaving Hydra, he was an expert at feeling nothing deeper than a paper-thin façade, a weak emulation of what he used to feel so powerfully back when he was normal. Before he died in the snow.

But now…

“Do you know what I feel like?” Bucky asks Bard.

“No, I don’t. You don’t give me a lot of hints.”
“I feel like I’m just one bad day, maybe one bad moment away from completely losing my shit,” Bucky says. “I feel that constantly.”

“What would it look like if you lost your shit?”

“I don’t know. Anger, sadness… Like if I let myself feel those things, I’ll lose my mind. Hurt someone maybe. Maybe when I start feeling it, it’ll never stop.”

Zemo’s dark words echo in his mind, as they frequently do, especially now that Bard is trying to get him to dismantle the precarious psychological equilibrium he’s built up over the years. For a guy who wasn’t even a psychiatrist, Zemo was able to read Bucky with uncanny precision.

“That’s a fear a lot of people in PTSD treatment have,” Bard assures him. “I’ve never seen that happen all my years in this field, but it’s almost a universal concern.”

Bucky stares back at Bard. He thinks about the other people Bard is referring to and figures that even the most fucked up combat veterans probably haven’t done even a fraction of the horrible things he has. He once again feels a surge of doubt about therapy, about Bard, about his ability to ever feel anything close to normal again.

“I know this is frustrating for you,” Bard says, “but you’re doing great. Let me show you something that’ll help make more sense of this.”

He pulls out another worksheet.

“This is the Feelings Monitoring Form.”

“God, these worksheet names,” Bucky complains.

Bard ignores Bucky’s griping and goes about explaining the form, which includes four columns: Situation, Feeling, Thoughts, and Action.

“Let’s run through an example from the past week, shall we? What’s something that sticks out for you?”

Bucky thinks back and opts to tell Bard about when Wanda approached him in the arboretum. He deliberately avoids anything related to what happened the day he passed out, especially the part with Steve. He still doesn’t fully understand what that was and, frankly, doesn’t want to look at it too closely.

“Oh, so you would write what happened in the situation column,” Bard says. “What were the feelings you had? Use the Feelings Wheel.”

Bucky looks over the sheet. He thinks about how he felt when Wanda first sat down next to him.

“Irritated, I guess.”

“Good. Anything else?”

Bucky’s brow furrows. “Wait, good?”

“Yeah. Why isn’t that good?”

“It’s not a good emotion to have.”

“Many people get messages throughout life that feelings – or at least, certain types of feelings – are
bad. The thing is, they’re not inherently bad. Most of the core emotions happen naturally, whether we like them or not. This very much includes the ‘bad’ ones like anger and sadness,” Bard says.

“It doesn’t feel like most of them are happening,” Bucky says.

“That goes back to the numbing I talked about earlier. They’re probably all happening, but you’re shoving them down the second they start to gain traction. By now, it’s probably an automatic process. And just so you’re clear, the goal of this exercise is not to judge your emotions as good or bad. They’re all okay. The goal is to get you to articulate what you’re feeling in the first place. Now, give me some more emotions for this scenario.”

“Fine. I felt embarrassed. Also guilty.”

“Great. Any others?”

“No.”

“Okay, next column. What were some thoughts you had in this scenario?”

“I wanted her to leave me alone.”

“So you’d write that in the next column under ‘thoughts,’” Bard says. “Any others?”

“She must think I’m pathetic.”

“Okay, so some thoughts about how she might view you. Good. And what was the action you took?”

“We talked for a few minutes. Then I left.”

“See? That wasn’t so bad, right?” Bard asks, smiling.

“No, but it doesn’t seem like it would to any good.”

“Well, this is just building up your basic skills in identifying emotions and connecting emotions to thoughts and actions. It’s the basis of everything I envision us doing together in therapy.”

“I don’t think I’m going to keep coming in after next session,” Bucky says. “The next one is my fourth.”

Despite how confident Bucky is in his decision, he still feels uncomfortable telling Bard that he doesn’t want to come back. In his head, he mockingly identifies the accompanying emotion as ‘guilt.’

Bard’s smile wanes.

“That’s certainly your choice. Can I ask why you don’t plan to come back?”

Bucky looks down at the rug.

“Honestly, I think I’m beyond helping at this point. I think you’d just be wasting your time.”

Like Steve moving the world to try to save him from Hydra, the Germans, the UN, Zemo, and Stark, Bucky knows that Bard’s headed down the same road, which will only lead to the same dead end.
“I would never consider working with you a waste of time,” Bard says seriously. “And I absolutely don’t believe you’re beyond helping. But I can tell you that all day, right? You still have to believe it yourself. I wonder what it would take for that to happen.”

“I don’t know,” Bucky says. “I’m sorry.”

Despite the fact that the next session is his last, Bucky is still given homework to complete one feelings monitoring form per day, plus all the other assignments from the previous sessions. He stops by the kitchen to grab more of those horrible bars, which he finds himself still reaching for almost every day despite their taste.

He takes a seat at the large, eight-seat table right outside the kitchen area, where Steve and the others presumably gather for breakfast. Like last week, it’s dead quiet. He remembers his conversation with Wanda and guesses that “the boys” are all at the gym in the east wing.

And, of course, just as he’s about to bite through the first bar’s wrapper, he hears a commotion. Men’s voices, loud, overlapping, and getting louder by the second. His processing power is still hovering at around 75% from his concussion, and he fully understands what’s happening only just as they start streaming into the room.

“Whoa! Hey, you’re here!” Clint exclaims, the first one to catch sight of Bucky.

“Hey!” Sam says.

“Wow! Hi!” Scott echoes.

“Hey, Buck!” Steve says, his already cheerful expression brightening even more.

It’s clear that they’re all thoroughly jazzed from whatever workout they just did, swarming toward the kitchen like they haven’t eaten in a week. Steve approaches Bucky at the table with a smile.

“How was therapy?” he asks, quietly enough that the others in the kitchen can’t hear.

“Okay,” Bucky replies.

Bucky’s gaze drifts inadvertently to Steve’s chest, clad in a moisture-wicking grey t-shirt that looks to be at least one size too small. The shirt is darkened with sweat between his pecs and under his neckline and armpits. Bucky catches himself staring and his face warms.

“Ugh, those things are terrible,” Steve says, pointing to the bars Bucky has. “They’re Clint’s. We sometimes – what’s the term, Clint?” he calls into the kitchen. “When we eat your bars even though we don’t like them?”


“I didn’t know they were yours,” he calls back. “Sorry.”

Clint pokes his head around the corner. “I’m just kiddin’, man. Eat however many you want.”

“Don’t! Unless you want diabetes,” Sam yells.

“Hey, I don’t have diabetes,” Clint replies as he goes back to the kitchen. “Not yet, anyway. Soon, though. I’m working on it.”
“Oh, your wife won’t like that,” Scott says.

“Ah, she’s already had it with me. Not that I can blame her.”

“You just couldn’t stay retired,” Sam says. “Just one more mission, honey. Just gonna do a solid for Steve. Then I’ll hang up my quiver for good.”

“I should just stop living in denial. Retirement sucks. Definitely not as bad as being an international criminal, though,” Clint replies.

He then pops his head back around the corner.

“Oh, hey, I didn’t keep you up last night, did I?” Clint says to Bucky. “4 pm Central Standard is pretty much the only time my wife can get all the kids to sit still long enough for a ten minute conversation.”

“No, you didn’t keep me up.”

This realization gives Bucky pause, because that means he actually slept through Clint video messaging his screaming kids on the other side of their shared wall.

“Hey, instead of those nasty things, lemme make you something,” Steve says. “C’mon.”

He motions for Bucky to stand up and follow him to the kitchen, which, with an inaudible sigh, Bucky does.

Steve walks up to a clear expanse of counter and pulls a large, high-speed blender from the cupboard below.

“Ohhh, it’s milkshake time,” Sam says.

“It’s not technically a milkshake,” Steve assures Bucky. “It’s just a shake.”

Bucky wonders what the hell the difference is.

“It’s worse than a milkshake,” Sam tells Bucky. “You’ll see.”

Steve begins moving around the kitchen, pulling ingredients from the freezer, fridge, and various cupboards. He lines up a jug of whole milk, a glass container of oats, a huge tub of vanilla protein powder, Greek yogurt, almond butter, coconut oil, and small ziploc bag of frozen bananas. Bucky watches him as he piles the ingredients into the blender. There is graceful deftness in his movements, even doing something this mundane. He tightens down the lid and turns to Bucky.

“You’re going to like this,” he says, flipping the on switch.

The blender makes quick work of turning the pile into what does indeed look like a milkshake. Steve pours the mixture into a large blender bottle, hands it to Bucky, and waits expectantly for him to try it.

Steve’s absolutely right. It tastes amazing.

“It’s really good.”

“1600 calories. Better than eating six bars, huh? I’ll write down the recipe for you.”

Bucky sips the shake in silence as Steve repeats the process for himself. Lighthearted, easy banter
swirls around him. A part of him is touched by Steve’s thoughtfulness. Anyone might find this shake tasty, but Steve knew he would love it. Steve knew it because Steve knows Bucky. Who he used to be, at least.

However, an even larger part of Bucky feels like a complete outsider among them. Maybe even an intruder. If they are a family, Bucky is pretty sure he’s the estranged uncle who went to Vietnam as a boy and only came back in name alone.

What he hates the most is that he has distant but vivid memories of himself bantering. Dazzlingly, joyfully, effortlessly, as if it was simple as breathing. But now, banter is yet another algorithm for human connection that has crucial components missing. If this, then… what?

In the middle of his shake, Bucky makes an excuse to go back to his room. To do his therapy homework, he tells Steve. Steve probably thinks his disappointment is carefully veiled, but he’s never, ever been good at hiding how he feels.

Bucky enters his room and locks the door behind him. He walks over strewn dirty clothes to get to his bed, where he puts down the shake on his cluttered nightstand. He sits down on the edge of his mattress.

The truth is that Bucky couldn’t stand another minute with them. Everything that started to stir during his session with Bard – the doubt, the hopelessness, his awareness of his emotional and social incompetence – has only been amplified and further confirmed by his brief interaction with them.

He wonders if he really is just a broken machine, a machine whose maintainers are dead, whose programs have been hacked into oblivion, and who appears to have no purpose at all except to generate concern in those around him. At the very least, when he was the Winter Soldier, he had a purpose.

Bucky reaches up under the bedframe to grab his pistol, which rests in a holster he rigged crudely out of interwoven pieces of folded duct tape. He clears the weapon and prepares himself for the inevitable onslaught of nausea.

It’s been 56 years since Hydra took away one of his last shreds of autonomy, and he still remains impressed with the staying power of his conditioning. The events of that week remain seared into his mind and his guts, his programming fighting back even harder now that he’s close to breaking through...

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Mission 19600528: Eliminate Anatoly Osinov, a Soviet engineer with the Strategic Rocket Forces suspected of providing the Americans with intel on ICBM technology and missile deterrence strategy. It was his second mission as the Winter Soldier, selected carefully because of its simplicity and low margin for error.

Indeed, it was simple enough to sneak into the man’s home that night, to stalk silently down the hall, to pop the corner of his home office and land three quick bullets in his chest. The Winter Soldier even enjoyed a few moments of blissful satisfaction as a rush of dopamine and adrenaline flooded his brain.

What the Winter Soldier did not plan for was that the bullets would go through the wall. He didn’t plan for the screaming in the room next door. Didn’t plan for the wide bloom of blood on the floor. Didn’t plan for the bullet-riddled body of a little boy. Didn’t plan for a woman’s face contorted
into a shape of anguish and horror. He left then, because that’s what his parameters dictated. One target. One kill. Proceed to extraction point.

As he moved through the blackness of the night along the rooftops, he analyzed the hit. His approach was flawed. Collateral damage was not acceptable. His mind ran through various permutations of how things could have transpired. Maybe he should have used his Stechkin instead of his modded Kalashnikov. Maybe he should have shot the man in the head. Maybe he should have approached from the exterior instead of the interior. Maybe he should have requested IDs of potential collaterals in the home.

Distracted, he stepped too close to the building’s edge. A loose brick gave way and he fell three stories into the alley below, cracking his head on a fire escape railing on the way down.

He woke up two hours later, face down on the concrete. He tried to think, to remember anything, who he was, his location, why he would wake up like this. He looked at his clothes. His horrifying mechanical arm. His gear, including an assault rifle, two pistols, two knives, and four magazines of ammo. Pure fear and confusion coursed through him, freezing him where he stood, his mind futilely grasping for any relevant information. He touched his hand to his head and ran it through his short hair. His left temple was sticky with blood.

“Soldier.”

He whipped around toward the sound of that voice. Through the darkness he could see a triangle of three men approaching him. The two in the back were young, dressed in tactical gear, cagily aiming their rifles at him. The one in the front was older, unarmed, dressed in plain clothes.

“Soldier.”

The man’s voice was calm. Familiar. It captured his attention completely.

“What is your name, Soldier?”

The Winter Soldier tried frantically to remember.

“What country do you serve, Soldier?”

He had no idea.

“Longing.”

His eyes went wide.

“Rusted.”

A barrage of images bombarded his consciousness.

“Seventeen.”

“No…” the Winter Soldier said in English.

The Winter Soldier pulled out his pistol. The old man paused. He pointed his pistol at the old man.

“Daybreak.”

In an instant, the clouds of confusion parted. A ray of pure lucidity cut through. He blinked. He remembered. Everything.
He pointed the gun to his own head.

The man took him down with a single word.

When he awoke, they were strapping him into the chair. His head lolled forward. They pushed it back, shoved the guard in his mouth, and activated the vise. They blasted him with so much electricity that he nearly lost consciousness. The old man from the alley yelled at the doctors to stop or else the asset would be completely useless.

After they removed the vise, the man approached him. The man looked at him with something resembling pity.

“Soldier. Do you know who I am?”

Somehow, he did. Lukin. He nodded.

Lukin motioned to the two young men from before, who dragged the Winter Soldier from the chair and shoved him into a cryo chamber. He tried weakly to push against the door but froze trying.

When he awoke, they wiped him again, quickly this time, while Lukin called out his activation words from the book. When Lukin was finished, he walked up to the Winter Soldier, his expression kind and paternal.

“Ready to comply.”

“I have very important training for you today,” Lukin told him. “You will participate in this training to the absolute best of your abilities. You will internalize and utilize everything we teach you today. Do you understand?”

It was the same canned spiel he heard before every training session. And like every other time, he replied in the affirmative.

They fed him. He was always starving after being pulled from cryo. The food was hearty and rich, and he shoved it into his mouth as quickly as he could chew and swallow it. They let him eat until he couldn’t stomach another bite.

The guards then escorted him to a small concrete room. In the middle of the room was a chair, not unlike the one they used in conjunction with the vise. Lukin instructed him to take a seat. Directly in front of him was a projection screen. Behind and slightly to the left of him was a projector.

A doctor came into the room, wheeling in a tall metal stand with a bag of liquid attached. He pushed an IV needle into the Winter Soldier’s right arm and secured it down tightly along the length of his forearm with tape and leather straps.

“You will follow my instructions precisely, even through the discomfort,” Lukin said. “You will stay seated for the duration of this training. You will not attempt to remove the IV. Noncompliance will result in severe consequences. Do you understand?”

“Understood.”

Lukin nodded to the doctor, who turned on the IV drip. Behind him, an assistant loaded a reel into the projector. Lukin then reached into his jacket and pulled out the Winter Soldier’s pistol. He pressed it into his left hand.
“You will hold this for the duration of the training exercise. Do you understand?”

“Understood.”

The lights were dimmed and projector flared up. He began to feel a sourness in his stomach, beyond the extreme fullness he already felt.

“Watch the screen,” Lukin instructed.

The first scene was of a man standing on the edge of some train tracks. A train could be seen swiftly approaching from the background. It barreled forward. The man stepped in front of it. His body exploded into a hail of blood, guts, and parts.

The second scene was another man, this time standing on the edge of a building. He took three steps forward and tumbled off the edge. The camera panned to the ground below, where the man lay sprawled on the sidewalk. Blood flowed from his head.

The sourness in the Winter Soldier’s stomach quickly escalated to almost blinding nausea. He felt hot and dizzy. His face broke out into a sweat. Someone put a metal bucket on his lap, which he grasped tightly with his right arm. His mouth filled with saliva.

The third scene was a man seated at a table with a pistol. He pushed a magazine into the grip and pulled back on the bolt to chamber the round. He then put the pistol under his chin. His face was calm. There was a crack, and his brains sprayed out onto the wall behind him.

He couldn’t hold back anymore. He vomited into the bucket loudly and violently, gasping desperately for air between heaves.

“Watch the screen!” Lukin demanded.

With a pained groan, he lifted his head from the bucket enough to watch a fourth scene of a man standing in front of a sink. He had a razor in his right hand. The camera zoomed in as he rested the razor against his left wrist and pressed it deeply into his flesh. Blood poured out from the wound.

He heaved again, vomiting out the last remains of his enormous meal.

“Hold the pistol to your temple,” Lukin told him.

He lifted the pistol and pressed it against his head.

“Your body is not yours to destroy,” Lukin stated. “You will commit no act of violence against yourself.”

He swallowed back another wave of nausea.

“Hold the pistol under your jaw.”

He complied.

“You will not deliberately shoot yourself. You will not cut yourself in order to inflict damage. You will not throw yourself from any height with the intent of harming or killing yourself. You will not throw yourself in front of a moving vehicle with the intent of harming or killing yourself. You will not consume poisons or overdose deliberately on medications. Hold the pistol over your heart.”

He complied.
“You will not deprive yourself of nutrition or water for the purpose of harming yourself. You will not perform any act against yourself that would lead to strangulation or other forms of asphyxiation. Lower the pistol. Watch the screen.”

The four scenes repeated over and over. Lukin called out the same commands and repeated the same instructions over and over. The Winter Soldier complied over and over. He retched unproductively and painfully into the bucket over and over. The cycle repeated for an hour-and-a-half, until he was so weak that he could barely hold himself upright.

Then the projector stopped. The lights went up. The doctor shut off the IV drip and removed the straps, tape, and needle. The bucket was taken away.

Lukin approached him and carefully removed the pistol from his metal hand. The Winter Soldier looked at him from beneath heavy eyelids. His hair and shirt were soaked with sweat. Lukin smiled at him.

“You have done very well, Soldier. Your compliance was impeccable.”

Lukin laid a gentle hand his wet head.

“You are truly remarkable.”

Lukin instructed the guards to be careful with him. They eased him out of the chair, still reeling from the last throes of the emetic in his veins. They walked him to a small cell containing a cot, a toilet, and a sink. They sat him down on the edge of the cot.

Lukin crouched down next to him and poured him a glass of water from a pitcher. He instructed the Winter Soldier to drink, which he did.

“You will lie down and rest now,” Lukin said. “I will be back for you in an hour. You will also drink this entire pitcher of water. Do you understand?”

“Understood,” he replied, voice so hoarse it was barely audible.

An hour later, Lukin was back. He came alone. He took the Winter Soldier by the arm and brought him to the firing range.

He led him to a table strewn with an array of firearms and magazines. There was another stand with another IV bag. The same doctor approached him, fed the needle into his right arm, and strapped it down. The Winter Soldier tensed with dread. Lukin placed a calming hand on his shoulder.

“This one is different,” he assured him.

Lukin handed him hearing protection muffs and then donned his own.

“Now, pick up the pistol and fire at the target.”

The Winter Soldier picked up the Stechkin and landed 20 rounds center mass into the human-shaped silhouette in front of him. A soft, warm sensation began to fill his body.

“You are a vital asset to our organization. To your motherland, the Soviet Union,” Lukin told him. “Pick up the Kalashnikov and aim for the head.”

He complied, emptying the magazine expertly into the target’s head. He felt light and powerful. Focused. Invincible. Euphoric.
“Switch out the target,” Lukin called to one of the assistants standing by. “150 meters.”

He turned back to the Winter Soldier.

“Load another magazine.”

He complied. Lukin looked him in the eye with an intensity belying his old age.

“You work is a gift to mankind, Soldier. Never forget that.”

Lukin smiled. And the Winter Soldier smiled back.

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Back in his room, Bucky once again presses the muzzle of his pistol underneath his jaw. He takes a deep breath, closes his eyes, and concentrates.

He thinks about everything that Hydra has taken from him, including the only way he could have truly saved himself and everyone else. He thinks of all the suffering that could have been spared had he pulled the trigger that day. And now, he thinks about what he might spare himself and everyone else if he can pull it now.

He grits his teeth. Pulls hard. Hears a loud click.

His eyes open wide in disbelief. And then, he does what he never imagined he would do in this situation:

He smiles.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Bucky spills the beans. Sam steps up to the plate. Steve confronts Bucky. Shit hits the fan.

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all the kudos and lovely comments. They mean a lot to me.

“So, today’s our last session,” Bard says, taking his usual seat across from Bucky. “Or maybe not. Have you given it any more thought?”

Bucky is unsettled, right leg bouncing, fingers of his right hand tapping against the arm of his chair.

“Are you okay?” Bard asks. “You seem anxious today. Even more than usual.”

“I’ve been lying to you,” Bucky says, unable to look at Bard directly.

“About what?”

After a beat of final consideration, Bucky leans forward and reaches around to his lower back. He pulls out his .45 and places it on the coffee table between them.

Bard looks only mildly surprised.

“Huh. Well, I gotta say, this is the first time I’ve had a patient take out a weapon during session.”

“I’m not going to hurt you,” Bucky assures him.

“Of course not,” Bard says. “The thought didn’t even cross my mind. But you definitely got my attention. What have you been lying about?”

“I’ve been thinking about killing myself.”

“For how long?”

“Since I woke up from cryo.”

“How often do you have these thoughts?”

“Every day.”

“I take it you’ve gone so far as to think about how you’d do it?” Bard says, nodding to the gun.

“I’ve practiced. Many times.”
Bucky tells Bard about his Hydra training, how he worked to override it, and how he finally succeeded in pulling the trigger the week before.

“So you pulled the trigger. And yet you’re here, telling me what you’ve done and showing me the weapon you’ve been rehearsing with.”

“Yes.”

“Why haven’t you shot yourself yet?”

It’s a weird question, but a valid one. One that Bucky has to think about.

“I went through all that so that I could have the option to off myself, if things got bad enough. A back-up plan, I guess. But when I pulled the trigger, I felt relieved. I somehow went from wanting to have a last ditch escape plan to thinking it was a really good idea to kill myself.”

“What happened when you realized that?”

“It was like a punch in the gut.”

“Do you want to stay alive?” Bard asks.

Bucky has always had an unfortunately high tolerance for physical pain, to the point where even if he wished he could pass out from agony, he probably couldn’t. He sometimes worries that this tolerance extends to the emotional realm as well. Maybe he’s capable of enduring a natural lifetime of abject misery. Maybe this will never end and he’ll die just as miserable, alone, exhausted, and afraid as he feels right now. With the serum in his veins, he doesn’t even know how long his natural life would be.

“If I have to keep living like this, I’d rather die,” Bucky says.

Bard nods. “Given that we’re here, having this conversation, I’m gathering you think there might be another option. Aside from either killing yourself or living this way forever.”

“I want there to be another option. I don’t wanna hurt anyone because I feel trapped. If I killed myself, it would be a dick thing to do to Steve.”

Bucky can barely stand to think about how much Steve has sacrificed to help him. His freedom. His friendships. His good standing and reputation with the government. Even his assets have been seized, leaving Steve with truly nothing to show for his sacrifices except Bucky. Alive.

“Is it possible that therapy could be that third option?” Bard asks.

“I’ve had doubts about it, obviously.”

“To be fair, you’ve barely given it a shot,” Bard points out. “It takes time and a lot of work to see progress. I told you that during our first session together.”

“I know.”

Bard is right. Bucky knows his expectations for therapy are wildly off the mark. He knows there’s no way only four sessions could make a marked difference, given the sorry state of his current mental health. The frightening extension of that is the possibility that he is so damaged that even years of therapy might not help. From any angle, he feels disheartened by the magnitude of what he’s up against.
Bard takes a deep breath and appears to steel himself.

“So remember our first session when I told you I might have to break confidentiality to keep you safe?” Bard asks.

Bucky nods as his internal threat system begins blaring like a klaxon.

“This is one of those situations where I’m seriously considering that.”

“Why?” Bucky asks, his voice laced with barely subdued panic. “I gave you my gun. I’ll come to therapy. I’ll put in the work.”

Bard shifts to the edge of his chair and leans forward.

“Listen, I want you to try to view this from my perspective. Here are the variables I’m looking at:

“You’re extremely depressed and chronically hopeless, you’ve been thinking about suicide every day, you rehearse blowing your head off multiple times a week, you feel like you’re a burden to the people who care about you, you isolate yourself physically and emotionally, you’re in a near constant state of distress, you barely sleep, you don’t think therapy can help you, you feel deep regret and shame, you appear to have virtually no positive self-regard, you’re very clever and resourceful, you’re proficient with weapons, extremely skilled at causing bodily harm, and you’ve lied to me about being suicidal from day one.

“When I say all of that, do you see why I’m really concerned?”

Bucky feels himself starting to zone out as the weight of Bard’s summary settles down upon him. Any illusions he had about walking away from this session without serious consequences evaporate into ether.

“Yeah. I see why.”

“And I’m not taking your gun. I’m not comfortable with that.”

They sit in silence while Bard studies Bucky and Bucky studies Bard’s scuffed Oxfords.

“So what now?” Bucky finally asks.

“I see two options. We could put together a really good safety plan that involves you giving your weapons and your medications to someone else to hold onto. It’ll also involve you committing to coming in for a two-hour session instead of a one-hour session every week. You’ll also have to commit to engaging with your social supports, and I mean actually engaging with them. You’ll check in with at least one person every day. You’ll talk about what’s really going on with you, not just this ‘I’m okay, I’m fine’ bullshit you’ve been trying to sell.”

Somehow, Bucky finds a modicum of amusement in the fact that Bard literally called him out on his bullshit.

“If you can’t agree to that,” Bard continues, “I’ll tell Steve everything and involuntarily hospitalize you. Simple as that.”

“You’re not putting me in the hospital.”

“Okay, so plan one?”

“Fine,” Bucky says between clenched teeth.
“I also think we should get your meds adjusted. You should have started to see some improvement in either mood or sleep by now, but you obviously haven’t. Before you leave, I’ll call Dr. Jelani and ask about upping the dose. Maybe we need to get an additional antidepressant onboard, too.”

Bucky nods.

“So, let’s get specific with this plan. Who are you going to give your weapons to?”

Bucky briefly considers his options, which consist of anyone in the compound except Steve.

“Sam.”

Bard’s face contorts in confusion.

“Not Steve?”

“Steve won’t be happy about it.” The understatement of the 21st century to date.

“What do you think he’ll do?”

“Get really concerned.”

“Yeah, that would be a normal response,” Bard replies. “This situation is quite concerning.”

“Still. I don’t want him to worry about me anymore than he already does.”

“So you’re suggesting that Sam won’t tell Steve. You really believe that.”

“Maybe he won’t, if I ask him.”

Bard steeples his fingers over his lips.

“Okay, let’s do an exercise in empathy, shall we? Let’s reverse the roles. You’re doing okay and Steve is your suicidal, depressed best friend in therapy. If Steve was thinking about killing himself every day and practicing shooting himself in the room next door to yours, would you want to know?”

“Of course.”

“What would be your response if he told Sam but not you?”

It’s hard for Bucky to realistically participate in this exercise, to imagine himself ‘doing okay’ enough that he would be a reliable, good friend to someone suffering like he is right now.

“I suppose I’d be hurt.”

Bard nods. “Yeah. So, you still think this is a good idea?”

“I know it doesn’t make sense to you, but I’m going to try it my way.”

Bucky marvels at his own contortion of logic, perfectly rationalizing what knows deep down is an absolutely terrible idea.

“So Sam’s going to be your go-to guy for your daily check-ins, too?”

Bucky shrugs. “I guess.”
“I think this is a terrible idea,” Bard says frankly. “But I think they’re both going to gang up on you, so at least I don’t have to worry about you slipping through the cracks. I just think it’s going to be much messier than if you were to tell Steve first.”

“You’re right,” Bucky says. “Sam’ll probably tell him. But I want some time to make some progress before he does. Maybe I can get him to put off telling Steve for a couple of weeks. Then maybe he won’t worry as much.”

Bard smiles. “Well, lucky for you, I’m going to teach you some distress tolerance strategies today. Maybe you can try some of those when this plan blows up in your face.”

Bucky looks over at the clock.

“Oh yeah, I’ve still got you for 90 more minutes,” Bard says. “I’m guessing we don’t have any homework to review. Or do we?”

Bucky reaches under his chair, grabs his homework folder, and tosses it on the table next to his pistol. Bard picks it up and sifts through the papers inside. Then he starts laughing.

“What a paradox. The guy who thinks therapy is crap and doesn’t work but does all of his assigned homework perfectly.”

Bard pulls out one sheet in particular and waves it at him.

“He even does a Feelings Monitoring Form around his suicide behaviors.”

“What can I say?” Bucky says flatly. “I’m good at following orders.”

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After therapy, Bucky heads back toward his room. Since he’s out of session over an hour later than usual, everyone is long back from the gym and has moved on to doing whatever it is they do when they’re not working out. He stops in front of Sam’s room, which is across the hall from Clint’s. He listens at the door and hears some quiet rustling. He knocks quietly.

When he opens the door, Sam’s expression appears both puzzled and pleased.

“Hey, Barnes. What’s up?”

“Can you come to my room in around five minutes?” Bucky asks.

“Uh, sure,” Sam replies. He’s clearly too perplexed to gather any salient information about why a guy who barely talks to him is suddenly inviting him to what Clint calls Bucky’s Fortress of Solitude.

Bucky then turns and crosses the hallway to his own room. After setting his homework folder down and closing the door behind him, he surveys the state of his living space. He quickly picks up his clothes from off the floor, tossing them into his closet. He straightens his comforter and throws his trash into the nearly overflowing garbage can by his bed. He then walks to his bathroom and grabs his pill bottles from his medicine cabinet.

Sam knocks. Bucky invites him in. Sam eyes the room warily, leans back against the wall next to the doorjamb, and crosses his arms.

“I might be the first one who’s ever been in here, aside from you,” Sam correctly observes.
“I have to tell you something. Close the door.”

Sam does as requested. Bucky sits down on the edge of his bed.

“You know I haven’t been doing great lately,” Bucky states.

“Yeah, I gathered that.”

Anxiety wells up, just like it did when he was about to confess everything to Bard. He looks at Sam, who is a solid wall of composure. Bucky borrows a little of that solidity and rights his slouching posture.

“I’ve been thinking about killing myself. Often.”

Sam’s mouth draws into a flat, serious line.

“I told Dr. Bard. He said if I want to avoid being thrown in the hospital, I have to give my gun and pills to someone. I’d like to give them to you.”

“Why me?”

“I trust you.”

“Lots of people here are trustworthy. I’m thinking of one in particular, right next door,” Sam says, tilting his head toward Steve’s room.

“I want to wait to tell him.”

“Wait for what?”

“If I tell him now, he’s gonna be really upset.”

“Yeah, you think?”

Bucky attempts to calmly lay out his bogus rationale, even though he is swiftly losing confidence that Sam will buy into any of it.

“I figured I could give everything to you now, do a lot of work in the next few weeks to try to get better, and then tell Steve. Then I’ll have something to show, at least.”

Sam shakes his head with an incredulous smile.

“So you want to wait to tell him, which will really piss him off and result in him kicking my ass for keeping secrets about you? No way. I’m sorry, but I’m not getting in the middle of whatever you’ve got going on with Steve.”

Bucky frowns. “There’s nothing going on.”

“Maybe that’s the problem. Things are really weird between the two of you, and I’m beginning to think you kinda like it that way.”

Bucky falls quiet. He feels drained and defeated. He almost regrets telling anyone about any of this in the first place.

“You know what I used to do for work, before I met Steve?” Sam asks.
Bucky shakes his head.

“I was a peer support counselor at the VA in DC. You know what you have to do to become a peer support counselor?”

“No.”

“Graduate from therapy, so you can help other vets build up the courage to go to therapy themselves. I had guys like you come to my group. They’d come in with their depression beards, sit in the back of the room and scowl. They were probably only there because their third wife was about to walk out on them. Not the high school sweetheart first wife or the stripper second wife. The post-stripper wife.”

Sam smirks and shifts his weight to his other foot

“I’m not about to get into a trauma contest with you, because although my therapist used to say that there are no trauma kings, I think you might actually be one. That said, I’ve been through therapy, and even though we’ve got different stuff, I bet some of it is the same stuff, too.”

It suddenly strikes Bucky that he knows very little about Sam, despite the fact that they’ve lived together for months. Part of it has been his general withdrawal from everyone, coupled with Sam’s limited involvement in his deprogramming. But he’s also kept his distance from Sam because he’s strong, grounded, and an excellent friend to Steve. Everything Bucky is not.

“What happened?” Bucky asks.

“On my last deployment, I watched my best friend die. Even besides that, the whole deployment was really rough. Came back home, didn’t re-enlist, got a sweet gig as a defense contractor in NOVA. I went to work, did my job well, came home, and that was it. Drank too much. Didn’t talk to anybody, not even my old buddies from my unit. I didn’t want anything to do with them. I just wanted to be alone.

“I also had this boss when I first started in contracting. He was a real son of a bitch. Always angry, always snapping at everyone. Then he started leaving at lunch to go to group therapy. And over the months, he changed. I knew he was with the 1st Marines at Fallujah, so I thought it might have something to do with that. We started talking and he helped me get hooked up with a counselor at the VA. I got diagnosed with PTSD and did four months of therapy.

“And it sucked,” Sam emphasizes. “No shit. It sucked. Every single day. I learned if therapy doesn’t suck, you’re not doing it right. You’re not working hard enough. Or your therapist is bad. Mine was great, so it was all on me.

“Does therapy suck for you?” Sam asks him.

Bucky thinks about his own struggles with attending just four sessions, the first of which was more of a prolonged sales pitch than anything else. It has sucked thoroughly.

“Yeah. And not because of Bard.”

“That’s a good sign. That means it’s doing something. Shaking up all the crap you’ve been ferreting away in your bad-feelings-box since whenever.”

“How’d you get through it?” Bucky asks.

“Made friends with other vets in the PTSD program. Reconnected with my old buddies, a lot of
who were going through something similar. And I always reminded myself of my goal, which was to get better.”

“I take it you did.”

“Yeah. I don’t have PTSD anymore. I quit my job as a contractor and became a peer support counselor, that’s how much therapy helped me. I’ll be honest though, all the bad memories are still there. They’ll always be there. They don’t have a magic pill to make them go away. But they don’t run my life anymore.”

Sam smiles at Bucky.

“So I’m not gonna take your gun or your pills. But I’ll support you in any other way I can. I give a mean pep talk, because I sure as hell got a lot of ‘em from my friends when I was working through everything.”

“I might need that,” Bucky says.

“I know things have been kinda strained between us since we met, but I consider you my friend,” Sam tells him. “And not just because you’re Steve’s friend.”

“Same here,” Bucky says, surprised at how easily the words come out and how much he believes them.

“But it all comes down to this: you wanna get better, go to therapy. Do your work. All of it. Do more than your therapist tells you to do.”

Sam then does a 360-degree appraisal of Bucky’s room.

“And don’t take this the wrong way,” he says, “but this place is nasty. It’s like a depression cave. Do your laundry. Wash your sheets. Open the window. Get some cross-breeze going on. Air this place out. Empty your trash. Better yet, let the cleaning ladies come in here and bleach the hell out of this whole place. I promise you, you’ll feel better.”

“I know,” Bucky mutters, embarrassed.

“You’ll also feel better if you stop locking yourself in your cave all day. Leave the door open. Eat with us. Come to the gym. You can use dumbbells and get all jacked on your right side. Or you can get that arm up and running and actually train with us for real. Also, something that really helped me was saying yes every time I got invited to do something, even if I wanted to say no. Especially when I wanted to say no.”

Sam then dons a grave look.

“And for God’s sake, take care of that thing on your face.”

Bucky lifts his hand to touch his beard.

“Depression beards look good on nobody. I’ve got an extra set of clippers you can have.”

Despite the fact that he got nothing out of the conversation that he originally intended, Bucky starts to feel something that vaguely resembles hope.

…At least, until he’s reminded of what he has to do next.

“And now you’re going to go tell Steve everything,” Sam says. “You’re gonna bring him your gun
and your pills. And your knife.”

One of Bucky’s eyebrows quirks up. “How’d you know I have a knife?”

“You’re a knife guy. A cuttin’ man for Uncle Sam, as the cadence goes. You Army guys have some really messed up cadences, by the way.”

Bucky fondly thinks back to his Army basic training, which was a joke by today’s training standards. It’s a wonder they all didn’t get their heads blown off the second they got off the boat.

“I was gonna say that the cadences weren’t that bad in the ‘40s, but they were actually pretty bad. Lots of stuff about Jody sleeping with your wife while you’re in theater.”

“Who’s Jody?” Sam asks.

“Some 4F reject. He’s just waiting to take away everything you love while you’re freezing your ass off in Ardennes.”

“Okay, now you’re stalling. You’ve said more to me in the last thirty seconds than you have the entire time I’ve known you.”

“Maybe.”

“Let’s go.”

Sam escorts Bucky to Steve’s room. As usual, the door is open. Steve is on his bed, sitting upright against the headboard, reading from his tablet. Bucky is once again struck by the contrast of light and cleanliness between their two rooms. Steve sees them in the doorway and puts his tablet down.

“Hey, you two. What’s going on?”

“Barnes has something to tell you,” Sam says. “Good luck,” he adds quietly as he walks out and shuts the door behind him.

“Good luck? For what?” Steve asks casually, scooching off the bed and rising to his feet in front of Bucky.

Bucky holds out the pill bottles he has in his right hand.

“What are you doing?”

“Giving them to you,” Bucky says, voice tense as if pushing against a wave of nervousness that threatens to snap him into pieces.

“Why?” Steve asks. Despite his obvious confusion, he still takes the bottles from Bucky.

“And this.”

Bucky reaches back and pulls out his pistol. He tries to hand it over to Steve, who still has his hands full of pills. When Steve doesn’t move to take it from him, he sets the gun on the nearby dresser, along with the KA-BAR he pulls from the holster on his lower leg.

“What’s going on?” There is nothing casual about Steve’s tone now.
Bucky can feel his fingertips trembling. He swallows hard and tells Steve everything he told Bard and Sam. It comes out as a long stream of bland narrative punctuated incongruously with hectic explanations of his twisted thinking.

By the end, Steve’s face is completely unreadable, even to Bucky. Before this conversation, Bucky considered many possible responses that Steve could have. However, this excruciating silence, the uncharacteristically blank expression, the lack of outrage or concern, or any emotion at all – this is not something Bucky planned for. He doesn’t even know what to make of it.

“Steve…”

Steve runs his hand over his mouth and lower jaw. Then he shrugs his shoulders and shakes his head.

“I don’t even know what to say,” Steve admits.

Steve stares at Bucky for a long time, searching Bucky’s face as if it holds the key to making sense of everything he just heard. Bucky’s anxiety ratchets up under the scrutiny. He feels like he might burst out of his skin if something doesn’t break the tension soon.

Then Steve’s face begins to change, maybe as he’s finally putting all the pieces together that Bard laid out for Bucky earlier that day. It starts to resemble an expression that Bucky has only seen once, when he was hanging off that train in 1944, reaching out for Steve before plunging into that dark ravine below.

“You’re scared,” Bucky says.

“You’re damn right I am,” Steve snaps. His blue eyes are sharp and blazing.

Bucky flinches. This is so, so much worse than he imagined it would be.

“What do you want me to do, Bucky?” Steve asks, exasperated. “Everything I try, every time I try to talk to you, to reach out, to offer you any support, you push me away. And now this. You wanna die. You wanna kill yourself.”

Steve points an angry finger at the wall to his left.

“This whole time you’ve been on the other side of that wall, putting a gun up to your head, pulling the trigger, while I’ve been in here, totally oblivious. And then the first one of us you reach out to, even in the slightest, is Sam.”

Steve’s arm falls back to his side and he takes an imposing step toward Bucky.

“Maybe I’m being stupid or childish or jealous. I don’t know. But sometimes I wonder – are we even friends anymore? I thought we were, but sometimes I don’t know.” Steve’s voice is pained, as if the notion is unbearable to even consider.

The question stings Bucky, cutting him to the core. He stands, frozen, rooted by his frayed nerves but also by the deep acknowledgment that he deserves all of this.

“I know things are different now,” Steve says. “I know you’ve been through so much.”

Steve takes another step forward, this one more hesitant. His tone softens.

“If I think too much about what happened to you, I feel sick and devastated and so unbelievably
sad. If I feel that bad just thinking about it, I can only imagine how you feel having lived through it. Having to remember it. I tried to talk to Dr. Bard about what to do and – ”

Something snaps in that instant, and Bucky finds both his voice and something else he can’t quite identify. Definitely something in the anger slice of that fucking Feelings Wheel.

“Wait, you went to Bard behind my back?”

“I didn’t know what else to do.”

“Jesus, Steve.”

“You’ve been completely self-absorbed ever since we got here,” Steve says, apparently feeling some of that anger slice now, too. “And you’ve earned that right. God knows that in the last 70 years, your life has been owned by everyone else except you.”

Steve’s hands clench into fists.

“But if you expect me to stand by while you fade away, while you blow your brains out, then you’re living in some messed up fantasy world.”

With a last step, Steve is now firmly situated right in Bucky’s face. Steve’s anger then seems to drain away until all that’s left is heartbreaking earnestness.

“I’m not going to let you do that,” Steve tells him. “Because I’m selfish. I want you alive. Even if that means you’re in pain.”

Steve then wraps his arms around him, hugging him tightly, like he’s the only thing keeping Bucky from being ripped away forever.

“Let me help you,” Steve whispers against Bucky’s cheek. “Please.”

Bucky opens his mouth to say something, to apologize a hundred thousand times, but his throat is so tight that nothing comes out. He feels a long-absent pressure behind his eyes that scares the shit out of him, and he crushes the sensation into oblivion by focusing his attention on the feeling of Steve’s body against his own. After being starved of kindness and physical affection for decades, Bucky latches desperately onto any little bit of it he can get. Especially from Steve. He wraps his good arm around Steve and holds him close, willing himself to ignore the predictable pattern of self-loathing thoughts that creep into his consciousness.

“Okay,” Bucky finally whispers back.

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After leaving Steve’s room, Bucky storms back to his own. In minutes, he’s ripping his bedding off the mattress. The sheets and comforter go flying out the door into the hallway, followed by a hamper full of dirty clothes. He throws open the window to let fresh air in. Then there’s commotion and an outpouring of expletives as he tries to fumble open a garbage bag one-handed. Sam comes by with his extra set of clippers, which Bucky yanks from his hand with a gruff “thank you.” He then makes a detour to the bathroom and quickly shaves his depression beard down to short stubble.

In the hallway, Scott and Clint watch as the scene unfolds.

“I can’t tell if he’s trashing the place or cleaning it,” Scott says.
“I think cleaning.”

“Need any help?” Scott calls into Bucky’s room.

“Nope,” Bucky replies curtly, stepping out into the hall and precariously piling his bedding on top of the dirty clothes in his hamper.

He carries everything down the hall to the small room at the very end, where T’Challa’s staff picks up and drops off their laundry. He scrawls BARNES on one of the tags provided and sticks it to his pile. He then picks up the phone on the wall in the room, which calls directly to housekeeping. He very politely requests the cleaning equivalent the nuclear option for his bedroom and bathroom and is told that it will be done within the next two hours.

Still fuming, Bucky goes to the kitchen and sloppily throws together a sandwich of way too much peanut butter and some strawberry jam. He takes it to the table, sets down his plate a little too hard, and tries to breathe away some of the intensity of what he’s feeling. He realizes then that he’s angry. He also realizes that he’s not completely losing his shit. Somehow, he’s handling it.

He takes out a tiny notebook and pen from his back pocket and writes down the equivalent of a Feelings Monitoring Form.

Situation: Tell Steve about wanting to kill myself, tell him about safety plan
Feelings: Anxiety, Shame, Anger
Thoughts: I’m a piece of shit, I’m a terrible friend, I’m a selfish asshole
Actions: Clean my room, shave, throw tantrum

“I almost forgot what you look like under that beard.”

Bucky lifts his head and sees Steve walking toward him. He looks calm, much more collected than Bucky is currently feeling.

“Yeah, me too,” Bucky replies.

Steve takes the seat next to him.


“You don’t need to be sorry, Buck. Let’s just move forward from here.”

“And we are friends,” Bucky tells him. “You’re the best friend I’ve ever had.”

“Right back at you,” Steve replies with a smile. “To the end of the line, remember? Just quit trying to fast-forward us there.”

This time when Bucky smiles, it’s because for the first time recent memory, he feels a small, fragile bloom of happiness.

“I will.”
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Bucky asks Steve for help.

Chapter Notes

This is the first half of what was supposed to be a single low-key transitional chapter. However, once I passed the 7k word mark, I decided to turn it into two chapters. I figured I’d post the first half now, since it’s done. More to come later this week.

Thanks so much to all who’ve left comments and kudos!

For the rest of the week, Bucky does as requested by Bard, Sam, and Steve. This means a radical change in behavior on all fronts. No more closed door. No more Fortress of Solitude. No more saying “no” to casual invitations. No more glossing over all of his thoughts and feelings, which means no more completely denying them himself.

Bucky now feels open and vulnerable, like a raw wound. All the time. There’s nowhere for him to hide, except at night. And at night, being alone has become aversive. He still has terrible nightmares, though they seem to have reduced in frequency. He falls asleep quickly thanks to the trazodone but later at night jolts out of sleep, heart racing, at the slightest noise. And now he doesn’t even have his weapons to help him feel safe.

But not everything is unpleasant. His mood is somewhat better, though he doesn’t know if it’s from his meds or from having more interaction with the others. Everyone is abundantly welcoming and careful with him. He eats with them whenever they all eat together. Most of the time, he keeps quiet and listens to them talk. They seem to sense that he’s perpetually on the brink of overwhelm, so they keep the pressure to socialize low. They sometimes make side comments to him, either to fill him in on things he’s missed or to possibly call back to one of the few innocuous events that he’s participated in with them. They tactfully avoid anything even tangentially related to Hydra, and they often avoid anything related to his life before Hydra, leaving their pickings pretty slim.

Every evening he feels completely drained from participating in life so much after being virtually inert for months. That’s usually when he has some alone time with Steve. Their time together has become a welcome reward for having most of his defenses and choices stripped away. Steve doesn’t pressure him to talk, and oftentimes they merely enjoy being in the same room together. Sometimes they sit in the living room and read. Sometimes they walk around the arboretum. Sometimes Steve talks through a problem he’s having with the project he’s helping T’Challa with, which involves the question of whether or not to shore up their national defense force and convert it into a proper military capable of international deployment. Sometimes Bucky halfheartedly vents about Bard, projecting his frustration with himself onto his psychologist, conveniently avoiding talking about most of the content of their sessions.

All and all, it’s not too bad.
In their session that week, Bucky and Bard talk at length about how the safety planning went with Sam and Steve. To his credit, Bard does not appear smug when Bucky tells him that things transpired exactly as he predicted.

They then move into reviewing Bucky’s homework from the past week, with a particular focus on his Feelings Monitoring Forms.

“I’m particularly interested in this one,” Bard says, referring to what Bucky filled out after he cleaned his room. “There’s a lot of good information here. First of all, there’s some anger.”

“I was pretty pissed,” Bucky tells him.

“At whom?”

“Myself.”

“Oh, and that was linked to these thoughts: ‘I’m a piece of shit, I’m a terrible friend, I’m a selfish asshole’?”

“Yeah.”

Bard nods his head. “Those are some powerful thoughts. No wonder you felt angry. This is a perfect example of how the things we think can have a major impact on our emotions.”

“What do you mean?” Bucky asks.

“Well, let’s say you had the thoughts ‘I messed up, but I’m trying the best I can’ or ‘I’m going to be a better friend moving forward,’ for example. Your emotions would be very different in that scenario, wouldn’t they?”

Bucky openly scoffs at the ridiculousness of Bard’s alternative scenario, because he can’t imagine a single permutation of reality where he might have those thoughts. He tells Bard as much.

“I can see how they’re not realistic to you now,” Bard replies. “The thoughts you had are tied into much deeper negative beliefs you have about yourself, which we’ll definitely address at a later time. But let’s go back to this anger thing. You told me that if you let yourself be angry, you’d ‘lose your shit,’ I think you said.”

“I thought I would.” More than that, he was certain of it. “But honestly, I don’t know if I was really that angry. I’m still afraid of letting myself feel the actual amount of anger I’m probably carrying around.”

“Oh, so here’s an example of you being able to use your skills to keep a lid on most of it. What skills did you use?”

“Breathing. I also was thinking that I need to be a better friend to Steve, and Steve wouldn’t want me to lose my shit.”

“And what does that mean to you, being a better friend?” Bard asks.

Bucky considers the question carefully. He thinks back, somewhat uncomfortably, to his relationship with Steve before the war. Steve was always strong as hell mentally, even when his body conspired incessantly to snuff him out. Bucky had to be strong in complementary ways. Vigilant. Protective. A pigheaded foil to Steve’s own pigheadedness. A pillar of levity and stoic constancy – whatever was needed – for both Steve and his mom during those times when Steve
was so sick that they were certain God or Mary or Baby Jesus or whoever the fuck was coming down to claim him imminently.

“A good friend is strong,” he tells Bard. “Perceptive. Thoughtful. Someone who’s always there for the other person when they’re struggling.”

“And you’re not those things?”

God, he wishes. He wonders how it was so easy to be that person, how that could possibly have been his natural state.

Bucky shakes his head. “I’ve been so messed up that it’s been tough to be a good friend. I feel like I’m burning through all my energy all the time, between always feeling stressed out and trying to manage all the emotion stuff that comes up. It’s like I have no processing power for anything else.”

“Like you’ve got a decent sized hard drive but only about 20 bits of RAM?”

“That’s fair,” Bucky concedes.

“With PTSD, the body and brain are always on high alert, even though there’s rarely real danger present. Your ability to focus is diminished by your whacked out threat detection system. And because you’re always in fight-flight-freeze mode, your body feels like it’s jacked-up-go-time, all the time. It’s an exhausting way to live.”

Bucky nods in profound understanding. That’s precisely how he feels. He then wonders if Bard even has a clue what it’s like to be in a body like that, to not be able to escape it except during the capricious and illusive state of deep sleep.

“So to be a better friend, what do you need to do?” Bard asks.

“Get rid of the PTSD,” Bucky states.

Bard smiles. “Okay, great longer term goal. But getting rid of PTSD right this minute is kind of a tall order. Are there other ways you can be there for Steve, even with PTSD? What do you think he needs from you?”

Bucky thinks back to the conversation he had with Steve the week prior, the one that nearly crushed his heart.

“He wanted me to let him help me,” Bucky tells Bard. “But that’s not being a good friend. That’s me being selfish.”

“But it’s what he asked of you, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Sometimes you have to trust that others are asking for what they really want.”

Bucky is quiet for a few moments. He props his elbow on the armrest of his chair, makes a loose fist, and rests his chin against his hand. His gaze drifts to the wall just behind Bard.

“I have problems with that,” Bucky says quietly.

“ Asking for what you want?”

Bucky nods.
For most of the past seventy years, there was never any point in asking for what he wanted. Even at the very beginning of this time with Hydra, before the brainwashing began, when he couldn’t remember who he was because of the fall, he still fought and carried his obstinacy like hard-earned medal. He wasn’t going to ask them for shit. And then later, when they dragged him into an endless cycle of wiping and programming, the thought to ask for them to stop rarely even crossed his mind.

Learned helplessness, he thinks. It’s a concept borne from experiments with dogs who were electrocuted repeatedly and given no way to escape the pain. Afterwards, when the scientists finally gave these dogs the means to escape, the dogs didn’t even try, because they already learned that there’s no point. This is the kind of messed up stuff Bucky has been reading about lately, which helps provide context for some the things he’s been through but doesn’t do anything to ease the nagging conviction that he should have tried harder to get away.

“Do you have an example in mind of your not asking for what you want? Because if you do, I have a new worksheet.” Bard smiles broadly, anticipating Bucky’s reaction.

“Of course you do,” Bucky replies with a sigh.

Bard introduces the Interpersonal Schemas Worksheet, which resembles the Feelings Monitoring Form except that it’s specifically for interactions with others. He tells Bucky that an interpersonal schema is a general formula that people follow when they interact with others.

“Well, what’s the situation?” Bard asks Bucky.

“I wanted to ask Steve to come with me to my appointment this week at the university.”

“What one is that?”

“My brain scan. For the implant.”

“You’ve decided to move forward with that?” Bard asks, brows arching in surprise.

“I’m sick of not being able to do basic things. I nearly had a meltdown trying to open a fucking garbage bag last week.” He doesn’t tell Bard that his asshole doctor went behind his back to schedule the appointment, Bucky’s preferences be damned.

Bard nods approvingly. “I’m glad to hear it. I think it’ll improve your quality of life significantly. So what happened when you wanted to ask Steve?”

Bucky and Steve were sitting at the table, just the two of them. Wanda had recently left to join the others in the living room, who were watching some awful reality show on TV. T’Challa had pulled out all of the stops to get them access to any channels they could want, probably not looking to have a bunch of stir-crazy Avengers getting too antsy or bored in their exile.

Earlier that day, Bucky had a phone consult with Dr. Van Der Laar from his office in Pretoria, who was the surgeon who implanted the arm that the Wakandans had designed and constructed for him. The doc had asked basic questions about pain and signs of infection, which Bucky had denied. He had also expressed concern that Bucky hadn’t moved forward with the neural mapping process, which culminated in very frank questions about what the holdup was. Bucky didn’t provide an answer for him at that time, because the real answer was that he was practically immobilized from anxiety about the procedure.

Miffed at the possibility that his hard work on Bucky’s arm had thus far amounted to jack squat from a functional standpoint, Van Der Laar took the liberty of scheduling Bucky’s appointment
with the neurosurgeon at the university hospital. Despite the complete disrespect that Van Der Laar’s actions implied, Bucky didn’t bother cancelling. The guy might be an asshole, but he wasn’t wrong about needing to get it over with.

What Bucky really wanted that night at the table was for Steve to know everything – his anxiety, his concerns, every awful nut and bolt of the upcoming surgery. Because if Steve knew all of that, Bucky was sure he would sidle up to him like a stanchion and help move him forward. He tried to ask Steve to come to his appointment. Several times. But each time, the words clung stubbornly to the inside of his mouth.

“Okay, so what were you feeling when you wanted to ask him?” Bard says.

Bucky tells Bard that he felt nervous about the procedure and about being out in public. He also says that he felt burdensome because he shouldn’t have to ask for help just to go to an appointment.

“And how do you think Steve would react if you asked him to come with?”

“I think he’d be happy that I asked and would agree to it.”

“Okay, so what do you think you were you telling yourself that prevented you from asking? What interpersonal schema was at play here?”

This is where the therapeutic rubber meets the road. After going so long willfully divorcing himself from his internal experience, it’s also the place where Bucky continues to struggle. But still, he tries his best.

“Maybe if I ask for help, that means I’m weak. Or maybe I don’t deserve to ask for help.”

“Perfect,” Bard praises. “It really taps into this big push-pull thing that happens with PTSD. The push is ‘get the hell away from me, I don’t deserve to have healthy relationships, I can’t relate to you, I don’t trust you.’ But the pull is ‘I need love and friendship and closeness and affection.’”

Bucky feels this push-pull process continuously, with Steve, with the others, even to a small degree with Bard. Given the exactness of Bard’s descriptions, Bucky is beginning to wonder if the man has had PTSD himself. Or maybe it’s the more likely scenario, that Bucky’s issues are so typical that these observations ring true for pretty much everyone with the disorder.

Bard points at the worksheet that he’s placed on the table between them. “Thinking about your decision to be a better friend by letting Steve be there for you, does this conversation – or lack of conversation – help with that?”

“No,” Bucky admits.

“All right. So let’s brainstorm ways that you can get your needs met in this situation, and also meet your goal of being a good friend.”

Later that afternoon, Bucky is sitting on his bed flipping through TV channels, because he doesn’t know what else to do with his time. He hates everything that’s on, and he’s not sure if he actually hates everything or if he’s just in a foul mood. He’s come to accept that he’s going to feel like a well-used napkin after therapy, not only because of the mental energy it requires but also because of his frustration with his lack of insight into his own emotions, thoughts, and behaviors.

There’s a knock at his doorframe. Bucky tenses and turns his head to see Steve standing there.
“Hey, Buck. You busy?”

“Definitely not,” Bucky says, disdainfully pressing the off button on the remote he’s holding.

“It’s my night to cook. Wanna help? I wouldn’t mind some company,” Steve says, his face bright with optimism.

“Since when do you cook?”

“Since the internet. Lots of cooking shows on YouTube,” Steve says, holding up his ubiquitous tablet.

Bucky slides off his bed and makes his way to the door. “What’s on the menu?”

“I’ve been trying to make recipes from different African countries. Tonight it’s…” Steve pauses and looks at his tablet. He squints at it, as if he actually has difficulty reading the text. “Mesir wot and gomen. Something with lentils and something with greens.”

He lifts the tablet in front of Bucky’s face so he can see the pictures.

“And Wanda has some injera batter fermenting in the fridge,” Steve adds.

Bucky nods. “Pretty brave.”

Steve briefly lays a hand on Bucky’s shoulder as they step into the hallway and make their way to the kitchen.

“By the time we get out of here, I’ll have a backup career all ready to go,” Steve tells him.

“You gonna open an Ethiopian restaurant?”

Steve shrugs. “Why not? You can be my sous-chef, if you want.”

Bucky snorts. “Bad idea, if you want the restaurant to stay open.”

“YouTube. I’m telling you. Check it out,” Steve replies.

Bucky feels a swell of amusement whenever Steve talks about technology. Even though he’s been thawed out for five years, he still retains an endearing enthusiasm for devices and apps that others use routinely and take for granted. It’s as if he just discovered YouTube yesterday and is on an evangelical mission to convince others of its utility.

In the kitchen, Steve already has a spread of vegetables and spices laid out on the counter, along with a cutting board and other cooking tools. It reminds Bucky of the way Steve used to lay out all of his gear when they were in the field. It was always meticulously organized just a little bit beyond what was practical, inviting warm ridicule from Bucky and the other guys about commissioned officers and their penchant for form over function.

“Where do you want me?” Bucky asks.

Steve thinks for a minute. “Maybe you can…” He points to the cutting board, then looks at Bucky. “No. Probably tough to cut vegetables with one hand.” He touches his finger to his lips thoughtfully. “Hm.”

“I can stir something.”
“Ah yes, you can cook the onions. I’ll chop them.”

Bucky rests his hip against the counter and watches Steve cut, using a technique likely picked up from his beloved YouTube.

“Remember when we tried to make that sauce?” Bucky says, thinking back to when they were twelve. “How we thought it was gonna be so easy?”

“Oh my God, it should have been. How did we mess up marinara? Mrs. Mariano said the recipe was fool-proof,” Steve replies with a fond laugh.

“Apparently she underestimated us fools,” Bucky says with a thin smile. “Your mom was so nice about it.”

“The sauce was your idea,” Steve reminds him. “She wasn’t doing so hot. You thought it’d be nice to make her something.”

“If only it’d actually been edible.”

“She loved the hell out of you,” Steve says wistfully.

Bucky feels a stab of pain when he thinks about how that boy she loved is so far from the man he is now.

“She was pretty great,” he replies.

They stand in silence, Steve chopping, Bucky watching.

“Can I ask you something?” Bucky finally says.

Steve looks over at him. “Anything.”

“I have an appointment at the university on Friday to get some scans done on my brain. I was wondering if you’d come with.” The words feel like they’ve been ripped out of him forcibly, but at least now he can tell Bard he did his damn homework.

Steve puts down the knife and turns to fully face him. “Of course. Is this for your arm?”

“Yeah. They’ll just be running some tests, but they’ll probably want to move forward with the surgery the week after that.”

“What time?”

“9:00.”

“Sounds good.”

Steve turns his attention back to the onion, making some last skillful cuts.

“Look, I know things haven’t been easy for you in the past week. I know you’re really stressed out,” Steve says.

Bucky nods. He’s not dumb enough deny the obvious. “I’ll get used to it.”

Steve smiles over at him. “Thanks for asking me.”
“Sure.” He wonders if Steve knows that he’s doing Bucky a much bigger favor than Bucky is doing for him.

Steve then finishes cutting, sets down his knife, and picks up the cutting board with the onions.

“Now let’s put you to work,” Steve says. “Bring that stirring arm over to the stove...”
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Bucky and Steve go on a trip. Everyone prepares for surgery. Sexual tension emerges.

Friday morning comes much, much too quickly for Bucky.

Bucky and Steve are standing at the entrance of the palace with T’Challa, waiting for a car to take them to the hospital. They’ve attempted to obscure their appearance with sunglasses and head coverings, possibly looking even more conspicuous in doing so. Steve is wearing a lightly distressed, olive green baseball cap, and Bucky has on a black zip-up sweatshirt with the hood pulled loosely over his head.

“Everything should be arranged,” T’Challa tells them. “My driver will take you to a side entrance, where Dr. Kalu will meet you. I have been assured that you will have one of the imaging suites reserved for as long as you need it. If you have any problems, contact me immediately.”

“Thanks,” Bucky and Steve say simultaneously.

“My people are exceedingly loyal to me, and they know you are my guests. I do not anticipate any problems, even if you are recognized.”

Still. Bucky’s anxiety is through the roof. He didn’t sleep at all the night before. He can’t even tease out what the worst part of it all is, because they all seem like the worst parts.

Steve, by contrast, is a six-foot-two-inch-tall column of blond tranquility. Probably relieved to be heading off the reservation, Bucky figures. The hospital is a 30-minute drive away, tucked in the left atrium of Birnin Zana, and it will be the first time either of them has driven through the capital.

Steve smiles over at Bucky. Bucky tries to mirror the expression back, but he only pulls it off about half way.

A black car with tinted windows stops in front of them.

“Dr. Kalu will take good care of you,” T’Challa reassures Bucky as he walks them to the vehicle. “She is one of Wakanda’s finest.”

There is some comfort in knowing that. Bucky did his homework on her and yeah, she’s pretty much the best neurosurgeon on the continent. But finest, shittiest, mediocreist, whatever, she’s still going to be digging around in his brain next week. And while it’s nice that she probably won’t mess up too badly while she’s in there, the thought of her – of anyone – standing over him with his brain wide open for God and everyone else scares the hell out of him.

They ride in silence, Steve following Bucky’s lead. Steve gazes out the window at the scenery – the modern architecture, the crisp cleanliness of every surface, the flowing crowds of well-dressed Wakandans making it all go ‘round. Bucky is pretending to gaze out his own window but is really focusing on breathing his heartbeat down to a reasonable rate. The ride goes by quickly, as things tend to when there’s a bunch of awful waiting at the end.
The driver pulls onto the hospital campus, at the center of which is a seven-story wonder of windows, a whole building seemingly made of glass. They drive around to the back end of the campus, where the driver creeps along slowly until he sees a tall black woman in a lavender sheath dress and lab coat holding open an exit-only door.

They get out of the vehicle, thanking the driver on their way. Bucky stuffs his left hand into the pocket of his sweatshirt and moves quickly toward the building. Steve stays locked at his side, surveying the terrain to the left and right like Bucky’s personal bodyguard.

“Welcome,” the woman says, ushering them through the door. “I am Dr. Kalu. Please follow me.”

They nod and follow her down a small stairwell into the basement of the hospital. She takes them into an office that looks into the MRI room and gestures for them to sit down on two chairs she’s set out.

“Mr. Barnes. Mr. Rogers. I am very glad to meet you.” She sits across from them, crossing her legs at the knee. “Mr. Barnes, do you wish to have Mr. Rogers present for our entire appointment today?”

“Yeah, no need for secrets,” Bucky says, taking off his sunglasses and lowering his hood.

“Wonderful. Thank you for being here, Mr. Rogers,” she says.

“My pleasure,” he replies and takes off his own sunglasses and hat.

“Let me first explain what we will be doing today. We will be conducting two scans of your brain: a normal MRI followed by a functional MRI. The first one takes a picture of your brain while you are lying still. For the second one, I will ask you to make a series of movements with your left arm, hand, and fingers. Although your arm will not move at this time, we will be able to map the parts of your motor cortex that fire up when you do each of those movements. We will then be able to have a better sense of where we need to implant the neural interface to ensure that your entire range of movement is adequately covered. Do you have any questions so far?”

“Won’t the arm be a problem with the MRI?” Steve asks.

Bucky’s glad Steve is here, because he’ll ask all the mundane procedural stuff that probably won’t even register on his own radar screen at all.

“Mr. Barnes’ arm is constructed out of vibranium alloy, which is not ferromagnetic. Therefore, it will not be a problem.”

“Do I have to go all the way in the machine?” Bucky asks.

“No, I will put you in head first.”

Thank God, he thinks, because the idea of having his whole body shoved in a giant magnetic sarcophagus makes him shudder. He then offhandedly wonders if he’s got bullet fragments or shrapnel in his body that’ll rip their way out of him when she turns on the machine.

“Would you mind if Dr. Kalu explains the surgery so I can know what’s going to happen?” Steve asks Bucky.

“If you want,” Bucky replies, swallowing back a wave of dread at the thought of her describing the procedure in detail.
“I am happy to explain it. May I approach you?” Dr. Kalu asks Bucky.

“Sure.”

She rolls her chair up to Bucky’s right side. She gently places her index and middle fingers on the right side of his head, about half way between his forehead and the back of his head.

“This is where your motor cortex is, the part of your brain that controls movement on the left side of your body. We will put you under local anesthesia so that you cannot feel any pain, and we will also give you a tranquilizer to help you relax. Your head will be braced during surgery, held into place with three screws. I will then make an incision like this.” She draws a large horseshoe shape that traverses nearly a quarter of his whole skull. “We will need to shave this part of your head first.”

“Wonderful,” Bucky says. Yet another change to add to the shit pile of changes this week.

“I will then pull back your scalp and use a small saw to cut a circle in your skull. I will remove the bone flap and then cut into the thick membrane that protects your brain, called the dura. Once your motor cortex is exposed, I will lay a thin piece of material on it called an intracranial electrode grid. I will then have you do a series of movements with your arm and hand, like I will have you do today. It’s a more precise way to measure what we will be preliminarily measuring today. Once we have the mapping, I will then fuse a small interface to your brain based on where the signals register on the grid.”

“Sounds invasive. What kind of risk are we talking about here?” Steve asks.

“Everything will be taking place on the surface of the brain, so the potential for serious damage is lower. There are, of course, risks to any procedure that involves the brain. But Mr. Barnes is biologically young and healthy, with enhanced immune function and healing capabilities. I am not concerned about complications at this time.”

Steve still looks concerned. “What’s this interface?”

“The interface is like a computer chip, with many tiny prongs to measure electrical activity. The interface will feed a signal wirelessly into the decoder, a piece of hardware implanted in Mr. Barnes’ arm. The decoder turns electrical signals from the brain into movement by the prosthesis. In surgery, we will test for gross movements to ensure that the implant is placed properly. There will be more calibration after the surgery to capture more precise movements. After we ensure the implant is affixed properly, I will then lay the dura back over the brain, suture it up, put the bone flap back in place with plates and screws, and sew the scalp back up.”

Bucky stopped listening when she started cutting into his dura. Instead, he’s locked on an imagined scene in his mind, his head literally screwed into a vise, unable to move, listening to his skull being sawed into. Another scene also alternates into his consciousness, him paralyzed, unable to move, hundreds of volts of electricity shooting through his brain as he screams into the piece of rubber in his mouth…

“Bucky, are you okay?”

He feels dizzy, sick, and hot. His chest feels like it’s going to collapse, and he starts straining for breath.

He stands, mumbling something about the bathroom, and walks as fast as he can to the door. He hears Steve’s voice in the background saying something, but he leaves it behind. He hangs a left,
somehow having enough presence of mind to remember passing a bathroom on the way here. He throws open the men’s room door and braces himself over the sink, hyperventilating, starting to see stars from lack of CO2. He closes his eyes and tries to slow his breathing, tries to use the skills Bard taught him, but damn, it is not coming easy. He ducks his head reflexively when he hears another person enter the bathroom, hiding his face behind his hair.

He then feels a warm hand on his shoulder. He doesn’t even flinch, because it’s probably physically impossible for his body to get any more amped up than it already is.

“Try closing your mouth and breathing out of one nostril,” he hears Steve tell him.

Bucky glances over and sees Steve pocketing his smart phone. Bucky closes his mouth, lifts his right hand, and presses the second knuckle of his index finger against his right nostril. It’s like breathing through a straw, which initially feels even more terrible. But after a couple minutes, his breathing slows considerably. Steve’s hand remains on his shoulder, grounding him.

“Fuck,” Bucky says under his breath when he finally feels like he’s regained a semblance of control.

“What happened?” Steve asks.

Bucky exhales heavily. He fights against the urge to shut down, to brush it off, to tell Steve he’s fine and can they just please go back to T’Challa’s now.

But he doesn’t. He thinks about Bard, that stupid worksheet, his goal to be a better friend, and about how moments like these are where change actually happens.

“Having my head put into something, having it held in place, not being able to move… brings up bad memories,” Bucky tells Steve. “I don’t know how I’m gonna do this.”

“I don’t know if this would help at all, but would you maybe want me there?” Steve asks, tone hesitant and sincere.

“Where?”

“In the MRI room. Maybe also the room where you’re having surgery.”

Bucky frowns. He feels that push-pull dynamic in full force. The ‘no, I don’t need you because I don’t want to be weak for you’ meeting the ‘yes, God, please be there and never leave my side again.’ The latter is more authentic, more visceral, and in the end, it wins out easily.

“I mean, yeah, I think that could help. I don’t know if they’ll allow it,” Bucky says.

“Can’t hurt to ask.”

“You wanna see my brain all open like that?” Bucky says, looking at Steve in the mirror.

“Well, it’s not on my bucket list or anything, but if I can support you by being there, I’m glad to.”

Bucky then turns on the sink and splashes some water on his face. Steve hands him a paper towel to dry off with. They then unhurriedly make their way back to the imaging suite.

“Lemme guess, you got that nose trick from YouTube?” Bucky says.

Steve’s mouth quirks into a smirk. “Nope, just regular old WebMD.”
When they get back to the suite, Dr. Kalu stands as they enter the room. “Are you all right?” she asks Bucky.

Bucky skips over the question and moves straight into asking Dr. Kalu if Steve can be in the room with him for the MRI and surgery. To his surprise, she not only agrees but also thinks it’s a good idea.

After getting Bucky’s permission to move forward with the scan, Dr. Kalu hands them both a set of dark gray scrub pants to wear with their t-shirts while they’re in the MRI room, since they’re both wearing jeans with metal rivets, zippers, and buttons. She then steps out into the hallway and leaves them in the office to change.

Steve removes his jacket and shoes and places them on his chair. Bucky does the same.

Bucky then watches Steve unbutton his pants and realizes that he probably shouldn’t watch the rest. He undoes his own pants and shimmies them down one-handed, feeling like a jackass, because what man should have to shimmy out of his pants? A one-armed man, he supposes, which sparks in him a small amount of motivation to move forward with all this. When he’s alone in his room fumbling with his clothes, his shoelaces, and his basic grooming, he sometimes forgets how inconvenient it is to only have one arm. But now that he’s here doing the same with Steve, he’s struck by how disabled he feels.

Bucky steps out his jeans and stands there for a moment, dressed only in his black t-shirt, black trunk briefs, and socks. Despite some flimsy internal resistance, he sneaks another glance over at Steve. He’s in a similar state of undress, white t-shirt, navy blue underwear, and socks, bent down, stepping into his scrubs. Bucky’s face feels warm, then even warmer when he catches Steve glancing back over at him, his lips slightly parted as he looks Bucky from toe to head. They make fleeting eye contact and then both look away. Things immediately become all business as they finish dressing.

Bucky’s face still feels like it’s on fire when Dr. Kalu knocks and enters. Steve conveniently (deliberately?) busies himself shutting off his phone. Dr. Kalu takes Bucky’s weight and blood pressure before leading them into the MRI room.


Whaddya know? He even gained a few pounds.

She walks Bucky over to the MRI table and has him lie down, guiding his head onto the positioning block. When he’s settled, she looks down at him and places a hand on his right arm. She radiates with maternal warmth.

“How do you like working with Jason?” she asks him.

Bucky nearly forgot that he signed a release of information to have Dr. Bard speak to her and send over his records. Now her behavior makes sense. Her caution. Her extra special bedside manners. Bard probably called ahead to warn her that he’s a pathetic heap of threadbare nerves who needs TLC.

“He seems to know what he’s doing,” Bucky answers.

“That he does,” she confirms. “This is all going to be okay. If you need me to stop, just say so. I’ll be right over there.” She points to toward the glass. “And your friend will be right here.”
Bucky nods as much as he can with his head positioned that way. She pushes the button that controls the table, and he starts sliding toward the MRI machine like he’s about to be its dinner. When the table stops, Steve steps into Bucky’s line of sight and crosses his arms over his chest with a supportive smile.

He breathes his way through the banging of the machine. No shards of wayward metal fly out of him, which is nice. Occasionally he hears Dr. Kalu’s voice cut through the noise, asking if he’s okay, telling him he’s doing great, as if there is some real skill involved here aside from delivering the proper amount of oxygen to his body. Bucky looks over at Steve with some regularity, who’s planted himself like a muscle-bound sequoia.

Bucky’s not sure what triggers it. Maybe it’s the way the curves of Steve’s biceps stretch the fabric of his shirt. Maybe it’s the pensive look that’s settled on his face or the steel-sharp cut of his jaw. Whatever it is, like a flash grenade, Bucky’s mind tumbles abruptly into a long-abandoned place, somewhere it hasn’t dared to go since the war. Certainly not since he got his memory back.

Images from the past unfold in a series. Steve finding him on that table, ripping off his restraints, looking so impossibly handsome to Bucky that he made Errol Flynn look like a sack of dog vomit by comparison. Truly, this version of Steve was impossible, he thought then. He wondered if he was dying or in some warped fever dream, and then he wondered why his delirious or dying brain would turn his best friend into this guy. As Steve half-dragged him through the Hydra complex, Bucky remembers thinking ‘what the hell?’ over and over, his torture- and drug-addled mind perseverating on the impossibility like a nervous tick.

After that day in Italy and until Bucky fell, the entire tenor of their relationship was changed. They looked at each other a little too long, laughed a little too loudly, smiled a little too affectionately. They fell into a different kind of two-planet orbit from the one they grew up in, at once sweetly self-conscious, dizzy with fondness, and smoldering with barely suppressed want.

But nothing ever happened. Because it was the ‘40s. Because it was war. Because they were men and friends and weren’t supposed to be anything more than that.

The thing is, that haze of incredulity never quite went away. In fact, if Bucky risked being truthful, if he were to pull his sorry self out of his own pity party for a few minutes, he’d acknowledge that Steve Rogers still manages to captivate him, even after all these years.

Bucky snaps out of it as the first scan terminates. He declines the offer to take a break before moving on to the functional portion of the MRI. He just wants to get it over with and get the hell back to his room as soon as humanly possible. Consequences be damned, he might just close his door today.

Dr. Kalu then calls out a series of commands to him, blessedly reignining his focus. Lift your left arm over your head. Touch your ear. Make a fist. Spread your fingers as wide as they will go. Throw your elbow out, as if you’re cracking some asshole in the jaw with it (the last part might have been his addition).

Bucky feels a small thrill at that, because although there is a somber part of him that hates to fight, there’s a bigger part of him that fucking lives for it and always has, ever since his first fierce scuffles as a kid. It’s the thing he’s best at, and sometimes he misses the wild adrenaline of fighting as much as he misses his sanity. Even bringing pain down on Stark felt amazing, because despite the heartbreaking, grim significance of that battle, at least then he didn’t feel like a damaged, frail, recluse who can’t even win a fight with a garbage bag.

Steve continues to watch over him like a Sphinx, his benevolent expression belying the tightly
reigned ferocity Bucky knows lies just underneath. Bucky marvels at the way that people read Steve wrong all the time, even the people who supposedly know him well. Bucky sees it in the Avengers’ daily interactions. They tease Steve in various ways about being a square, confusing his fastidiousness and moral rigidity for purity. They clearly respect the hell out of him, but they still clock him as a dull, vanilla, discount Dudley Do-Right.

But they don’t know shit, Bucky thinks. He imagines they haven’t seen Steve use his shield to bludgeon a man to death – to turn his face into an unrecognizable shroud of gore – almost effortlessly and without a whisper of remorse. And maybe Steve isn’t that guy anymore, but Bucky bets he still is. Because if they were to go knocking on Daesh’s door right now, he’s pretty sure there’d be more bludgeoned corpses in Steve’s wake than all the body bags in the Middle East could hold.

Bucky wonders what Steve is thinking now, seeing him flat on his back, head shoved in the machine that will help turn his own terrible machine into a deadly weapon once again. Then he wonders what Steve was thinking when he looked over and saw him standing there in his underwear.

Does Steve remember? Does he ever see the two of them in his mind’s eye, high from victory, their breath making clouds in the cold, standing over the bloody carcasses of their Nazi quarry, thrumming with aliveness, exchanging looks that passed for camaraderie but were laced just underneath with a searing current of hunger? Does he ever still feel their knees touching intentionally under the table at the bar, where they drank with the brothers who would have heaved if they could have seen even the top layer of filth circulating in Bucky’s mind at that moment? Does Steve ever pull up old jerk-off fantasies of the two of them fucking, not even caring exactly how, so long as it was frantic and loud and obscene? Does he feel an ache where their shoulders used to touch, lying side-by-side in their two-man tent, chilling the heat between them with talk about girls and marriage and other ludicrous dreams razed to ashes by Hydra?

Dr. Kalu’s voice then cuts sharply through his spiraling thoughts.

“Mr. Barnes, can you hear me? Are you flexing and extending your thumb?”

“Sorry. I am now.”

“Much better. Almost done. You are doing great.”

As he finishes flexing and extending the rest of his fingers, his attention continues to be pulled between following Dr. Kalu’s directions and his confusion about where the hell this is all coming from. Before he knows it, they’re done, and he’s sliding out of the machine. He can’t even look Steve in the eye as they walk back to the office on the other side of the glass.

Dr. Kalu sits down at the desk in front of three large monitors. On them are grids of pictures of his brain. Steve and Bucky stand just behind her.

“This is the motor cortex and all the places where your various movements activated the neurons there,” Dr. Kalu says, pointing to the place on the brain corresponding to where she touched his head earlier. Red, orange, and yellow blotches light up the image series in varying patterns.

“These are from something else,” she adds, pointing to areas of red outside of the motor cortex. “Looks like your mind was wandering a bit.”

“Sorry,” Bucky apologizes.

“Quite all right. It is not unusual. The solitude of the MRI machine elicits all sorts of things. One of my patients went in the machine an accountant and came out declaring that he was quitting his job
to become a writer," she says, looking back at them with a smile.

Funny, Bucky feels like went into the machine a eunuch and came out a deviant.

Dr. Kalu then pulls up a series of plain grayscale images taken from various angles.

“This is the first set of images I took.” She points to a picture taken on the coronal plane and uses her finger to trace a circle around the lower middle section of his brain. “These are your hippocampi, the parts of your brain which play a large role in memory. I have not precisely calculated their size, but this area in general appears to be smaller than one might expect. This change may be related to post-traumatic stress, but given your history, it is more likely an indication of deliberate damage.”

She chooses not to get any more specific than that, but Bucky knows exactly what she’s saying. This is the rotten fruit of Hydra’s careful labors. Turns out his flippant thoughts and remarks about his brain being broken actually appear to be grounded in reality.

“But fortunately, the brain is highly plastic,” Dr. Kalu tells him. “Especially yours, given your unique physiology. I am hopeful that over time, much of the damage may be reversed as long as you continue to take care of your physical and mental health.”

Bucky nods slowly. “We good to go?”

“Everything looks fantastic to me,” Dr. Kalu replies.

“All right,” he says. “Let’s get this thing scheduled.”

Bucky gives himself permission to completely fold back in on himself after his appointment is over. He feels spent in every conceivable way, bone tired, unable to feign even half a shit’s worth of concern about anything. He barely remembers the ride back or the walk to his room. He knows Steve was there the whole time, but Bucky’s little ramble down memory lane left him feeling awkward and embarrassed, as if Steve could see through his skull and into whatever has taken root there. Bucky imagines the poor guy must be worried, or at least confused, by his sudden DEFCON 1 shutdown.

Back in his room, Bucky closes his door and flops down on his bed. He can sense Steve still lingering outside.

“I’m fine. Just gonna take a nap,” Bucky tells him.

“Sure thing,” Steve replies. “See you at dinner?”

“Yep. See you then.”

His closes his eyes to rest for just a minute and opens them back up three hours later, just as the sun is starting to set outside. He scrubs his hand over his face and then lazily passes it through his hair, thoughts drifting to the beauty parlor hack job Dr. Kalu promised him on Tuesday before his surgery. He tries to imagine how he’ll look with a giant horseshoe shaved into his head, and he’s surprised by how attached he is to a hairstyle that has been the product of equal parts handler neglect, personal laziness, and habit. But to everything there is a season, he reasons, even hair.

About ten minutes later, Bucky manages to drag himself out of bed and walks to his bathroom. He lays a towel on the floor and pulls out the clippers Sam gave him. He’ll be damned if he’s going to
pass up a chance to seize a morsel of control over what’s about to happen to him. They wanna shave part of his hair off? He’ll do them one better. He figures that a #3 all around won’t be the worst thing ever, and it’ll make Dr. Kalu’s cut less drastic by comparison.

Bucky rarely checks himself in the mirror for any reason other than making sure he doesn’t hack off too much when he shaves. But today he gives himself a good, hard look. He’s not completely disgusted by the man he sees staring back at him, but there’s only a vague familiarity there, like an echo on its last legs. On the plus side, although his steel blue eyes still hold weariness, at least he thinks they no longer look completely dead.

He holds the clippers between his knees and slides on the guard. He then turns them on and goes to work. Like many things, the task is almost laughably graceless and slow with only one arm. But contrary to all his expectations, even the bit of grief he thought he might feel, he catches a small smile in his reflection once everything starts to fall away.

An hour later, he walks into the dining room to join the others for dinner. Upon entering, the room promptly breaks into pandemonium, giving rise to a cacophony of outcry both approving and disapproving. How little excitement they must have, he thinks, that they would go this ballistic over some hair.

The only person not completely losing their mind is Steve, who looks at Bucky – hand to God – like he’s the main course that evening. Bucky can feel the intensity of his stare burning into him, and rather than backing down, he dishes it right back.

Bucky doesn’t have a clue what’s gotten into him today, but he could get used to it.

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The day before his surgery, Bucky and Bard have a short impromptu session to catch up and prepare for the difficult week ahead. By this time, Bucky’s brief interlude of self-assurance has been supplanted by his dear old friend anxiety. However, at least he can use the memory of those moments as some small proof that he might not be uneasy for every remaining moment of his life.

They review his homework, focusing on several interactions over the past week, most of them deliberately superficial but apparently substantive enough to satisfy Bard.

“I think we should take a break,” Bard tells him afterwards.

It’s the last thing Bucky expects to hear, and he’s surprised that his first emotional reaction is a negative one.

“What do you mean? For how long?”

“You need time to recover from your surgery. I also think it’s a good transition point for us in terms of therapy. We’ve gone through pretty much all of the first treatment protocol, and you’ve done a really great job. Moreover, your suicidal ideation seems to be under control. I think you’ve got the skills and stability to move on to trauma-focused treatment.”

“You mean getting into all of the stuff I have absolutely no desire to even think about, let alone talk about with you?”

Bard smiles. “That’s the stuff. That’s where the real work is going to happen.”

Bucky rubs his hand over his shaved head. He’s kind of taken a shine to it, even though he knows there’s a short fuse on it. The stuff has always grown like crazy for as long as he can remember.
He takes a second to be thankful that he’s not in the Jason Bard Club for Follicly Challenged Gentlemen.

“Well, you’re the expert, doc,” Bucky concedes. “I’m not gonna argue with you.”

After they finish their session, Bucky walks back towards his room and starts thinking about everything that’s happened since he started working with Bard. Despite all the flailing and stubbornness and skepticism, he can objectively say that things have gotten better since he started therapy. He doesn’t feel like blowing his head off. He’s sleeping better. He doesn’t feel like he’s always crawling blindly through a miasma of despair. He almost just wants things to stay the way they are now, because the relative change feels pretty good.

But in the spirit of self-transparency, Bucky admits to himself that he only needs to dig just few millimeters below the surface to see that he’s definitely not well. Still, he is managing things better, which has helped him scrape together a few paltry atoms of self-esteem. It’s as if his progress has given him a measure of breathing room that he didn’t have before, enough to start slowly throwing some light weight on the counterbalance to all the awfulness that nearly pulled him under for good.

As he walks into the living room, he sees Steve there, reading on the couch. Bucky takes a seat on the chair opposite him.

“How was session?” Steve asks, looking up from his tablet.

“Not bad. Went over some stuff from last week. Prepared for tomorrow.”

“What time do we need to be at the hospital?”

“5:30.”

“You worried?”

“Yeah.”

“Me too,” Steve admits.

Bucky shakes his head. “No, no, no, you’re supposed to say ‘everything’s gonna be all right, Buck. I promise.’”

“Well, it probably will be. But that doesn’t mean I’m not worried.”

Bucky lets his head fall against the high back of his chair. He takes a moment to enjoy Steve’s concern for him, as well as his unflagging honesty. He has always admired the delicate balance Steve somehow keeps between vulnerability and inviolability. Bucky wishes he could have a little of that, because he feels like he’s either completely defenseless or totally impenetrable. Neither state is particularly healthy or pleasant.

“You sure you’re okay taking care of me after?” Bucky asks him. “Kalu said I’m gonna be loopy and really tired for a while.”

“Of course. Can’t wait to see the loopy part,” Steve says with a playful smile.

Bucky snorts. “Yeah, I bet.”

“It is gonna be okay,” Steve assures him.
“Just keep telling me that. Especially when she’s elbow deep in my gray matter.”

“You got it, pal.”
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Bucky has surgery. Steve takes care of him. Bucky gets goofy on painkillers.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

_Bucky thinks this on a continuous loop as the nurse ties a rubber tourniquet around his forearm. He’s lying semi-upright on a wheeled bed in a surgical preparation room at the hospital, gowned and with blankets pulled up to his waist. Steve is standing at the foot of his bed, his attention shifting between Bucky’s blanched face and the nurse._

This is actually the second surgical procedure he’s had since being in Wakanda, the first being when Dr. Van Der Laar implanted his new arm. That first surgery felt like nothing by comparison, in large part because it took place in the lab at T’Challa’s palace. The arrangement certainly wasn’t the safest, but at least it prevented all the general out-in-public anxiety that’s currently stacking itself on top of everything else. They also had a fat, cheerful anesthesiologist put him deep under for the whole thing, which was especially great because ‘under’ was his favorite place to be at that time.

The nurse rubs his hand down with Betadine and un-packages a needle.

_This is not the same this is not the same this is not the same this is not the same this is not the same this is not the same this is not the same this is not the same._

She makes the stick precisely, attaches the IV tubing, and tapes everything down.

“This will help you relax,” she tells him. “You should start feeling it soon. We’ll be back in a few minutes to take you in to surgery.”

“Okay, thanks,” Bucky says, though he’s not sure what exactly he’s thanking her for. He guesses he should really thank his mother for imbuing him with mindless, habitual politeness.

As soon as she steps out, Bucky takes the deepest breath he can manage. He feels like his body is trying its damnedest to exit the building, and his thin layer of skin is the only thing keeping it in place.

“How you holding up?” Steve asks

“I have a feeling I’ll be better in about five minutes.” He manages a half-smile, a weak attempt to reassure Steve, which he imagines more closely resembles a grimace.

They hear a knock at the doorframe, followed by Dr. Kalu entering the room. She looks chipper in a set of crisp blue scrubs.

“Good morning, gentlemen. How are we doing?”
“Been better,” Bucky says. “But, to be fair, definitely been worse.”

It’s true. In the rolodex of horrors that has been Bucky’s life to date, having his head hacked open still doesn’t rank in the top ten awful experiences he’s had. It might barely even rank in the top five worst medical experiences he’s had. Not that the perspective helps to ease his stress.

“I see you got a head start with your hair,” Dr. Kalu says, smiling as she pulls a pair of clippers from her pocket. “Still, I’m going to have to take a little more.”

She deftly shaves a narrow, upside down parabola into the right side of his head. She then pulls a blue marker from her other pocket and draws a line down the middle of it.

“There we go. How are you feeling? More relaxed?” she asks.

“About the same.”

She turns the dial on his IV drip. “This may take a bit of experimenting, I’m afraid. This drug is called midazolam. Given your anxiety around the procedure, I thought we could try to put you into something called twilight sleep once we begin the operation. You will be responsive and alert and able to follow commands, but you will not remember the procedure. It will likely seem to you as if you are unconscious the whole time. How does that sound?”

As much as Bucky bristles at the idea of anything interfering with his already compromised memory, this is one instance where he thinks it might actually be a good thing.

“I guess that’s okay,” he tells her.

“Wonderful. Now, do either of you have any questions?”

“How long will he need to stay here for recovery?” Steve asks.

“We typically say two days, since the risk for infection and seizures are greatest within 48 hours of the procedure,” she says to Steve. She then looks at Bucky. “In terms of side effects, you will likely be very fatigued for a week or more. Many patients also have headaches during that time, which we can help you manage with painkillers. Any other questions?”

Steve and Bucky look at each other. Bucky shrugs and shakes his head.

“Not at this time,” Steve says.

“Very good. I’m going to go scrub in. See you two very shortly.”

“Do me a favor,” Bucky says to Steve once she’s out of earshot. “If I’m out for some reason, don’t let them put a catheter up my dick, okay? I’ll crawl to the bathroom, if I have to.”

“You’re not gonna crawl to the bathroom. I’m here to help take care of you, remember?” At that, Steve reaches down and grasps Bucky’s blanket-covered left foot, lightly shaking it for emphasis.

It’s the first time there’s been any contact between them since they hugged two weeks ago, aside from the occasional shoulder clasp, which Bucky is about to trademark as Steve’s go-to nonverbal friendship gesture. Bucky finds the foot thing endearing as hell, easy and casual, like they touch that way all the time.

Except that they definitely do not.

“You shouldn’t have to take care of me like that,” Bucky says.
“C’mon,” Steve says, letting go of Bucky’s foot. “You did the same for me – and more – when I was half-dead from pneumonia. Plus all the other times you pinch-hit for ma.”

Bucky knows exactly which bout of pneumonia he’s referring to, the one that struck shortly after his mom died. He remembers peeling Steve’s sweaty clothes off his body, helping him re-dress, wrapping him in as many blankets as they had, and just hugging the hell out of him, feeling helpless and scared out of his mind, while Steve shook and coughed through the night. Steve’s doctor blew Bucky off the next day, saying that the medicine needed more time to work, which was bullshit if there ever was bullshit. Bucky ended up dragging Steve to the hospital, where he teetered on the edge of life and death for a week. When Steve was finally in the clear, Bucky went back to that doctor’s office and nearly got arrested for slamming his fist into the fucker’s face for being a criminally negligent piece of shit. The only thing that kept him out of jail that day was good old reliable Irish nepotism.

“You were so sick,” Bucky says quietly, feeling an ache in the pit of his stomach just remembering how bad it was. “I thought you were done.”

“Me too,” Steve replies.

“Jeez, I think this stuff’s starting to kick in,” Bucky says, pulling away from the still raw emotions bubbling up around the memory. Finally, finally he feels some of the tension start to drain from his limbs.

A pair of nurses comes in a couple minutes later. One of them hands Steve a set of scrubs to change into while they wheel Bucky down to the operating room.

Whatever they gave Bucky is starting to work. He feels remarkably calm as the nurses and surgical assistants bustle around him, preparing everything. The same fat, happy anesthesiologist drops by to inject local anesthetic into his head in various places, telling Bucky a series of terrible – not even laughably terrible – jokes to distract him. They’re so bad that Bucky’s not sure if he should even pretend to laugh. Once he’s numbed, one of Dr. Kalu’s residents brings over the skull clamp and screws it into his head without the slightest hint of apprehension or fanfare. They then make quick work of laying a surgical drape over the site and prepping it with Betadine.

All of the drama Bucky anticipated and he doesn’t even care about it. Before he knows it, Dr. Kalu enters, all scrubbed in, with Steve in tow. They’re both wearing surgical caps and masks.

“Nice booties,” Bucky says to Steve, glancing down at the fluffy, polypropylene shoe coverings he’s wearing.

“Almost as nice as your dress,” Steve replies.

Thoroughly disinhibited from whatever they’ve got pumping through his veins, Bucky winks back in response.

“Are you ready?” Dr. Kalu asks.

“As I’ll ever be,” Bucky says.

Dr. Kalu then steps over to his IV and fiddles with it some more. Bucky looks over at Steve. From the crinkles in the corners of his eyes, Bucky can tell he’s smiling.

“Tell me about where you grew up,” she says to Bucky.

“Why?”
“I want to hear about it.”

“Well, we lived in a six story apartment building on Third Avenue in Bay Ridge. Second floor. Four of us crammed in this little two bedroom, one bath. The kitchen was… so small…”

“How small?” she asks.

“There was… the oven… and……”

The next thing Bucky notices is one of the engineers from his last surgery closing the access panel on his left arm.

“Welcome back,” Dr. Kalu says over his left shoulder. “We’re all done.”

He turns to look back at her, which he shouldn’t be able to do with his head screwed into the clamp they just put on him. “Wait… what?”

“Look,” she tells him, pointing to his left arm. “Wiggle your fingers.”

He looks at his arm. The movements are a tad jolty, but holy shit, he’s moving his fingers. With his mind. Or, more precisely, with bioelectricity, a computer chip, and a Wi-Fi signal.

“I don’t remember anything,” he says, confused by the sequence of events but also utterly mesmerized by his own hand.

“That is the magic of twilight sleep. You did beautifully.”

Bucky looks up at Steve for confirmation, who nods and gives him athumbs-up.

They wheel Bucky back to a two-bed intensive care room and remove the midazolam drip, replacing it with regular IV fluids. Steve joins him there a few minutes later, back in his street clothes.

“I was seriously awake the whole time?” Bucky asks him.

“Yep. You were cool as a cucumber, even when they were sawing your skull open.”

“Did I say anything stupid?”

“Not really.”

“Not really?”

Steve takes a few steps closer, until he’s right at Bucky’s bedside.

“You were blabbing for a long time about the neighborhood,” Steve says. “You were really getting into it. Especially when you got to talking about Eddie Gallagher.”

Bucky rolls his eyes. “That grubby little prick.”

“Yeah, you didn’t mince words about him. Dr. Kalu had to tell you to stop, ’cause your language was getting a little too… colorful,” Steve says.

Bucky’s attention drifts back to his left arm. He rotates, bends, and flexes it, awestruck by how responsive it is. And that’s without a lick of fine calibration. It’s also quieter than his other arm, though there’s still a hint of mechanical whirring with larger movements. He has a thought – an old
brand of thought – about how tactically advantageous the improvement is.

“How does it feel?” Steve asks.

“Good. Really good,” Bucky says with a small smile. “Can’t say the same about my head, though. Anesthetic must be wearing off.”

“Want me to call the nurse?”

Bucky shakes his head. “Nah. I can handle it.”

“The Great Depression ended a long time ago, Buck. You don’t get points anymore for how much suffering you can endure.”

“No,” Bucky admits. “I guess not.”

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Two days later, Bucky is released from the hospital. When he and Steve return to T’Challa’s, Bucky is surprised – actually, light-years beyond surprised – that everyone is there waiting for him when they walk in. Wanda and Scott are holding a rectangular, chocolate-frosted sheet cake with brain drawn on it in red frosting, the words “Happy Brain Surgery! Welcome Back!” written below it in blue.

Bucky is moved beyond words, already feeling inarticulate and goofy as fuck from the boatloads of OxyContin they’ve been giving him to manage the terrible headaches he’s been having. After catching everyone up (with Steve’s gracious assistance) and eating a huge corner piece of the cake they made him, Bucky crashes on the couch and sleeps until Clint wakes him up for dinner six hours later. By that time, his brain feels like it’s trying to crawl its way out of his skull, so he takes more pills.

After dinner, Steve walks Bucky to his room.

“How’s the head?”

“Much better.”

Not only that, the meds make him feel like a hundred million bucks. He feels free, unencumbered, with no shameful, traumatic past trailing after him like a black shadow everywhere he goes. At this moment, there is and never was a Winter Soldier. No Hydra, no torture, no murder, no nothing. He doesn’t even have the nagging voice of his superego telling him that he doesn’t deserve to be free from any of that, even for a few days. He can see how people so easily get addicted to the stuff.

“Wanna watch a movie?” Bucky asks Steve.

“Where? Here?”

“Sure. I don’t know when I’m gonna clock out for the night, so at least if I fall asleep, I’ll be in my own bed.”

Steve goes back to his room for a few minutes while Bucky changes into something he wouldn’t mind falling asleep in – a pair of drawstring jogger pants and a t-shirt. When Steve returns, they both get comfortable on top of the duvet. Steve props himself up against the headboard with pillows and Bucky lies down, already anticipating that he’s not going to make it through whatever they decide to watch.
The problem then becomes picking a movie. The selections are staggering between the satellite and various streaming services. They’ve both been out of the cultural loop for so long over the past century that it’s tough to narrow anything down, even to a particular decade. Fortunately, Sam happens to pass by and insert himself into the process as they’re searching through Netflix.

“Oh, tell me you haven’t seen Top Gun,” Sam says when he sees the title pop up in the new releases section of the app.

Bucky and Steve both shake their heads.

“You have to watch it. It’s a classic ‘80s Cold War buddy movie. I’m surprised it wasn’t on your little list, Steve.”

“I might have heard of it, but I’m not sure,” Steve says.

“I can’t say you’ll think it’s the best movie ever,” Sam warns, “but you’ll definitely be entertained.”

“Thanks, Sam,” Steve says.

“Well, don’t thank me yet,” he replies chuckling as he walks out the door and back into the hall. Seemingly out of nowhere, he yells, “I want some butts!”

They then hear Clint echo the same thing from the room next door.

Bucky and Steve look at each other. Bucky shrugs.

Not five minutes into it, they’re kids again, shit talking at the movies, except now there’s nobody there to tell them to shut their yaps.

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“She’s got you jumpin’ off the deck and shovin’ into overdrive?” Steve says. “That doesn’t sound like it’s about flying at all.”

……..

“He followed her into the bathroom?!” Bucky exclaims. “What a creep.”

Steve tries out his best Kelly McGillis impression: “Well, Maverick, I clearly told you that I wasn’t interested, but now that you’ve cornered me in the ladies’ room and are talking about how you’re gonna sex me on the counter, I think you might not be half bad after all.”

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“Did he just say ‘I want some butts’?” Steve asks.

“I want some butts!” Bucky says loudly.

“I want some butts!” Clint and Sam call back from their rooms.

……..

“Wow, now we get a sweaty, shirtless volleyball game,” Bucky says.

“Why is it in slow motion?” Steve asks.
“Are Maverick and Iceman gonna fuck or what?” Bucky asks, turning his head to look up at Steve. “I bet you 20 bucks they fuck by the end of this movie.”

“You don’t even have 20 bucks,” Steve tells him with a smile.

“Oh yeah.”

“Are Maverick and Iceman gonna fuck or what?” Bucky asks, turning his head to look up at Steve. “I bet you 20 bucks they fuck by the end of this movie.”

“You don’t even have 20 bucks,” Steve tells him with a smile.

“Oh yeah.”

“This movie needs to come out of the closet,” Bucky says.

“It’s like they shoehorned in this straight love story just to say ‘Don’t worry, audience, nothing gay to see here,’” Steve replies.

“Is it just me, or is this love scene really bad?” Steve complains.

“Ugh, they’re all tongue. Like a couple of Labrador retrievers going at it,” Bucky says.

Bucky falls asleep a little over two thirds of the way through the film and wakes up in the middle of the ending credits.

“Hey, what happened? Did Iceman and Maverick do it?” he asks Steve, rubbing his bleary eyes.

“Yeah, you missed it.”

“Nuh-uh. They did not,” Bucky says, propping himself up on his elbows.

“Then they got married and won the Cold War together,” Steve deadpans.

“Well, I’ll just pretend you’re telling me the truth.”

“Always do.”

Bucky snorts. “Yeah, that crap may fly with your other friends, but I know better. You can spare me the George Washington Yankee Doodle Johnny Appleseed routine.”

Steve looks confused. Bucky supposes he can see why. There’s something that’s been bugging Bucky ever since the hospital, and it’s only now that his feel-good drugs are wearing off that he feels compelled to finally bring it up.

“Y’know, a lie by omission is still a lie, Steve.”

“I know that,” Steve replies, his tone guarded.

“So were you ever going to tell me that I punched that poor engineer half way across the room when he first turned on the decoder in my arm?”

“You remember that?” Steve asks.

“No, but I heard Dr. Kalu telling Van Der Laar about it on the phone outside my room when she thought I was sleeping.”
“You didn’t mean to do it. It was a reflex.”

“Still, I probably hurt that poor kid. No wonder he was looking at me funny afterward.”

“I didn’t want you to feel bad about it. And I figured you wouldn’t find out,” Steve says plainly, looking as if he’s been caught shoplifting something trivial, like a pack of gum or a roll of dental floss. It’s a look that’s vaguely remorseful but also defiantly self-assured.

“Did I at least apologize?” Bucky asks.

“Yeah. A lot.”

Bucky lets himself fall back flat on the bed. It’s a difficult situation for him to address, because he knows Steve only had the best intentions. He’s well-intentioned to a fault in pretty much everything he does. But having Steve lie to him makes Bucky feel even worse, because it implies that he’s so weak that he can’t handle even knowing his own actions. He hates this particular change in their dynamic more than anything else that’s happened to their relationship since Hydra. Steve’s unilateral assumption of responsibility. His assumption of Bucky’s fragility, whether it’s warranted or not.

“Look, I know I’m a hot mess now, and I know you want to help me, but I need to be able to trust you more than I need to be protected from the truth.” Bucky’s eyes sharpen through the haze of his meds. “So stop bullshitting me. You never used to do that. Ever.”

“Okay,” Steve says, nodding. “You’re right. Obviously I have a problem with that, as you saw with Tony.”

That is the last absolute thing Bucky wants to think about, especially since it beckons that black shadow to begin its menacing creep back into his periphery.

Steve breaks eye contact with Bucky and looks down at his lap.

“Goose died. He broke his neck or something trying to bail out of the plane after Maverick lost control. Maverick was devastated, but he kept flying because he knew Goose would want him to. Then they shot down a bunch of Russians and Maverick and Iceman hugged and said they would be each other’s wingmen.”

Bucky smirks. “Well, I guess that’s kind of like a Naval aviator version of a marriage proposal.”

“Little too close to home,” Steve says, just barely loud enough for Bucky to hear. He then glances back down at Bucky with a solemn expression. “I should let you sleep.”

Bucky frowns as Steve starts to get up to leave. Without thinking, he reaches out with his left hand and grabs Steve’s wrist. He has a split second of concern that maybe he grabbed too hard, but then he realizes that the look on Steve’s face as he turns back around is one of surprise, not pain.

“Stay here.”

“All night?”

Bucky nods.

Bucky can see the corner of Steve’s mouth turn downward. He hesitates, as if he’s about to make one of the biggest decisions of his life.
“Let me go get ready,” Steve finally replies.

Bucky lets go of Steve’s wrist and lets his arm fall heavily on the bed. Steve gets up and leaves the room. Next door, Bucky hears Steve’s dresser drawers open and close, then he hears a rush of water as his shower turns on.

Bucky feels paralyzed by his own impulsivity, spinning his wheels. He clumsily tries to analyze the frown on Steve’s face. The reluctance. He wonders what the hell he was thinking, asking Steve to sleep over. They’re not kids anymore, and this is not a goddamn slumber party.

But he manages to gather his wits about him enough to go to his own bathroom. He brushes his teeth and washes his face, then takes his own quick shower, cleaning everything from the neck down since getting water anywhere near his stitches is verboten. He then gets out, dries off, puts his clothes on, and inspects the gnarly curve of sutures on his head. The incision looks clean, with no redness or drainage. He then stares down his reflection for a few moments before grabbing the bottle of OxyContin and flushing the remaining pills down the toilet. He takes the rest of his other meds like he’s supposed to and goes back to his room.

By that point, Steve is back, sitting on the edge of Bucky’s bed wearing nearly identical sleep clothes in different colors. No matter how far the universe flings them apart, they still somehow manage to fall into the most serendipitous – if brief – spurts of synchrony.

“You mind if I stay up and do some reading?” Steve asks, as if nothing uncomfortable or weird has transpired in the last half hour.

“No. I’m probably gonna be out in five minutes,” Bucky says, completely unsure of the probability of that actually happening.

They crawl into bed, arranged exactly as they were before except under the covers. There’s a palpable tension lingering that Bucky tries with limited success to ignore. Bucky looks up at Steve, who appears thoughtful – or at least playing at thoughtful. Bucky wonders if he’s even reading at all or if he’s just as distracted as he is.

Then Bucky wonders the million-dollar wonder: What, exactly, was he expecting to get out of this? What did he think would happen? What did he want to happen? Is this it? Steve’s presence? Sure, the thought of being alone is unpleasant, but the thought of anything beyond exactly what is happening right now is utterly terrifying. Not because it would necessarily be unwanted –

Bucky’s thought process derails violently at that, sending the train crashing, tumbling car-over-car, exploding into a spectacular fireball that chars those thoughts to black dust.

He closes his eyes and attempts to put on his own mini production of pretending to sleep. He feels a strong current of regret about asking Steve to stay but also an equally strong counter-current of unabashed satisfaction with the current arrangement. Wherever the hell it came from. Whatever the hell it might mean.

Spared once more from any serious contemplation of the situation by his robust fuck-it reflex, Bucky’s body settles. He rolls onto his left side, toward Steve.

“Good night, Steven,” he mumbles into his pillow.

There is a long pause before Steve replies.

“Good night.”
When Bucky opens his eyes the next morning, he’s struck by two things: The searing pain in his head and the fact that Steve Rogers is sleeping next to him. Bucky is on his stomach, head still facing Steve, who’s lying on his back. He’s still deep in sleep, breath coming slowly and evenly. Bucky can see the strong, steady pulse of his carotid artery just beneath his skin. He looks handsome, his face smooth and untroubled.

Bucky reaches out his right hand and gently – very gently – rests the edge of it against Steve’s shoulder. It’s something that could easy pass for an accident but still allows Bucky to greedily enjoy the thin slice of contact.

Steve’s body is warm, always so warm, his super metabolism burning like a furnace. His warmth takes Bucky right back again to those nights in the field, just before it all went to hell. They were deep in their battle rhythm of lots of waiting, lots of planning, and lots of freezing, with intermissions of savage battles and heady victories and the occasional rest and resupply back in the UK.


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January 12th, 1944, 6 km east of Seefeld, Austria

“Did you ever think when we were kids pretending to kick the Kaiser’s ass that we’d ever be out here, kicking German asses for real?” Bucky asks.

Steve smiles, barely able to keep his teeth from chattering. “Not a chance. Didn’t think they’d be stupid enough to start another war, for one.”

They’re neck deep in their sleeping bags, shivering in the dark, wearing almost every piece of clothing they have, the sides of their bodies flush in an effort to leech some warmth from each other.

“Sometimes I think I like kicking German ass a little too much, like maybe to an unhealthy degree,” Bucky says.

“Well, you sure have a knack for it,” Steve replies.

“Says Captain America, who’s socked ol’ Adolf on the jaw over 200 times,” Bucky teases.

Steve groans. “I’m never gonna live that down, am I?”

“Oh, no way. Never. You’re stuck with that for life, pal. I only wish I coulda seen it.”

“You were too busy actually fighting the Germans.”

“While you were prancing around with all those girls, you lucky son of a bitch.” Bucky then pauses for dramatic effect. “Oh wait, that’s right, you only got eyes for Peggy Carter. Not that I can blame you one bit. That dress... Man, only one reason she wore that dress for you.”

“And why’s that?”

“So when you’re freezing your balls off in the snow, you got that memory to keep you warm.”

Steve exhales a shallow laugh.
“You’d be a total idiot to mess that up. She’s practically got a sign on her saying ‘Fuck off, I’m waiting for Steve Rogers.’” Bucky then lifts his head and knocks his fist against Steve’s thigh. “Wait, Steve, are you still a virgin?”

“Jeez, Buck –”

“Oh my God, you are,” Bucky says, laughing, letting his head fall back down. “You’re gonna have to do something about that.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Best advice I have: get very familiar with the terrain down there. And with more than just your dick.”

“You mean…”

“Yeah, I’m talking about your mouth. You wanna knock a girl’s socks off, that’s the way to do it. Almost guaranteed. See, most girls never get asked, and they won’t usually ask you. So when you offer, I swear, some of ‘em don’t even know that’s a thing guys will do for them. It’s tragic.”

“I… wouldn’t even know where to start.”

In the dark, the voice doesn’t belong Captain America, the super soldier who’s been brutally eviscerating Hydra for the past year. It belongs to Steve Rogers, the 90-some-pound boy-faced man who always looks like he’s being swallowed up by his clothes.

“I’ll say this, enthusiasm counts for a lot. Like when a girl sucks your dick, even if she doesn’t really know what she’s doing but you can tell she wants you to feel good, that’s the best. I’d rather have that any day than a girl who’s got great skill but who just goes at it like she’s punchin’ the clock.”

Bucky smiles then. In the dark, there’s no way that Steve can see how bittersweet and jaded that smile is.

“I can hear you blushing,” Bucky continues. “I’m not just saying this to be crass, though you know by now that I’ve got no shame in the romance department. This is serious business. You get in there and use some of that super soldier stamina you’ve got, she’ll be crushing your head with her thighs. Which in that case is a very good thing.”

“The romance department, huh? That’s what you call it?” Steve shoots back, his tone somewhere between playful and something else Bucky can’t put his finger on.

Bucky knows that Steve is trying to deflect some of the blistering directness of the conversation, which Bucky has purposefully delivered with well-honed nonchalance for Steve’s easy embarrassment. Indeed, Bucky is in his element, doing what Bucky does best – a glowing, shallow impersonation of hyper-heterosexuality.

Of course, it isn’t all impersonation. Bucky is an expert at using his sexuality to distract from substance and fill the emptiness in himself, giving rise to a long series of too-brief relationships with a seemingly endless string of girls, starting far too young for his own good.

Girls, girls, girls – so many that there’s no room for anything else. No vulgar fantasies of hot testosterone and gruntling and sweat; of sparse trails of chest hair that skip some flesh to land again just under the belly button, drawing another line that dips below; of stiff, straining cocks and stubbled jawlines and rough hands. No, there’s no room for any of that at all. Except when there is,
when it seizes a rare moment of empty silence and digs itself in like an insatiable tick, until it’s beaten down with weak disgust or indulged in with voracity and then shame.

In addition to fulfilling his own needs, at least temporarily, Bucky’s sexuality has also earned him nearly a decade’s worth of premium social capital among his peers, from the men who want to be him and the women who want to be with him, as well as the quiet few who want both. Everyone except for Steve, who’s watched the spectacle from the sidelines for years, holding his own jumbled emotional concoction of concern, jealousy, frustration, and heartache.

And in that moment in that tent, Bucky’s once again doing what he’s practiced for years, successfully choking off both the substance and emptiness between them, killing what could be before it can even take it’s first full breath.

Bucky can’t even – won’t even – dare imagine the course of events if he hadn’t been so hell-bent on disrupting them, if he hadn’t been so frightened of what might happen between them and what it might mean. But then, given that he took a one-way trip to Camp Zola just a little less than two months later, Bucky reasons that it was probably all for the best.

Steve stirs then, and Bucky moves his hand away. Steve turns his head to the right, now facing Bucky, and slowly opens his eyes.

“Hey,” Steve says, smiling, voice thick from sleep.

“Hey.”

“How’d you sleep?”

“Good. You?”

“Yeah, good. How’s your head?”

“Better,” Bucky lies.

Steve lifts his head and looks over Bucky’s scar. “Looks like it’s healing really well.”

“Don’t look at it. It’s gross,” Bucky says.

Steve relaxes back onto his pillow. “It’s not gross.”

They lie in silence for a few moments before Bucky is suddenly moved to ask a question that’s been rattling around in the back of his mind for the better part of five months. In hindsight, he’ll later come to recognize the question and its poor timing as a continuation of a long cycle of self-sabotage and self-fulfilling prophecy that kept him stuck in relational dead-ends during his life before Hydra.

“Hey, I meant to ask you something a while back,” Bucky says.

“What?”

“What’s the deal with you and Sharon?”

Steve’s brow furrows deeply. “Why are you asking about that?”

“Just curious.”
“I dunno. I don’t think there is a deal. I haven’t seen her since May, or even talked to her.”

“She’s cute,” Bucky says glibly.

“God, will you just stop?” Steve snaps.

Bucky’s whole body tenses at the blunt force of Steve’s response. “What?”

“I’m gonna get some coffee,” Steve says, sliding off the bed and beating a cool but swift exit. He closes the door behind him, leaving a very confused Bucky in his wake.

“What the fuck…?” Bucky mutters to himself, running through the conversation again – and then again – to try to figure out what the hell just happened.

And either his brain isn’t working or Steve is being indecipherable, because he comes up with nothing. He chalks it up to the much more likely first scenario, because he’s running on only about two out of eight cylinders right now.

He grabs the pillow Steve was using and buries his face in it with a loud sigh.

It’s gonna be a long damn week.

Chapter End Notes

On an unrelated note, I have to say that one of my favorite parts of Civil War is the set design for Bucky’s apartment in Romania. I love that he has those caramel cookies or snack cakes or whatever on top of the fridge next to a bag of what I think might be potato chips. I don’t know why it’s so amusing to me to imagine him sitting around writing in his diary while eating snacks, but I just love it.

Also, thanks so much for all the kudos and comments.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Bucky starts trauma treatment. Bucky remembers the past.

Chapter Notes

Sorry this is so long. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for all the support!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For Bucky, the next nine days are a blur of sleep punctuated by bouts of tedium and frustration. There are no more sleepovers, and there is no discussion of the single ill-fated sleepover that did happen. As they’ve done several times before when things have fallen out of their usual copacetic superficiality, Steve and Bucky try to carry on as if nothing has tripped up the their platonic alignment. Maybe it’s an artifact of old battlefield habits, where they both mastered the art of brushing things aside, putting them in a box, and swearing to deal with them later, and later, and later still.

There is now a palpable weight accumulated around them that Bucky does not like one bit. Still, he doesn’t feel at all equipped to address it either, because addressing it could mean opening up an entire plane of new and petrifying territory that he can’t even wrap his mind around. The dangerousness of the remote possibilities alone makes Bucky want to lock himself in his room, crawl under the bed, and never come out again. He treats the whole situation like a piece of unexploded ordinance, where the distance he keeps from it is matched only by his obsessive preoccupation with it.

In contrast, the physical recovery front has yielded steady progress. Dr. Kalu dropped by on day seven to remove his sutures, cooing with awe at how quickly the incision healed. The poor engineer from Bucky’s surgery braved another visit with him to finish calibrating his arm, with Dr. Van Der Laar joining them via video teleconference to supervise the process. Bucky was all apologies and absolute gentlemanliness, beating back intense irritability from his weeklong, untreated headache and all the unresolved crap with Steve. The congeniality seemed to go a long way, and the engineer even gleefully gave Bucky a shoulder torque test, clocking him in at a staggering 386 foot-pounds. For comparison, the engineer told him that a bullet coming out of the muzzle of a .45 pistol runs at around 415 foot-pounds.

In the spirit of his newly accustomed ambivalence about most things, Bucky is both delighted and disturbed by the power he now wields.

Now on the tenth day after surgery, Bucky sits in the chair outside of Bard’s office. He wouldn’t describe himself as eager to see the man, but he sure isn’t dreading their session. While waiting, Bucky ponders the logistics of Bard’s one day a week at the palace. When does he arrive? Does he come in through the underground garage or the front door? Or another door? Why does he never see Bard outside of this one room? It’s as if the man doesn’t exist outside of their time together, a
thought Bucky recognizes as the epitome of narcissism.

When Bard opens his office door, his face lights up with pleasant surprise to see Bucky there so early. He doesn’t even appear entirely ready for their session, and he excuses himself to get something out of his car (which is where, and what kind?), leaving Bucky in his office.

Bucky takes advantage of the time alone and spends a few minutes snooping around Bard’s desk. What sticks out immediately is a framed photo of Bard, looking somewhat thinner but just as bald and bearded, with a good-looking, bespectacled black man and two little girls. He doesn’t know if he’s never noticed the picture before or if it wasn’t there for their earlier sessions. Given how admittedly self-obsessed Bucky has been since they started working together, he wouldn’t be surprised if it’s been there since day one.

Bucky puts the photo down as soon as he hears Bard re-enter the room, which isn’t soon enough for Bard to not notice.

“You look puzzled,” Bard says.

“I guess I never thought about you having a life outside of this,” Bucky says.

“Yeah, I do the husband and dad thing. Does it surprise you that I’m gay?”

“No. I’m surprised you have kids.”

Bucky doesn’t give a fat flying fuck about other people’s queerness, which is something of a miracle, given his upbringing. He could be neck-deep in the gyrating bulges and G-strings of the San Francisco Pride Parade and not feel a lick of anything… except probably the twitching of his own cock. That, ladies and gentleman and other-gender folks, is the thing he considers a problem.

“Why are you surprised I have kids?”

“I don’t know how you do this kind of work and then go home and be a parent,” Bucky says.

He imagines people who do this work to be of two breeds: The sadistic voyeurs who live off the suffering of others and the bleeding hearts who go home and drink themselves into a stupor every night. He pegs Bard for more of the latter, though the guy does seem awfully chipper for a drunk.

“Ah, well, when you do trauma work all day, you get really good at compartmentalizing,” Bard explains.

Bucky tilts his head slightly. “I thought you said compartmentalizing is bad. Sorry – maladaptive.”

“For you, yes!” Bard says, chuckling. “For me, I’m not trying to sift through seventy years of hyper-compartmentalized, backlogged traumatic memories, so I get a pass. Someday when you’ve moved past this, you too will be able to adaptively compartmentalize.”

Bard holds out an arm toward their chairs, silently encouraging Bucky to take a seat in his usual spot. Bard takes his seat across from him and pats down on his portfolio with the palms of his hands.

“So, how are you doing?”

“Some things are better. Some worse.”

“Well, fill me in on both.”
Bucky does an adequate job giving Bard the basics, glossing over the weirdness with Steve, the sleepover, and other products of his drug-induced disinhibition. Basically, all the stuff that’s gotten worse.

“Last time we saw each other, we agreed to get rolling with trauma-focused therapy. How are you feeling about that now?”

Bucky shrugs. “I don’t know how I’m gonna get more ready to feel like total dog shit for, wait, how long?”

“About 12 weeks, at the very least. Longer, if you need it.”

“Jesus,” Bucky replies, eyebrows rising. “Yeah, this is about as ready as I’m gonna get for all that.”

Bard pauses for a second, then smiles and shakes his head. “Okay, sorry to side track, but I’m just amazed at how much less depressed you seem compared to the last time I saw you.”

“I’m doing all the stuff you told me to do. Taking my pills. And I’m Mr. Sociality now,” Bucky says, tone and expression flat. “This also helps,” he adds, rotating his left arm and making a fist with his hand.

“Yes, I know you’re doing it all very grudgingly. And see? You’re feeling better in the process. Remember this in the near future when I’m asking you to do a bunch of other things you think probably won’t work.”

Bard then pulls out a piece of paper titled PCL-5 and gives it to Bucky on a clipboard.

“This is an assessment of PTSD symptoms, which I’ll give you every week to track your progress,” he tells Bucky. “Go ahead and fill it out now so that we can get a baseline.”

It’s a series of 20 questions asking about various symptoms and how much he’s been bothered by them in the past month. When Bucky’s done, he hands the form back to Bard, who scores it on the spot.

“So, you scored a 72 out of 80,” Bard tells him.

“What does that mean?”

“First, surprise, you have PTSD. Second, it means that your symptom severity is quite high. This gives us a good frame of reference moving forward. A plus is that when people start really high like this, they generally see a greater degree improvement.”

Bucky has mixed feelings about his score. On one hand, it feels something like validation to be able to quantify how awful he feels and to have Bard be able to see that. It’s been hard for him to explain what it feels like to be living the way he’s living, especially without sounding weak and sniveling to his own ears.

On another hand… shit.

“Okay, well, what are we gonna do about it?” Bucky asks.

Bard leans forward, his face animated with what is clearly great enthusiasm about their forward momentum.
“So the therapy is called Cognitive Processing Therapy or CPT for short. It’s one of the top evidence-based treatments for PTSD. The premise is that when traumatic things happen, people can form very rigid beliefs about themselves, others, and the world because on the trauma. That’s one process of many that can lead to the formation of PTSD. The thing is, those beliefs aren’t necessarily grounded in reality, and they prevent you from meeting your goals and having the life you want to have.

“We call these rigid ideas ‘stuck points.’ They’re usually broad statements, like ‘I can’t trust anyone,’ ‘I don’t deserve to be happy,’ or ‘I’m to blame for the bad things that happened to me.’ CPT targets these stuck points and helps break them down so that you can view what happened through a different lens. In the process of breaking down these stuck points, we also do a lot of processing of emotions around trauma.”

As Bard describes CPT, Bucky feels himself slowly sinking further into his seat, as if the plushy, high-backed chair will open itself up and kindly swallow him if he pushes himself against it hard enough.

“So you’re gonna want me to talk about what happened,” Bucky states nervously.

“Yep,” Bard says, nodding.

“All of it.”

“Well, unfortunately, you’ve got more material than we could probably cover in 100 weeks. But we should hit the major things. Plus, stuck points tend to generalize, so if we work through the ones that seem most relevant, it should help even the stuff we don’t talk about directly.”

Bard then dons a serious expression, which Bucky has come to recognize as his now I’m going to level with you, so listen up face.

“And I’ll say this up front, and probably repeat it a lot throughout - the more you put into this, the better you’ll get. If you hold back, that’ll reflect in your lack of recovery. Plain and simple. So you’re really driving the boat here.”

“I won’t argue with having control,” Bucky tells him. Control is good. Very good. And it’s in such rare supply these days.

“Yeah, says you and everyone else with PTSD. Now, for the rest of our time today, I’m going to give you the full rundown on the treatment protocol, but I’ll start with giving you a preview of your homework. The first thing I’m going to have you do is start writing down your personal stuck points. I have a sheet with common trauma-related stuck points to get you started that I’ll send back with you. You’re going to create a big master list of stuck points that’ll act like a living document. We can add anything that seems important at any time.

“The second assignment is that I’m going to have you write something called an impact statement. I want you to write about the why you think the things that happened to you happened. Also, I want you to write ways that your trauma history has negatively affected your life, with a particular focus on trust, safety, power and control, esteem, and intimacy. Don’t write details about any traumatic events in particular. Just the effect they’ve had on your life. You’re going to write it all out by hand. It can be as long as it needs to be. And in our next session, you’re going to read it out loud and we’re going to pick stuck points out of it. Don’t worry, I have all the instructions written down for you to take with you.”

Bucky swallows hard. He feels an urge to slam on the breaks and backpedal out of this whole
arrangement, which his pride would never let him do after his overconfident insistence of his readiness not ten minutes prior. But oh, how quickly he starts pining for those stupid-easy feelings monitoring forms he rolled his eyes at last month.

“You look spooked,” Bard observes.

“I’m fine. Let’s just do this.”

After session, Bucky drops off his awful assignments in his room and goes looking for Sam. He gives himself a small figurative pat on the back for not doing what he actually wants to do – lie on his bed and stare at the ceiling and ruminate about how he’s really screwed himself over this time.

He finds Sam sitting on his bed in his room, watching the news.

“Hey,” Bucky says, leaning in Sam’s doorway. “You got a few minutes?”

“Yeah, c’mon in,” Sam replies, gesturing to the chair that they all have a nearly identical copy of in their respective rooms.

“What kind of therapy did you do at the VA?” Bucky asks as he takes a seat.

“Well, I did a group where we learned a bunch about PTSD. Then with my individual therapist, I did cognitive processing therapy.”

“That’s what Bard’s having me do. I just had my first session.” Bucky has the heavy, burdened expression of a man who just found out he’s dying, which he recognizes might be a tad melodramatic.

“Well, you’re in for a hell of a ride,” Sam tells him. “You gotta do an impact statement?”

Bucky nods.

“It sucks – it all sucks, remember? – but impact statements are really helpful. You’re gonna get so much from it. CPT helps you cut through all crap you tell yourself. The stuff you don’t even know is crap until you step outside of it.”

“That’s basically what Bard said.”

“Well, he’s right. And so am I.”

Bucky’s right leg starts shaking. Although he completely comprehends the concept of stuck points, he’s daunted by the fact that he can’t readily produce any of his own. He wonders if maybe he doesn’t have any at all, because everything he thinks up seems completely, incontrovertibly true. And if these things aren’t actually true, if the things he thinks aren’t stuck points actually are, then that means his whole entire understanding of himself and the world is completely bat shit upside-down. This is a profoundly unsettling thought.

“How many stuck points did you have?” Bucky asks.

Sam pauses to recall, looking up and to the right. “A dozen at least. And I just focused on one trauma. I can only imagine how big your list is gonna be.”

“Boy, you sure know how to inspire.”
“Hey, you want inspiration, get a bald eagle poster. You believe you recruited me to help kick your ass through this process, not blow sunshine up it.”

Sam then presses the pause button on the remote and puts on a stern, paternal face. Maybe a drill instructor face. Bucky wonders if Sam was ever on the DI trail and, if so, what he must have been like. Screaming his throat hoarse at airmen, making grown men cry themselves to sleep in their bunks at night. Or maybe he was one of the quiet ones, the ones who really scare the piss out of you because you can’t read them to save your life.

“So here’s how it’s gonna go,” Sam says. “You’re gonna do your impact statement, you’re gonna do it well, you’re gonna have 7 billion stuck points, and you’re gonna address them all to the absolute best of your ability. And you’re gonna get better because of it.”

“Yes, Sir,” Bucky replies.

“Hey, don’t ‘Sir’ me. I was an enlisted man, same as you.”

“Yes… Sergeant?”

“Master Sergeant, actually.” Sam makes a face then, like he’s poorly hiding something. Maybe play-acting ignorance. “Speaking of officers, do you think Steve’s been acting weird lately?”

Bucky tenses, fingers gripping the arms of his chair. “Weird how?”

“Broody. Grumpy around the edges.”

Bucky turns his palms upward in a halfhearted shrug.

Sam sighs. “Why is there always something going on between you two?”

“I don’t know if you realize this, but it’s not like we can just pick up where we left off in 1944.”

“Of course not. But it’s been over six months.”

“Yeah, and I was in the freezer half that time.”

Sam snorts. “Math isn’t your strong suit, is it?”

“Fine. It feels like I was in the freezer half that time,” Bucky clarifies irritably. “Anyway, it’s not that simple.”

“Oh, I bet it’s much simpler than you think.”

Sam’s words are heavy with insinuation. Possibly even blame. Or maybe Bucky is just projecting, hearing the lub-dub of a telltale heart below the floorboards.

“What did he say to you?” Bucky asks, eyes narrowing with suspicion.

“As if I would tell you,” Sam jabs. Always so infuriatingly protective of Steve, the fucker. “Like I said before, I’m not getting in the middle of your stuff with him. You need to put on your big boy pants and take care of your own business.”

“Okay, I’m leaving now,” Bucky says, rising to his feet. “Thanks for the shitty pep talk.”

“Hey, always a pleasure,” he replies, smiling as Bucky storms off. “Lemme know how it goes!”
The rest of the week progresses crappily. Bucky is plagued by the specter of his homework assignments, both by the gravity of the tasks ahead of him and the fact that he’s multiplying his worry exponentially through procrastination. He hasn’t even touched his homework folder once since his last session. In fact, he shoved the whole damn thing in the top drawer of his dresser, next to a second-rate motorcycle enthusiast magazine he’s only read halfway through.

Instead, he’s been burying himself in as many trivial endeavors as he can, as if they’re the true keys to curing his PTSD rather than the barriers standing in the way of the same. He’s found himself doing almost anything that he thinks might temporarily loosen the grip of his dread. For one, he’s watching almost everything that any of them sit down to watch in the living room, no matter how terrible, from first class snooze-fest documentaries to the wickedly addictive, reeking tripe that is reality TV.

He also learned and nearly mastered Durak, making Wanda probably wish she never taught him how to play it in the first place.

“The duraks learn Durak the fastest, you know,” she joked as they played.

“Well, then call me King Durak of Durakistan,” he replied sarcastically.

Which, to his chagrin, Wanda now does.

And today, the day before his next session with Bard, Bucky’s hit a new low: trolling around people’s rooms to start small talk, the last ditch effort of a desperate man who’s scraping the bottom of the barrel for any excuse to not work. He’s currently in the middle of listening to Scott blab about his daughter, which Bucky found charming for the first seven minutes before having serious doubts about his abilities to generate enough tact to extract himself without being offensive.

Somewhere in the midst of a protracted and thoroughly boring description of Cassie’s... something... school performance (maybe?), Bucky does the calculus in his head, because he actually is pretty good at math, thank you very much.

He concludes that this socializing and trivial stuff is all very human and normal and non-reclusive and therefore good. However, this is not helping him get better. Not really. This will not help him sleep without nightmares or function in the most basic ways without being hampered by a relentless current of anxiety. What’s going to help him with all of that is currently sitting in a folder in his dresser, next to a magazine cover photo of Miss Travis County 2014 in a white bikini straddling a velocity red Harley Davidson Street 750.

He presses his small advantage when Scott pauses to try to remember a name. Rather than a lie, Bucky offers his actual reason for leaving, which is met with hearty approval and encouragement. Scott, it turns out, is a man with absolutely no bizarre or disappointing strings attached, a guileless, solidly decent guy all around. A gem – a real gem – as Bucky’s mother would have described him.

Like a dead man walking, Bucky goes back to his room to face the music.

He closes his door most of the way, leaving a small crack to satisfy his de facto supervisors, his new handlers, who are keeping sharp eyes on him as though he could decompensate into a heap of suicidal despair at any moment.

Last week, Bucky requested a small stack of cheap, stitch-bound notebooks from T’Challa’s executive assistant, who takes care of their basic shopping needs since they’re all broke and...
international personae non gratae. He grabs one from his dresser drawer, along with his homework folder, and plants himself on his bed. He draws his knees up and leans back against the headboard, reading through the directions he was given.

He first reviews the list of common stuck points Bard gave him and starts writing down the ones that might apply to him, too. Again, they all seem completely true, hardly things that could be challenged, but he still plays along:

- If I let myself feel sad/angry, I’ll lose control of myself
- I must be on guard at all times
- If I let myself think about what has happened, I will never get it out of my mind
- I am unlovable because of what I’ve done/what was done to me
- Other people should not trust me
- I deserve to have bad things happen to me

Writing down even these few brief sentences opens him up to a swift tide of shame, anxiety, and self-hatred. Memories that he’s successfully distracted into submission surge in on the heels of these emotions, digging their talons into him. His pen starts to shake in his hand. He drops it onto the bedspread and presses his hand to his chest, holding it there, breathing back panic.

As if Bucky had somehow willed it, or as if he’s unwittingly launched some sort of PTSD distress beacon, Steve is suddenly there, popping his head into the room. Bucky wonders if Steve’s just waiting on deck to sweep in and calm his little meltdowns. What a colossally pathetic waste of his time that would be.

“Hey, are you okay?” Steve asks, voice heavy with concern.

“No.”

Steve enters, unbidden. “What can I do to help?”

Bucky knows exactly what Steve can do to help, but the request seems so patently self-centered and infantile that he can barely get the words out.

“Can you just be here while I work on something for therapy?”

“Sure, what are you working on?” Steve says, taking a seat at the foot of the bed.

“I have to write a big thing about how fucked up things are because of everything that I did. I just started thinking about it, and I’m already about to lose it.”

Steve frowns. “That sounds like a really tough assignment. I hope there’s a good reason for it.”

“There is,” Bucky says, trying to remind himself of that as well. “I have to do it. Because it’s important and because I said I would.”

“Do you want me to sit next to you?”

“No,” Bucky replies forcefully. The thought of Steve being that close to him right now hits him like poison in his stomach, twisting through him, ripping up his guts. “I don’t want you to be able to read it.”

“It’s personal. I get it. I’ll sit over here.”

Steve gets up and sits in the chair against the wall, where he sat watching over Bucky when he was
concussed. He doesn’t reach for his phone. He doesn’t go back to his room and grab his tablet, his constant companion, and read from it with that contemplative expression that Bucky finds so ridiculously adorable. Instead, Steve simply sits, looking at Bucky, with a small smile on his lips that conveys support and caring and completely undeserved positive regard.

Having Steve in the room is like putting on a set of noise-cancelling headphones in the middle of a ground-zero artillery barrage. Steve has a preternatural ability to radiate out his own calmness, composure, and strength to everyone around him. That ability kept the Commandos in perfect synchronization, on-mission, moving like an impeccable, elegant, obliteration machine through the European theater. It glued together the Avengers and his SHIELD team for a time, until he retracted from both, throwing everything and everyone around him into the chaotic vacuum he left behind.

Bucky wants Steve right there, just where he is, for the rest of his life. Close enough to give that strength and support, no matter how unjustified, but just a little too far for Bucky to reach out and touch. Which is safe. For everyone.

And, he reasons, completely, cruelly unfair to Steve, who never bargained to be this for another man who could never pay him back and never earn such a gift.

The trembling in Bucky’s hand begins to calm, and he picks up his pen again. He turns the page, then another, just in case he ends up with two lined pages full of stuck points by the end of this shit show. He then takes another deep breath as he mentally braces himself for his real work – putting into words the cost of every moment of horror he was subjected to, every moment of horror he subjected others to. The dead. Their families. Steve. The others.

Bucky reads the impact statement instructions: Please write at least one page on why you think this traumatic event occurred. You are not being asked to write specifics about the traumatic event. Write about what you have been thinking about the cause of the worst event. Also, consider the effects this traumatic event has had on your beliefs about yourself, others, and the world in the following areas: safety, trust, power/control, esteem, and intimacy. Bring this with you to the next session.

The worst event? How could he possibly pick a single worst event? He tries, though. Sort of. His mind scans, glitching now and again, through the highlight reels. Sergei Ivanovich [glitch] … no, he can’t even begin to think about that one. Looking into Howard’s fearful eyes, eyes that recognized him, his name spoken like a question, the confusion there, before he bashed his skull in with his fist. Steve’s face, swollen, bleeding, letting the Winter Soldier continue to break him still, then reaching into the Soldier’s heart, touching that small, near-dead part of him that was still human.

He decides that it’s impossible to pick one thing. Whether it actually is impossible or not is another thing entirely. He opts to consider it all, the whole fucking kit-and-caboodle.

Why everything happened, he writes neatly, deliberately, in small, all-caps letters.

Everything started when I fell off the train, which I wouldn’t have done if I hadn’t picked up Steve’s shield. I picked up the shield because it was there and I was arrogant. I was also off my game that day. My aim was off. I was distracted. I should have shot that Hydra soldier, but I kept missing. I shouldn’t have missed. I usually don’t miss...

-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-

March 2nd, 1944 – The Bavarian Alps, 2 km east of the Austrian border
“If I have to eat another C-ration in my life after this is all over, I swear to God…” Bucky complains, laying out what’s left of his week’s rations on his sleeping bag.

They’re going a hell of a lot quicker than they should, but he’s ravenously hungry and has been for months. He chalks it up to the cold and considers it both good and bad fortune that he can’t seem to turn a single ounce of it into fat.

“Swear to God, what?” Steve asks, packing odds and ends from the last 18 hours into his field pack. Pencils. Notebooks. A map. The extra socks and his Army-issued jacket. The pair mittens gifted from Howard that he splits with Bucky at night to keep at least one of their hands warm.

“I dunno,” Bucky says. “Whatever it is, I swear it won’t be pretty.”

Bucky pulls out his undershirts, mostly dirty and smelling of old sweat, since he’s about out of those too, and wraps the tin cans in them so that they don’t rattle in his pack.


“Do we even know what kind of meat it is?”

“Pig lips and assholes, probably.”

Steve chuckles and pauses, taking a few moments to watch Bucky carefully wrap up his food, his fingers trembling from the cold.

“You ready for today?” Steve asks.

“Of course.”

“We’re gonna get Zola. Then it’s only a matter of time before Schmidt follows.”

Bucky clenches his jaw and his shoulders tense. He can picture Zola’s jowly face with nauseating clarity. Hear his nasal, smug voice, the pattering of his feet as he shuffles around the room. His words, spoken like kindness except that they’re twisted and sick and somehow always promising more suffering and pain, even when such a promise seems impossible to fulfill.

“Yep. Should get some good intel outta him,” Bucky replies, carefully concealing his discomfort.

“Quite a plan too, wouldn’t you say? Dernier really outdid himself.”

“Yeah, I was wondering when I’d get the chance to plunge off one mountain onto a moving train traveling along the razor’s edge of another mountain.”

“We’re gonna have a lot of great stories when we get back home,” Steve says, walking on his knees toward the edge of the tent so that he can roll up his sleeping bag.

“You actually wanna go back home after this? After all this?” Bucky asks, disbelieving.

“You don’t?”

“No way,” Bucky says, shaking his head. “Once my enlistment contract is up and I’m done pulling double-duty, I’m gonna go full time SSR. Assuming they take me.”

Steve smirks. “Of course they will.”
“You’re gonna stay in the SSR too, right? I mean, if you decide not to just go back to Brooklyn like a boring old man.”

“Boring old man?” Steve scoffs, feigning insult. “I dunno. If I was gonna stay in anywhere, I thought it might be the Army.”

“C’mon. *Agents Rogers and Barnes,*” Bucky says dramatically, like he’s narrating the introduction to their own personal action movie. “C’mon! You gotta love the sound of that. Or, wait, would you still be Captain America?”

“I’m not sure. I haven’t thought that far ahead,” Steve says.

Bucky’s expression sobered. “We gotta stick together. We make a good team.”

Steve smiles. “A great team.”

“You and me, kicking asses until we’re both old men. And I mean actually old men, not just young men who act old.” He raises his eyebrows playfully at Steve.

God, Bucky loves that idea. In truth, he can’t envision either of them old, but he lives for the idea of doing what he loves with his favorite person until he’s disabled or dead.

“Whose asses you think we’ll be kicking next?” Steve asks as he crawls back to the center of the tent, back to kneeling in front of Bucky.

“I’d bank on the commies.”

Bucky finishes stuffing the last of his rations in his field pack, then looks back up at Steve.

“Don’t stay in the Army. Those guys had you dancin’ around like a chorus girl instead of being out here where you belong. They didn’t do right by you then, and they won’t do right by you in the future.”

“Then I’ll go where you go,” Steve says seriously. “Anywhere.”

Bucky smiles big, a thousand watts of joy and affection cutting through the world-weariness, scrunching the corners of his blue-grey eyes.

Steve stares at him steadily. Despite the fact that none of them have showered in days, Steve still manages to look incredible. Strong. Clear-headed. Unwavering.

Except now… now that starts to melt into something else. Hesitation. Questioning. It looks strange on him, like if someone tried to put him back into his old wardrobe, his old job, his old life.

Steve then lifts his hand, slowly, tentatively, and touches it to Bucky’s face. First just the very tips of his fingers, running them up his unshaven jaw. Then, emboldened, he cups Bucky’s cheek in his hand. His hand is warm, so warm, and a little rough from fighting and the daily physical labors of Army life.

Bucky’s smile fades. He’s frozen, immobilized by surprise. And he’s afraid. Terrified. Mostly of the intensity of his own desire. Of what would happen if he let himself go. Leaned into that hand, touched Steve back, kissed him, pushed him down, ground his hardness against him, moaned into his mouth…

The image threatens to overwhelm him, and unlike all the other times, he actually has some doubts
about his ability to stop himself.

But like a good soldier, like a good boy, he drives it back with sheer force of will, evoking the voices of his father and Father Connolly and Sister Ignatius and all the people who’ve helped him hate and deny himself over the years.

“What are you doing, Steve?”

Steve’s mouth falls open a little, the look on his face one of hurt, regret, and the beginnings of embarrassment.

“Nothing,” Steve replies, dropping his hand back onto his thigh. “Nothing. You got the tent?”

“Yeah…” Bucky says, miles away now.

Steve crawls out the flap, pulling his gear with him. Bucky continues to kneel there, holding his hand to the cheek that Steve touched. Hating himself even more for being a goddamn coward. For the look on Steve’s face.

For the weakness in his heart.

Bucky looks up from his notebook. His brain fast-forwards through the rest of that day, as he remembers it. Taking down the tent. Hiking up to their vantage point. Bullshitting and joking and reminiscing as if nothing at all had happened. Flying down, full of that wild adrenaline, then frustrated, cornered, scared, resigned, invigorated, overconfident. Then terrified, so, so fucking unbelievably terrified. Then falling, falling, falling…

Remembering it, his heart races.

He wishes now – God, how he wishes – that he hadn’t been so terrified. Not of the fall, because that was true, unparalleled horror.

No. He wishes he hadn’t been afraid of Steve and of himself. He wishes he’d touched him back. Kissed him. Stroked his face and whispered his name like the Lord’s Prayer. Said what he felt in his heart – what he’s always felt – before he died.

Don’t be a little faggot, Jimmy.

Don’t be a little faggot.

Don’t snuggle on your mother’s lap – you’re grown now. And for Chrissakes, don’t baby him, Winnie, he’s seven years old... Get outta the damn kitchen! I told you not to have him in there, Winnie, Jesus Christ, you want him to grow up wearing a goddamn apron? Stop bein’ so damn sweet to your sister. You’re supposed to protect her, not be her little girlfriend…Go outside and get some mud on your face. Jesus fucking Christ. But you better not be out there with that little faggot Rogers boy, or so help me God… He ain’t got any father figure to set him straight. Little weak sissy mamma’s boy. You stay away from him – ya hear? – or he’ll turn you into a little faggot too… Oh, Jim, ya did what? A fight? Well, did you rough ’em up good? That’s my boy! I know your ma’s sore with you, but you did so good, sonny. C’mer, let’s get some ice on that eye.... See, Jim, you gotta protect yourself and the people you love, ’cause there’s no guarantees in this life.... It’s the little weaklings, the little faggots, they’re gonna eat it first. Like little eggs smashed on the goddamn ground, them little baby chicks spillin’ out... dyin’, bleedin’, chokin’, gaspin’ for air in the mud… I’ve seen it, Jimmy… over there... I can’t... you can’t know all that...God, I hope never
know anything like that… Ah, but you’re a good boy, Jim. A good, strong boy. You keep on fightin’, keep that weakness outta your heart and soul, be a good man, a solid man, ‘cause the softness ‘ll kill ya. It’ll break your damn heart, Jimmy, if you let it in… You just gotta be strong, my boy. If you can’t fight, you’ll break, and if you’ve seen a man break, you… Jimmy, you can’t ever un-break him… Jesus Christ, I-I don’t ever want that for you… Listen, I’m rough on ya, I know, I know it. But I just need you to be strong. It’s all I want for you. To survive. And to do that, you gotta cut out all the softness in your heart, Jimmy, because… God damn it… if you leave it in there, it’ll break you… Break you right through…

Bucky closes his eyes. His head falls back against the headboard.

“You okay?” Steve asks.

“I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine.”

They sit in silence for a very long time. Bucky’s mind floats, too exhausted now to hang onto anything serious for more than a few seconds. That he’s only written less than a paragraph of his impact statement is of absolutely no consequence.

His mind trails along, tripping through the old days, the good days just before he got drafted, going to the club and dancing to jaunty little numbers with jaunty girls, looking over at Steve, who, God help him, looks like he’s at a wake, breaking with his girl, siding up to Steve, hooking an arm around his shoulder and pulling him close, all friendly-like, trying his hardest not to smell his hair or touch his lips to the top of his head, and when Steve’s arm comes around him, that’s when Bucky finally lights up all the way, until he thinks he can’t get any brighter –

Bucky starts humming, his eyes still closed, face drawn in a look of pain.

Steve sings along softly.

Don’t sit under that apple tree with anyone else but me
Anyone else but me, anyone else but me
No, no, no.
Don’t sit under that apple tree with anyone else but me
Till I come marching home…

Chapter End Notes

-For any of you psychology nerds (you know who you are!) who are curious about CPT: http://deploymentpsych.org/treatments/cognitive-processing-therapy-cpt

-Don’t Sit Under the Apple Tree (With Anyone Else But Me). I dare you to get it out of your head, once it's there. (BTW, have you seen YouTube? It’s amazing. You should all check it out. So many videos.): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YcyiC79J910

-In Captain America: First Vengeance #7, Bucky says that nobody (and he means nobody) calls him Jimmy, but there's actually a precedent for Becca calling him that in Captain America and Bucky #624, so I figured it could be a family name. And I
readily admit to completely bastardizing George Barnes and turning him into pretty much the opposite person for the purpose of this story (sorry Mr. B).
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Bucky reads his impact statement. Steve betrays Bucky's trust.

Chapter Notes

I’m going to stop apologizing for the length of these chapters. I guess they’re just going to be long! ¯\_(ツ)_/¯

“All right, you got an impact statement for me this week?” Bard asks, eyebrows rising expectantly.

“Yeah,” Bucky says, crossing his right leg over his left at the ankle and opening up the notebook on his lap to the beginning of his impact statement.

“When did you start writing it?”

“Last night.”

Bard chuckles. “Yeah, that sounds pretty typical for this assignment. How many times did you stop?”

“Just once. At the beginning.”

“Just once? Impressive. And what was happening at that time?”

Bucky shrugs. “I got lost in my head.”

Or, rather, he got lost on another wicked trip down memory lane, which left him feeling depressed, regretful, and empty until the trazodone and prazosin sucked him into a deep, dreamless sleep at around 2:30 am. Steve was a trooper about staying with him until he finished his homework, only capitulating to hunger at around 9:45, when he left briefly to fetch them food. And Bucky kept writing, shoving a couple of Clint’s nasty protein bars in his face, grimacing around the chalky texture while he spilled out his shame and failings onto the page in tight, angry lettering.

“That can definitely happen,” Bard says. “Sometimes people struggle with organizing their memories and thoughts, especially in the case of prolonged trauma. But it seems like you managed to iron it out, so let’s just get straight into it.

“My writing isn’t great,” Bucky confesses.

“That’s not an issue at all. It’s the content that counts,” Bard assures him.

“And it’s pretty long. I couldn’t come up with just one trauma to write about. So I just wrote about everything.”
“Well, just read what you wrote. We’ll talk about narrowing down a single trauma later. Go ahead.”

Bucky sighs as his eyes skim over the first page. He’s fully cognizant – painfully so – of the depth of what he’s about to share with Bard. For someone who’s prided himself on a lifetime of keeping others at a distance, typically without them even knowing it, the level of exposure is almost intolerable.

But still, he bears it. He breathes, and then he reads:

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Why everything happened: Everything started when I fell off the train, which I wouldn’t have done if I hadn’t picked up Steve’s shield. I picked up the shield because it was there and I was arrogant. I was also off my game that day. My aim was off. I was distracted. I should have shot that Hydra soldier, but I kept missing. I shouldn’t have missed. If I hadn’t missed, he’d be dead. If I hadn’t picked up the shield, I’d be dead. So either way, it was my own fault that I ended up blown out that door. And because I was blown out the door, Hydra was able to find me and turn me into the Winter Soldier.

When Hydra first pulled me out of the snow, I didn’t remember who I was. I must have hit my head on the way down. I still don’t know how my arm got ripped off, but that happened on the way down, too. When I first woke up, I tried to fight. I didn’t tell them shit, not that I had anything to tell them. But I did fight them.

But after a while, I stopped fighting them. After a while, I went along with everything. I went on missions. I did what I was told. I trusted my handlers. I wanted to kill my targets. You have to be motivated to do things like that, and I was. There were some moments where not everything was clear, when I wasn’t completely sure that Hydra and the Soviet Union were really good or that my missions made sense. But I didn’t try to run or fight or resist.

So, really, I’m responsible for everything that happened after each one of those moments of doubt or clarity. Therefore, I’m to blame for all of the people I killed. I didn’t try to stop Hydra when I could. I let them fuck my head and turn me into a murderer of the innocent. The worst part is that it wasn’t even that hard to turn me. I was savage before Hydra. They just put a guidance chip in me. They harnessed the evil that I already had inside.

In terms of safety, there’s no way to be safe. When you get your mind fucked, when someone breaks into you like that, you learn that there’s really no protection from anything. Nowhere is safe. Lots of people want me dead. The authorities. The families and friends of the people I murdered. I know T’Challa thinks we’re all safe here, but I don’t think we are. I feel unsafe all the time. My body is always ready to fight, but no fight ever happens. Not yet. But I can’t let my guard down, because everything could break open at any minute, and as messed up as my life is, as worthless as I am to myself, other people, and the world, I still feel like I need to keep myself alive. And I know what I’m capable of, so I’m pretty sure I’d destroy whoever I needed to destroy to keep my piece of shit self walking the Earth for another day.

I trust some people. I probably shouldn’t, but I do. I trust Steve and Sam and you. I trust the other people I live with. Mostly because Steve trusts them, and he doesn’t give his trust lightly. But I definitely do not trust myself. Even though I don’t think I have any more secret access codes in my head waiting to be exploited, I know how dangerous I am. I’m worried that the others don’t know how dangerous I am, how brutal I can be. They don’t seem to know that I’m a feral animal pretending to be domesticated. All it’ll take is a little snap, and I’ll be wild. I don’t know what that would look like, but I’ve hurt people I care about before, and I know I could easily do it again.
Control goes along with trust and safety. If you know the world isn’t safe and you don’t trust yourself, everything feels out of control. I always feel like I’m out of control – my mind, my body, my thoughts, my emotions. Maybe I look like I’m controlled from the outside. Maybe sometimes I can keep myself from going completely crazy through breathing or the other tools I learned. But I feel like just below the surface, I’m a mess of chaos that’s just waiting to break out. I always feel like I just barely have control of myself, especially my emotions. I’m terrified of losing control of them, because if I lose control, if I let myself feel too much, all that chaos will come out and I’ll never be able to reign it in again.

Esteem? I guess self esteem? What the fuck is that? Sometimes I feel like I have a little bit, like when I feel like I have control over my emotions. But then something will happen, like I’ll remember something I did, and that little bit of self esteem burns away in an instant. I’m ashamed of myself all the time. For the things I did. For the things I let happen. For the things that Hydra did to me that I didn’t stop. I feel ashamed about the things I think and the things I want from others. Support. Love. Closeness. I don’t deserve any of that, not when I’ve left so many widows and widowers and children without their parents. I can’t even imagine the second and third order effects of those deaths – the people who died or suffered because I killed certain people. If I think about that, I can’t even stand it. The pain is overwhelming. It makes me wish I was dead (don’t worry, I’m not going to kill myself, so don’t get your beard in a knot). I just don’t want to have to feel this pain, and I don’t know how to make it end. I guess that’s why I’m writing this, huh?

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Bucky stops and clears his throat before proceeding.

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I don’t deserve to be happy or loved or be special to somebody. I can’t imagine anyone wanting to be with me in any kind of intimate way – not anyone who knows what I really am. (I don’t know if intimacy here means emotional intimacy or sex or what.) In terms of having any sort of physical relationships, I don’t think I could get close like that to anyone anymore, because all I would think about is how fucked up and awful I am, and I’d just kill the mood. I don’t deserve to enjoy myself like that anyway – or make anyone else feel good. Because that would be a betrayal. They’d think I was one thing when I’m really another, maybe think I’m desirable, that I’m a man, when I’m really a monster. I wouldn’t want to hurt anyone like that. I wouldn’t want anyone to feel shame just for being with me.

In terms of other kinds of intimacy, I know that if people saw just below the surface, if they could see into that chaos or into my past, they’d run as far away as they could from me. I think the only reason Steve is so hell bent on being close to me is because of old habits. He was friends with Bucky Barnes, and he actually thinks that I’m him. I feel like a fraud, like I should tell him that he’s got it all wrong, a case of mistaken identity, but I need him and I’m too selfish to tell him that he’s got the wrong guy. He’ll figure it out someday, and he’ll back off, and then I’ll really be alone. And it’ll be exactly what I deserve. I’m not worried about him though, because he has Sam, who’s replaced me anyway. Or, I guess I should say, he replaced Bucky Barnes. He’s everything Bucky Barnes used to be and better.

I don’t really know who I am. I do know that James Buchanan Barnes is dead. He’s a pile of bones at the bottom of a ravine. He’s a side bar in some other guy’s museum exhibit that might not even exist anymore. James Barnes would puke if he could see what he became. His parents and sister and friends would cry.

I don’t know what’s left over now, but I know it’s not good. And I don’t think it can ever be good.
Bucky shuts the notebook harder than he intended. He clenches his jaw, choking back what could only be described as bitterness. Bitterness and defeat.

He glances up at Bard, checking the other man’s face for his reaction. Bucky finds him nodding slowly, watching Bucky just as intently as Bucky is watching him.

“That’s some very powerful stuff,” Bard says. “How did it feel to read it?”

“I didn’t really feel anything,” Bucky says, mostly – but not entirely – truthfully.

“Yeah, you read it like a police report. Very numbed out. That’s okay for right now, but later it won’t be.”

Bucky feels a small amount of relief at Bard’s reaction. He’s not sure what he was expecting. Maybe some shock, disgust, or pity, some indication of negative judgment. Some reflection of the things he feels about himself. But Bucky finds none of that written on Bard’s face. It hits home that this is all part of a professional exchange of services. That this is Bard’s job. That this is treatment. In this regard, Bard has proven himself to be exactly the person Bucky hoped he would be.

“How did you feel when I read it?” Bucky asks.

“That’s an interesting question. Not one I get asked very often.”

“I want to know.”

Bard takes a moment to consider. “Well, I feel sad that you see yourself that way. But I also feel really hopeful, because it sounds like you let yourself be very honest when you wrote this. There are so many stuck points in there that we can work through because you did such a good job.”

“Good job, huh?”

“Absolutely. One stuck point I want you to write down right away is ‘I am not a victim.’ You told me that during our first session, and I think it’s one of your biggest stuck points. You didn’t explicitly say it in your impact statement, but it’s there in other ways.”

Bucky frowns. “I don’t wanna write that one down.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t think it’s a stuck point. I think it’s the truth.”

“It’s a sweeping, all-or-nothing statement that’s getting in the way of your quality of life. That’s the definition of a stuck point.”

Bucky’s jaw works from side to side a couple of times as he tries to figure out how his not being a victim is a) not true and b) getting in the way of his ‘quality of life,’ as if he deserves such a thing.

“How’s it getting in the way?” he asks.

“Not being a victim means that you were responsible for everything that happened. It means that you consented to everything that happened and everything happened of your own volition. Believing that makes you feel terrible, because you’re shouldering all the blame. And when you feel terrible about yourself, you can’t have satisfying relationships, among other things” Bard explains.
“But I am to blame. I deserve to feel terrible.”

“‘I deserve to feel terrible’ is another stuck point. Write it down.”

Bucky doesn’t move.

“Go on, write it. And also ‘I am to blame for what happened.’”

Reluctantly, Bucky opens up the first page of his notebook and writes the two stuck points.

“Listen, Bucky, sometimes even if you think something’s not a stuck point because you believe it so strongly, you just have to write it down and try to have an attitude of curiosity about it. We don’t have to necessarily destroy every single stuck point. These are things you really believe. I get that. Instead, let’s do some hypothesis testing here. Let’s try to keep an open mind about them. Maybe they’re true, but maybe they’re not.”

Bucky taps the end of his pen against the edge of his notebook nervously. “I guess we could do that.”

Bard smiles. “This work takes real courage. Courage isn’t about sucking it up. Courage is about doing something despite the fact that it’s terrifying, whether it’s combat or psychotherapy. I’m asking you to try to poke holes in some of your most deeply held beliefs, which is really tough work. So write down ‘I am not a victim.’”

Bucky would rather walk blindly and poorly armed into a hundred ambushes than do what he’s doing now. He finds the combat/therapy comparison actually laughable, in terms of difficulty.

He writes down the fucking stuck point.

“Okay,” Bard says, “so let’s review the stuck point list you already started, then we’ll go through your impact statement paragraph by paragraph and write down some things that might also be stuck – ”

“Before we do that, I have to say something,” Bucky blurts out.

“Sure.”

He waffles now, unprepared for the conversation to come and baffled at his impulse to bring it up in the first place.

“A lie by omission is still a lie, right?” Bucky asks rhetorically, repeating his chiding of Steve a couple of weeks ago.

“Some would say, yeah.”

“I haven’t been telling you about the stuff going on with Steve.”

“Stuff?” Bard says, a mixture of curiosity and amusement on his face. “What kind of stuff?”

Bucky shifts uncomfortably in his chair. “There’s been lot of… I guess… weirdness between us.”

“Care to be more specific?”

No, no, no. He would not care to. But he realizes that ‘stuff’ is woefully nonspecific and, damn it, he actually gives a shit about this ‘stuff’ that’s going down between him and Steve. So he eats his discomfort and lets fly what comes to mind.
“It’s like I need him to be close to me all the time, but it has to be an arm’s length away. No more, no less.”

“Why do you need him close?” Bard asks.

“He’s my friend,” Bucky states, as if that should be completely self-explanatory.

“Well, obviously we want our friends close. Why do you need him close?”

Why, indeed. Bucky has been asking himself that question for weeks. Months. Ever since he smashed his face on the floor after Scott Sputnik’d him, he’s been starving for Steve. Starving and simultaneously punching himself in the gut for being hungry for anything at all, even as the hunger pangs grow more desperate and difficult to beat quiet.

“He calms me down,” Bucky states, sticking to the physiological facts and keeping a wide berth from the jumbled mess of emotions he’s too scared to untangle. “I feel like I can kind of relax a little bit around him. But not when he gets too close.”

“What happens then?”

“I get overwhelmed with this…” Bucky pauses, motioning around his stomach with his hand. “I can’t describe it. It’s a very uncomfortable, visceral feeling.”

“What’s the emotion?” Bard asks. Bucky half expects him to whip out a feelings wheel. Thankfully, he doesn’t.

“I don’t know. It feels like if he gets too close, I’m gonna implode, like there’s a black hole in my stomach that’s gonna to suck me into nothing.”

Bard lets out a small *hm* of curiosity. “Is it a bad emotion?”

“No, I don’t think so.” Bucky’s good at the bad emotions. Fear. Anger. Shame. And this is none of those.

“So a good one?”

“I don’t know.”

“So when gets close to you, you feel overwhelmed with a not-negative emotion that makes you want to implode,” Bard states with the expansive cadence one would use when trying to engage a room full of small children. “What does that sound like to you?”

For a second, Bard looks at Bucky like he is a small child, a look Bucky imagines he might wear with his daughters. One that conveys limitless patience but also some minor amazement at the differential in cognitive sophistication between an adult and a young kid.

“I don’t know,” Bucky says.

Bard raises one eyebrow. “Really? Are you sure?”

Well, of course Bucky knows. But saying it – even thinking it clearly – could have the undesirable effect of making it real. And Bucky can’t afford to open himself up to the deadliest of emotions, where Steve is concerned: hope. Because doing that, opening himself up, tricking himself into believing that his feelings might be okay and that Steve might feel the same, leaves him susceptible to the heart-destroying disappointment of Steve walking away from him when the jig
inevitably is up. When Steve finally lifts his veil of self-imposed denial and figures Bucky out.

“Next time you’re with Steve, let yourself feel that emotion and try to figure out what it is. Don’t run away from it, don’t shove it away. Try to be open about it. See what’s there. Do that for homework, in addition to your CPT homework, which is a doozy.”

“God, worse than this?” Bucky grumbles in disbelief.

“Yeah, the next assignment is the one where people tend to drop out of this treatment. The ones that do drop out. And most don’t drop out, so don’t do it!” Bard emphasizes, leaning forward for effect. “You’re going to pick one of your traumas and write about it from start to finish. I know you’ve experienced a lot of terrible things, but I want you to focus on the worst one.”

“How can I even pick the worst one?”

“I usually have people pick the one that they have the strongest negative reaction to. One where when you try to remember it, you have an especially big emotional or physiological response. Or maybe the one you have the most nightmares about. Basically, write about the one that you’d least like to write about because it bothers you so much. Do you have one like that?”

A sick feeling washes over Bucky.

“Yeah.”

“Okay, so write about that event from start to finish, like a story. And here’s the most important part: I want you to include things you were thinking and feeling at that time, too. Not just the narrative about the event. I’ll have you read it aloud next session. We’ll go through it, pick some more stuck points out of it, and see what’s there for you emotionally.”

“This sucks.”

“Sure does!” Bard says with a wide smile. “And you’re doing an awesome job, by the way. Now, let’s see how many stuck points we can tease out of all this.”

By the time Bucky and Bard finished session, they identified a whopping 25 stuck points. Most of them came from his impact statement, but a few cropped up as Bucky was trying to weakly defend himself from Bard’s onslaught of write that down, that’s a stuck point, there’s another one, write that down, hey, I mean it, write that down...

He’s now in full-on compartmentalization mode. And yes, it’s probably maladaptive. But he’s felt quite enough for today, despite Bard’s contrary assertions. Physically, he’s keyed up. Tense and unsettled. He’d do anything to wail mercilessly on a punching bag for a few hours, but Dr. Kalu forbade him to do anything except pure cardio until next week. No hard jostling, no lifting, no krav maga, no fun. Can’t have his brain extruding out of his skull, now can he?

So he’ll settle for cardio, even though he hates it. Anything to burn through the mental and physical gunk. He first makes a quick detour to Steve’s room, paying the price for his own poor planning in the wardrobe purchasing department.

Bucky leans his head in Steve’s doorway and sees him planked on the floor doing pushups. Bucky watches him. His perfect form. The way his triceps pop. The intensity of his expression, as if the fate of the world depends on him pressing his body weight up from the floor repeatedly.
Steve then looks up and, seeing Bucky, springs gracefully to his feet.

“Hey! How was therapy?” Steve asks.

“Shitty.”

“Well, I guess that’s to be expected, right?”

“That’s what they keep telling me,” Bucky says, his mouth curling up in a lazy half-smile. “Can I borrow some workout clothes? I forgot to order some, and I’m gonna crawl out of my skin if I don’t burn off some energy.”

“Sure,” Steve replies, walking to his dresser and opening the second drawer down. “What do you want?”

“I’m gonna run, so a t-shirt. And shorts, if you have them.” Bucky hesitates, then asks, “You wanna come with?”

“I’d love to, but I have to take care of some things.” Steve tosses Bucky a navy blue moisture-wicking shirt and diminutively sized olive drab running shorts.

Bucky checks the tag on the shirt. “Medium? Really?”

Steve flashes him a cheeky smile.

“And where’d you get these things?” Bucky complains, holding up the shorts. “The Marine Corps surplus store? These’ll barely cover my ass.”

“I can take ’em back, if you don’t want ’em.”

Bucky pulls the garments against his chest possessively and turns to leave. He thanks Steve with a small wave and goes to his room to change.

After changing and catching himself in the mirror in his bedroom, he imagines the getup would look better on Steve. The shorts actually do cover his ass, with a bit of extra length to spare. Although he’s no Captain America, he objectively surmises that he doesn’t look half terrible himself. Except for the arm, which, even after all these years, he still views as aesthetically grotesque.

He turns to the left and looks into his reflection, obscuring most of the metal with his body. He almost looks human, albeit a heavily used one. He takes a quick tally of visible scars. The arch on his head that’s not yet been completely swallowed up by his fast-growing hair. The long, thin line that skirts the back of his arm where he broke a high fall with his elbow as a kid. The flecked spray of small white scars on his thigh from shrapnel. The raised ridge on his calf where a bullet traveled.

Almost human. But not quite.

But enough of that for one morning. He locks it down, determined to give himself at least one hour to not feel like shit about himself. He’ll have plenty of time for that later.

He walks back to Steve’s room, shoes in hand, barefoot, and stands in his doorway.

“And I need socks,” Bucky says, looking down at his feet.

“Jeez, Buck, you want my skivvies, too?” Steve teases, digging through his dresser again and tossing him a pair of white ankle socks.
“Nah, I’ll let you hang onto those.”

Bucky puts on the socks and shoes while standing in the doorway. He can feel Steve’s eyes on him, and he’s thankful for his impeccable balance.

“How long you think you’ll be gone?” Steve asks

“I’m gonna try for 90 minutes.”

“Sounds good. Have a good run.”

Bucky waves again and heads down to the gym. There’s nobody around, which he’s relieved about. After spending the past week hyper-socializing in the service of his homework avoidance, he’d welcome a complementary week’s worth of silence.

He can’t even remember the last time he deliberately exercised his body. Some time in Romania. He used to run at night to keep up his endurance and do calisthenics in his apartment, but there wasn’t much else that he could do without drawing attention to himself. His arm was far too conspicuous to train anywhere even semi-public, as was his unusual strength.

Fighting in Romania, Germany, and then in Siberia, he could clearly see the deterioration in his overall fitness and skill level. His movements were crude. Effective, in terms of ensuring his survival, but lacking in his old speed, dexterity, economy, and finesse. Although he barely misses any part of his life with Hydra, he certainly does miss his peak physical prowess.

He settles on a treadmill and walks a few minutes to warm himself up. He then cranks it up to 10 miles per hour and runs, burning tension, pent-up frustration, and all the suck from therapy like fuel. As he runs, his head churns through the sludge of his session today. Through his impact statement and 25 stuck points, which now color the first page and a half of his notebook black. A solid wall of stuckness.

Bucky is spent after only an hour, which is a pathetically low threshold for exhaustion compared to what he was clocking in Romania. But still, he feels good, covered in sweat and pleasantly buzzed from endorphins. He’s also gloriously free from the continuous background radiation of anxiety and self-defeating thoughts, which, if Bard is to be believed, is how he would have to characterize a vast majority of his thinking.

He dries his face and head with one of the many crisp, white towels provided and stretches. On his way out, he chances a few satisfying swings at one of the heavy bags, slugging it as hard as he can with his left hand before heading back to his room. The bag swings violently in his wake.

Bucky returns to the living quarters and promptly freezes in the hallway. One dubious gift his PTSD has given him is an even more neurotic level of attention to environmental detail, so he immediately notices the half-inch gap between the door and its frame that most certainly was not there when he left. His senses heighten. He becomes acutely attuned to the one weapon he has and runs through a quick functions check. Five-fingers-fist-wrist-elbow. Five-fingers-fist-wrist-elbow. He takes a defensive stance and presses his right hand against the door, the well-oiled hinges silent as he slowly pushes it open.

Standing there next to his open dresser is Steve, who’s staring into space. With Bucky’s therapy notebook open in his hand.

“What are you doing?”

Steve turns around. His eyes are wide with surprise. They’re also red.
Bucky closes the distance between them swiftly, rips the notebook from Steve’s hand, and tosses it to the floor. It slides across the hard wood and lands, half-open, pages crumpled, against the wall.

“I said, what the fuck are you doing? Are you reading all my shit for therapy?!”

“I’m sorry,” Steve says, his features plaintive and remorseful. “I had to know – ”

“The hell you did!” Bucky yells. “That was private! You said so yourself. You acted like you understood what that meant.”

Deadly adrenaline surges through him. And anger – white hot, blinding fury. But underneath that, fuelling all that anger, pushing it to the surface like magma out of a vent, is shame. Shame because that impact statement is the distillation of his vulnerabilities and insecurities, the home truths of his life as the Winter Soldier, his compliance, his non-resistance, and his culpability, all in one nauseating package. Moreover, he’s intensely afraid of what Steve will think of him now that he’s seen it. There’s also hurt there, because Bucky expected better from Steve. So much better.

“Get the fuck out of my room,” Bucky demands, voice chilled to a threatening sub-zero. “Now.”

“No.”

“No?”

Bucky then sees Steve look at something over his shoulder. Bucky turns his head around and sees Sam, Wanda, Clint, and Scott standing in the hallway right outside his room. Their expressions are equal parts fascinated and profoundly troubled, as if watching a ten-car pile up transpiring in super slow motion.

“Hey, man,” Sam says, raising his palms in a gesture of peace, “take it – ”

Bucky delivers a hard back kick, driving his foot into the door, which slams so hard that it shakes the walls. His glare then locks back on Steve, who looks to be a breath away from another heartfelt but pointless apology.

“Did you read the part in there about trust?” Bucky asks. “How I trust you? Was I wrong to do that? You lie to me now. You sneak into my room and invade my privacy – ”

“It was absolutely the wrong thing for me to do,” Steve says. “I’m so – ”

“Those are my private thoughts, Steve! That’s the stuff I don’t want anyone to know – especially you. That was for me and for Bard. That was not for you,” Bucky says, pressing the tip of his metal index finger hard against Steve’s sternum.

Steve pauses, rallying, reigning in his frayed edges, steeling himself against Bucky’s furious onslaught. “Do you really think all those things?” he finally asks.

Bucky scowls. “Of course I do! Why would I make that up? Why would I own up to all that shit if it wasn’t true?”

“Then you honestly think I’m so naïve, that I’m so blind and stupid, that I can’t see you for who you are? That I’m gonna find out who you really are and run away?” Steve asks.

“You don’t know shit about what I am. And you don’t know shit about what I’ve done.”

“Then tell me – ”
“Did you read the last part?” Bucky interrupts. “Or just the parts you wanted to read?”

“About Bucky Barnes being dead?”

“Yeah. You say you wanna know who I am? You’re deluded,” Bucky says, sharply annunciating that last word, spitting it forth like venom. “You just want him back. You think if I talk, if I tell you about what happened, how I feel, all my shame and my sadness and my rage, all the fucking terrible, disgusting things I’ve done… If I do all that, you actually think you’re gonna find him there, still breathing, buried alive underneath a pile of torture and dead bodies. But you won’t. You won’t find him there. Because he’s gone.”


“Oh, really?” Bucky scoffs. “And why is that?”

Steve walks over to where Bucky’s notebook lies on the floor. He picks it up, smooths the pages out, closes the notebook, and walks back to Bucky.

“These are you thoughts, right? The truth? Your truth?” Steve says, holding up the notebook. “I know Bucky Barnes is still alive, and I know that you’re him, because everything in here is exactly what Bucky Barnes would write. If you weren’t Bucky Barnes, you wouldn’t be suffering like this. Monsters don’t suffer. They don’t want to blow off their heads because their hearts hurt too much. They don’t feel shame and self-hatred and sadness for the things they do. People do. You do.”

Bucky has not considered this. Ever. Steve’s unshaking confidence in it, his bullheaded insistence of its truth, gives him pause. The idea registers incompletely, bouncing around the parts of his prefrontal cortex that deal in logic and high abstraction, a dozen levels removed from his raw internal experience. But there, in that space, this fledgling notion does not die.

Steve reaches over sets the notebook on Bucky’s dresser.

“I know exactly who you are,” Steve continues. “You’re my best and oldest friend. You’re the person I care about more than anyone else.” His warm expression intensifies. “So stop pushing me away. Better yet, stop drawing me in and pushing me away, and then drawing me in just to push me away again. It’s making me crazy.”

He’s right, of course. Bucky’s not completely blind to his own ambivalence and its consequences. The dropping of his guard. The flickering emergence of reckless honesty. His frantic attempts to recoup his lost control. Push/pull. Fuck off/love me. The unfairness to Steve, who’s caught in this tumultuous crosswind, is staggering.

It seems right to choose only one, doesn’t it? Isn’t that the right thing to do? Wouldn’t that be a mercy?

“Then just go,” Bucky says, expression tired and resigned. He presses his hands to Steve’s chest, slowly pushing him back toward the door. “Go. I won’t dick you around anymore.”

Steve lets Bucky push him until his back is flat against the door.

“I told you I’m not leaving,” Steve says.

“Why are you being like this?” Bucky asks between clenched teeth, dropping his arms to the side and closing his hands into tight fists.

“I’m sorry. I really am. I was wrong,” Steve says, laying his hands on Bucky’s shoulders. His brow
furrows deeply. “I just want to understand you again. I want to know what you’re going through. And I know that’s no excuse for what I did. But I feel like you’re always a hundred miles away, even when we’re talking in the same room together. Even right now. You still won’t let me in, and I can’t stand it anymore.”

“Why?” Bucky repeats.

“You really don’t know?” Steve asks softly.

His words, spoken with deepest sincerity, fall on Bucky like a caustic mist, burning through his rage, searing away his resolve layer by layer. And it hurts. Worse than all the bullets and shrapnel. Worse than the stark landscape of his loneliness.

Because he is a hundred miles away. From peace. From goodness. From everyone. And here’s Steve Rogers, that stubborn kid who never did know when to quit, a nomad in his own right, with the audacity to think that he can save Bucky. Bring him into the light. Make him good again through his own goodness and through compassion. What stupidity, Bucky thinks. What noble, beautiful stupidity.

Bucky bows his head.

“Don’t say that,” Bucky says under his breath.

“Why?”

“Because I might let myself believe it.”

Because he wants to more than anything else.

“It’s okay, Bucky. You can believe it.”

Steve then slowly slides his hands up from Bucky’s shoulders and up his neck, the tips of his fingers dragging over the short hair at his nape and back of his head. He holds Bucky’s head gently, lifting it, making fleeting eye contact until Bucky breaks it by directing his gaze to the floor.

“But you don’t…” Bucky tries to say, words stifled by the tightness in his throat. “You have no idea, Steve.”

“You can tell me. You can tell me anything, and I promise it won’t change the way I feel.”

“You don’t know that. You can’t promise that,” Bucky says firmly, grabbing onto Steve’s forearms. He’s not sure if he’s grasping onto them to hold them in place and keep Steve here or if he wants to throw those arms down and toss Steve out of his room.

“Try me,” Steve says, his thumb lightly grazing Bucky’s cheekbone. “Just try me.”

Bucky’s still angry. Still hurt. He’s now also embarrassed for yelling and probably scaring the shit out of the others.

But that other feeling is also there, that black hole, that sensation that he’s going to fall apart right here in Steve’s hands. There’s no mistaking what it is. Not anymore. And maybe he’s already starting falling apart, right in this moment. Because he feels his heart breaking open, the weakness seeping in, pushing the cracks wider with the force of three conscious decades of self-denial. And for the first time, despite how terrifying the sensation is, he doesn’t try to stop it.
“You’re not gonna to let this go, are you?” Bucky says, taking a deep, hitching breath, moving his hands to Steve’s wrists. He feels Steve’s pulse beneath his right thumb.

“Not a chance.”

“I’m really pissed at you.”

“I know. I deserve it.”


“I won’t. I promise. Can you forgive me?”

Bucky looks at Steve’s face. The naked earnestness there. There’s no way Bucky could deny him, despite the betrayal.

“I forgive you.” Slowly, tentatively, Bucky moves his hands to rest on top of Steve’s, which are still gently holding his head. He feels himself flush, because it’s the first time he’s ever touched Steve without berating or strictly monitoring himself, without reminding himself that it’s wrong to do it and that it’s even worse to enjoy it.

“If you really want, I can talk to you about some of those things,” Bucky says, “but not all of them. So don’t ever ask me to.”

Steve nods once. “I won’t.”

“But now you gotta go,” Bucky tells Steve, grasping his hands and lowering them. He gives them a quick squeeze before letting them go. “I’m gross and I need a shower.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll see you at dinner. Maybe after, we can watch something. Or something. I don’t know.” Bucky shakes his head. “I’m bad at this.”

“Bad at what?” Steve asks.

“I don’t know. Whatever this is.”

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Bucky deals with the aftermath of Steve’s betrayal.

Chapter Notes

And now a break from our usual programming for a “mini” update.

It’s Monday afternoon. Bucky’s in his room with the door closed, lying flat on his bed, turning his prepaid TracFone in his hands. He’s been like this for nearly an hour, wondering exactly what to say and how to say it. Hell, he’s not even sure exactly how he feels about it, let alone how to frame it. He’s tried to sort it all out, ever since the incident on Friday. Over and over the conversation has played in his head. Over and over he’s seen Steve’s face, felt his own blistering rage, his pain, his fragility, the black hole, the light. He’s rotated the conversation in his mind like a Rubik’s cube, trying to arrange it into a shape that’ll settle and gel. But it all keeps rattling around, disorganized, and the more he thinks about it, the more muddled it gets.

He goes to his contacts and selects one of the two numbers he has stored, marked with the initials JB. When he put the number in a couple months ago, their shared initials didn’t even register. Bucky considers it a modest mark of progress that he now appreciates the similarity.

“Just fucking do it,” he mumbles to himself. And after one last stutter of hesitation, he presses the call button.

“This is Jason,” a familiar voice on the other end says.

“Dr. Bard? It’s Bucky.”

“Oh, hey!” Bard exclaims. “Is everything okay?”

“ Mostly. You said I could call you between sessions if something came up.”

“Of course! I just never thought you’d actually call, that’s all. That’s why I sound surprised.”

“Is this an okay time? It’s not an emergency. I’m not suicidal or anything.”

“This is a great time. What’s up?”

Bucky puts his left hand on his diaphragm and takes a few deep breaths, like Bard taught him to do. There’s something even more familiar there, from long before he started therapy. When he learned to control and exploit the hills and troughs of deep breath, squeezing the trigger of his rifle at the apex of peak or valley for a sure, clean shot.

“Something big happened with Steve, and I don’t know what to do about it,” he finally says.
He proceeds to tell Bard what happened after their last session. He tries to be as objective as he can, leaving nothing out except for the touching and Steve’s implications about his feelings. He trusts Bard, now more than anyone else, but something still keeps him from complete honesty. Of course, he can’t think Bard’s so dense that he doesn’t already know. He knows. He has to.

“That’s a huge betrayal,” Bard tells him after he’s finished, his voice charged with energy. “I’m angry just hearing you talk about it. If my best friend, meaning my husband, did something like that, I would’ve let him have it. And I sure wouldn’t have forgiven him five minutes later.”

“Yeah, I know. I’ve been thinking about that a lot. It really bothers me,” Bucky says.

“It makes a lot of sense why it’d still bother you,” Bard affirms. “That’s a good clue that you probably didn’t actually forgive him. Why do you think you told him that you did?”

“I don’t know.”

“No, don’t give me that ‘I don’t know’ stuff. We’re trying to move past that, aren’t we? What was going on emotionally? What were you thinking?”

Bucky sighs and presses his palm to his forehead. It still pisses him off a little when Bard pushes him like this, but he’s seen it work enough that he knows it’ll probably lead somewhere productive.

“I was feeling a lot of things. I was furious at first. Ashamed. Afraid. But then I was also relieved, because he read my impact statement and didn’t reject me like I thought he would. He was really sorry, and I know he did it because he cares about me. He has very strong feelings for me, and he made that obvious.”

Bucky thinks that was the worst of it. Or the best of it, depending on the angle of viewing. He’s still reeling from Steve’s admission of his feelings. His bold reassurances that nothing will change those feelings. His hands…

There’s a loaded pause on the other end of the line before Bard responds.

“Okay, I want to reflect back what you’re saying, so you can hear what I’m hearing. What I’m hearing is ‘It’s okay for my best friend to psychologically violate me because he cares about me so much. I should just be thankful that he doesn’t hate me.’ How does that sound to you?”

“Bad.” So bad that Bucky wonders how the hell he couldn’t see it like that in the first place. At least now it makes more sense why he’s still upset about it.

“Yeah, it’s bad,” Bard says frankly. “I think your initial reaction was spot on. But that other stuff, I think a lot of that is stuck points playing out. Look at your stuck point list and tell me which ones you think apply. Do you have it in front of you?”

“Hold on. Let me get it.”

Bucky rolls over and snags his notebook off his nightstand, then repositions himself on his stomach, propped up on his elbows.


“That’s great! On both counts. I was gonna eventually encourage you to do your homework by yourself. Having him there is like the equivalent of a security blanket. I knew you could do it alone, even if you didn’t know that.”
Bucky catches himself smiling a little as he searches his stuck point list. “It’s not exactly the same, but maybe ‘I deserve bad things to happen to me’ would work here.”

“Definitely. That implies that you deserve to have your privacy violated, right? Also maybe ‘I’m a monster,’ because monsters should be grateful to have anyone treat them even a little bit well.”

“We should talk about that next session. The monster one,” Bucky says. He thinks back to what Steve told him about monsters not feeling pain for what they do, which is another phantom from that conversation that keeps coming back to trouble him.

“Jeez, on Friday you fought me tooth and nail to even write these down. Now you’re asking if we can talk about them.”

Bucky frowns. “I don’t like that my thinking’s so fucked up. It’s like everyone keeps trying to tell me the sky’s blue, but all I see is green. I hate it. I don’t understand how you could see what happened with Steve so clearly and I couldn’t.”

Bard takes an audible breath. “Well, a lot of people with complex PTSD don’t have good personal boundaries, because the nature of their trauma disrupts their understanding of what healthy relationships are. They push people too far away or they let people in too close. You do a bit of both. You push almost everyone away, but when you decide to bring someone in, they get to do whatever they want because you don’t think you deserve anything better. Maybe because you think you’re not worthy of respect,” Bard tells him.

Does Steve respect him? He’s never even considered the question. Mutual respect was implied before Hydra, but now… Now what is there for Steve to respect? Except maybe in principle, because his personhood somehow imbues him with some basic worth, which Bucky finds debatable.

Bard continues. “I want to clarify that I’m not trying to poison you against Steve or paint him as a bad guy. I don’t doubt that he thinks he had good motives, and I don’t doubt that he cares about you an awful lot. He obviously does. But it’s totally appropriate to still be hurt by what he did.”

Bucky closes his notebook and sets it back on the nightstand. He rolls over onto his side and draws his legs up.

“I don’t know what to do now,” he says quietly. “I don’t know how to make this better.”

“Friendships can’t be healthy without a foundation of honesty and trust. I think it’d be helpful to start by letting him know how much you’re still bothered by what he did.”

“I just don’t want to mess things up. He’s a really good person and a really good friend. He just made a mistake. And things are going pretty well between us, in general.”

Bucky wishes he could commit the full force of his anger to Steve. Wishes he could hate him – or even just dislike him. Wishes he could push him aside and never think about him again – or hell, he’d even settle for a single day of not thinking about him. He wishes he could shove his feelings for Steve back into the box from whence they crawled, as if they could actually be contained there. If he could do any of these things, this would all be so much easier.

But he can’t, and he’s not completely sure he’d actually want to, even if he could. It dawns heavily on him that this wouldn’t hurt if he didn’t care so much about Steve, if he didn’t want his esteem, friendship, and closeness. His love. Right now, locking Steve out or letting him in unchecked would be the bad-boundaries-and-too-many-Hydra-mind-fucks way to deal with things.
Black and white won’t cut it anymore. Bad boundaries won’t cut it anymore. For all the distance he’s come, Bucky’s sure as hell not going to start taking any steps back now. The only way out is through. The only way out is different. Better. No matter how difficult.

“You know he cares about you, right? And you care about him?” Bard says.

“Yeah.”

“Then talking with him about this won’t mess things up. It’ll make things better. Let’s practice some ways you can talk about it with him.”

From Monday afternoon until Tuesday morning, Bucky is a ball of nerves. He talked with Bard for an additional 45 minutes, running through different things to say, teetering on that delicate friction point between straight candor and over-rehearsed therapy talk. He’s practiced it in his head while running. Under his breath while surfing bullshit on the web with the laptop he requisitioned. He’s ridden the pendulum swing between wanting to storm into Steve’s room now – *right now* – and wanting to drop the whole thing, because, really, why cause more trouble?

He tries to remember Bard, his current role model of normalcy and the litmus test to his trauma-forged distortion filter. He constantly reminds himself that he has a right to be hurt and angry, and that expressing that is okay. There will be no punishment. There will be no mind wiping or deprivation. Steve won’t hate him, because if he didn’t hate him for everything he wrote, he won’t hate him for this. Bucky also scolds himself for his weakness and catches himself doing so. He tries his best to shut that shit down, because that’s not his voice, and he’s not a child anymore. He occasionally succeeds in this.

Bucky shaves and runs his clippers up the sides and back of his head to taper the vestiges of his initial first cut, which was starting to grow out like a puffball. He then showers and puts on his best clothes (‘best’ being a highly relative term, given his limited selection). He wants to look as good as he can on the outside in hopes that some of that might sink through his skin, because his limited stores of confidence are already burning up fast.

He finds Steve at the dining room table, talking to Clint. Instead of brightening the way he often does when Bucky walks in the room, Steve’s features dull and tighten, his posture righting sharply. Between the unexpected presence of Clint and Steve’s lukewarm reception, Bucky nearly turns on his heels and walks straight back to his room.

“Let’s take a walk,” he says to Steve instead, blessedly possessed in that moment by the small piece of himself that’s both wise and fearless.

Without a word, Steve rises and walks with him to the arboretum. They walk past the benches and into the fold of native plants. Bucky used to wonder why there was an arboretum, considering that the palace is surrounded by dense jungle on all sides. Now he knows it’s for the fruit and flowers, which make for a spectacular sensory experience. It’s calming, and it cuts through some of Bucky’s trepidation almost immediately.

“I know I said I forgave you for what you did on Friday, but now that I’ve had the chance to think about it, I don’t know if I do,” Bucky states, willing his voice firm against his anxiety.

“Ah,” Steve replies simply, looking down at the ground as they walk. His expression is solemn.

Bucky’s next words have an inorganic flavor to them, perhaps because they’ve been rehearsed ad
nauseam, or because they resemble something out of a self-help book.

“When you read my notebook, I felt angry and hurt. I still do. It makes me doubt my ability to trust you. And if I can’t trust you, I don’t know how we can be friends, let alone whatever else is going on between us. And I know you’ve done and sacrificed so much for me, and I feel like I should trust you because of all of that. I really want to trust you because of all of that. But this was bad, Steve. Really bad.”

“I know it was,” Steve murmurs.

“What were you thinking?”

“Like I said, I want to understand you, and I feel like you keep shutting me out. I want to help you so badly, but it still feels like you’re not really letting me. It’s been hard for me to see you struggling so much.”

Bucky stops walking. He plants himself firmly and crosses his arms over his chest. “Did it ever occur to you that you don’t always get to have something just because you really want it?”

After taking a few steps past Bucky, Steve stops in his tracks. Bucky can see the hard line of tension in his broad shoulders.

“You’re gonna have to do better than that, Steve. That’s not a good enough explanation. I want a real answer.”

Steve turns a little. His jaw clenches visibly and his eyes seem to search the shrubbery for what Bucky demands.

“I barely slept the night before, after I left your room,” Steve says. “The look on your face… the song… it was heartbreaking to see you like that. I don’t know what you were thinking then. I rarely know what you’re thinking, because you rarely say anything of substance to me. You can talk for hours and not say anything real, like how you’re really feeling, or what’s bothering you when it’s so clear that something’s really bothering you. In some ways, you seem to be getting better, but in other ways, nothing’s changed.” He slowly shakes his head. “I don’t know. I was feeling so helpless, and I guess something in me just snapped. Somehow I decided that I had to do that in order to understand you and help you.”

“You decided to betray my trust to help me.” Bucky snorts. “That’s some fucked up logic.”

Steve smiles sourly. “It’s not logical. Not at all. I’m not a very logical person. I make up my own logic, I know that. Like when I decided I needed to join the Army, and I broke the law in all five boroughs to try to do that. If they’d let me in like that, who knows how many people would’ve died because I couldn’t carry my weight. But I didn’t care about that, because I wanted to be in uniform and fighting overseas. I wouldn’t settle for doing anything less. Because when I decide something’s right, it’s right. When I decide it’s wrong, it’s wrong. And that’s paid off a lot for me in the past.”

“That’s one thing people really admire about you,” Bucky says.

“Yeah, well, I think I was doing the same thing here. I decided it was right, that the ends justified the means, and I did it.” Steve turns around now, fully facing Bucky, meeting Bucky’s intense scrutiny with diffidence. “But I was so wrong. I hate that I did it, and I hate that I hurt you. I’d do anything to take it back.”

Bucky tilts his head inquisitively. “Do you respect me?”
“Of course. I’ve always respected you.”

“I’m not talking about before Hydra,” he clarifies. “Do you respect me now?”

“I do,” Steve says seriously. “Even more than before. I see how hard you’re working, despite it being so difficult. I don’t know much about psychology or therapy, but I can see it’s not for the faint of heart. Honestly, I don’t know if I could do what you’re doing.”

“But if you respect me, how could you do something like that?” Bucky asks. Bucky lays his confusion and hurt bare, and Steve feels it. Steve’s face contorts painfully, as if struck. He lowers his head.

“I don’t know, Buck. I can’t make sense of what I did. I’ve tried, believe me. I’ve been thinking about it non-stop since Friday. All I can come up with is that I put my own needs before yours, and I rationalized that it was to help you. And that’s really messed up. ‘Sorry’ can’t even come close to cutting it.”

Bucky nods. This is not the conversation he expected to have. Not at all. In fact, he cynically expected Steve to reflect only shallowly on his behavior, to offer apologies – wholly sincere ones – without digging any deeper to acknowledge the core issues at play.

This is the Steve Rogers Bucky remembers from his youth. Thoughtful, sensitive, and brave in his willingness to own his flaws completely. At least, before the war started pulling that apart, where Steve crashed into the most massive of immovable walls and abjectly refused to back down from it, no matter the cost. Before joining the military became an obsession that began unraveling the seams of his solid character. And then after the serum, all his good became breathtakingly good, but he also lost some things in the long shadow and righteousness of Captain America. Bucky thought those qualities might be gone forever. But now, he’s never been more delighted to be wrong.

“It is messed up,” Bucky acknowledges. “But I know this hasn’t been easy for you.”

Steve huffs an incredulous laugh and looks back up. “God, that sounds awful. It’s been nothing for me compared to you.”

Bucky unfolds his arms and takes a step toward Steve. “I don’t think it’s nothing. When you care about someone, and they’re suffering, and you feel helpless, you do and think all sorts of crazy shit.”

Their gazes lock in swift, mutual understanding of exactly what Bucky’s referring to. How many times did Bucky lose his mind with worry over Steve before the war? How many irrational thoughts and actions came from those desperate times?

“Still, that’s not the same,” Steve says. “Maybe if you beat me to a pulp for being sick because you somehow rationalized that it’d make me better, that’d be a closer comparison.”

“All I’m saying is that I know what it’s like to feel helpless. Maybe more than most.”

Determination settles on Steve’s face. “I’ll earn your trust back. I promise.”

The smoothly turning gears of this well-planned conversation lock and jam, and Bucky’s eyes flash with sharp and unexpected irritation. He sighs loudly.

“God, can’t you let anything rest for a minute?”
Now it’s Steve’s turn to show his confusion as Bucky unflinchingly lets loose his B material, a semi-organized stream of consciousness that he thought he’d save for another day once he cleaned it up and packaged it nicely and therapeutically. To hell with all that, apparently.

“Stop promising,” Bucky says bluntly. “Stop plotting, stop fretting, stop trying to control everything. You wanna help me? Just be here with me. I’m working really hard, and it’s terrible work, but I’m doing it. I’m gonna be in pain. I’m gonna feel like shit. I’m gonna hate myself. You’re not gonna to be able to prevent that, and you shouldn’t anyway. I need to feel those things while I work to get better. Or so I’m told. And if you really wanna be here for me, you’re gonna have to find some other way to handle your feelings about what I’m going through that doesn’t involve fucking up our friendship.”

Steve looks gob smacked. For one of the few times in the many years Bucky’s known him, he doesn’t seem to know what to say.

Bucky walks to Steve’s side, puts an arm around his shoulders, and starts them walking back to the complex. He feels emboldened and energized by his unrestrained honesty, almost like he’s playing some older version of himself. His body hums from that and Steve’s proximity.

“You’ve gotta stop trying to save me all the time, Steve,” Bucky continues calmly. “You’ve done enough of that, and I can never, ever repay you. But you can’t save me from this. I need to save myself. And I need you to start seeing me as your equal, not some wounded animal you need to rescue. I wanna have you beside me. Not in front of me and not behind me.” He pulls Steve closer. “Here.”

Steve’s arm finally wraps around Bucky, hand coming to rest firmly on his waist.

“I can do that,” Steve tells him soberly. “I should have been doing that all along.”

They walk in silence until they reach the clearing, where the palace eyes are on them once again. Bucky lets go of Steve, secretly thankful for the exposure and the excuse to back away. The closeness is still too much for him, overwhelming him quickly, and he wants to hold onto the fleeting, platinum-rare composure he has right now.

Steve appears less thankful, but he reads Bucky’s body language astutely and slowly lets go.

“I need some time alone,” Bucky says, stopping in front of one of the benches, the one where Wanda cornered and confronted him what seems like ages ago.

“I could probably use it, too. You’ve given me a lot to think about,” Steve replies.

Bucky feels a small shock of panic.

“In a good way,” Steve adds, beginning to walk backwards towards the building entrance.

“Okay,” Bucky says, relieved. “I guess I’ll see you later.”

“Definitely.”

Bucky sits down, settling only for a second before twisting around and calling after Steve.

“Hey!”

Steve stops and looks over his shoulder.
“I feel the same, you know. About you,” Bucky says, his smile nervous but alight at the edges with hope.

Steve beams – positively *beams* – and goes inside.

And Bucky, it seems, is beaming too.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Bucky reads his trauma narrative and tries to cope with the aftermath.

Chapter Notes

The incident from Bucky's past described herein is based very loosely off of issue 624 of the comic Captain America and Bucky. I think the evolution of the Winter Soldier in the comics is fascinating, because his usage appears to have changed somewhat over time. He was originally sent on missions where he posed very successfully as an American to infiltrate Western environments, in some ways more like espionage than the more brute, kill-bot usage we see in TWS. This chapter shows an example of the former.

Thank you so much for the comments and kudos!

October 27th, 1963

The Winter Soldier enters the hotel foyer, which is bathed in waning daylight dulled grey by the Ray-Ban Caravan sunglasses he wears. He’s dressed in an expensive, slim cut two-piece black suit with an equally slim black tie and white shirt, his short, dark hair styled into a modest pompadour, face clean-shaven. He cursorily scans the lobby for exits, stairways, and cover, simultaneously committing the details to memory.

He approaches the front desk and sets down a large black briefcase and a leather duffle bag.

“Guten Tag,” the hotel clerk greets.

“Guten Tag. Ich habe eine Reservierung auf den Namen Gregory Simon,” the Winter Soldier says, sliding his U.S. passport across the desk with his gloved hand. He leans against the counter and continues to observe the lobby as the clerk searches his paperwork for the reservation.

“And that will be for one night only, sir?” the clerk asks in English.

“That’s right. The payment should have been wired by my employer. Additional charges can be settled through the contact information provided by them.”

“Ah yes, I see that the room has been paid in full. Business, I take it? And on a Saturday, no less?”

“Yeah, unfortunately. That’s the job, though. Gotta pay the bills.”

“Indeed we do. Well, welcome to West Berlin, Mr. Simon. Enjoy your stay, however brief. You’ll be in room 310,” the clerk tells him with a smile, handing back his passport and a key.

He thanks the clerk, grabs his bags, and takes the stairs to his room, which is deliberately situated
directly next to the stairwell entrance. He locks the door and checks that the windows are secured, closing the heavy curtains and turning on the lamps once he’s done so. He then undresses and heads to the shower, achieving only marginal success at washing all the pomade out of his hair.

He slips on a pair of comfortable pants and a white undershirt and orders room service, requesting that the food be left outside his door. He gets some small enjoyment out of charging room service to the KGB. He orders amply, knowing he has to take advantage of the opportunity to eat as much as he wants before… before what, he’s not sure. He’s been out of cryostasis for nearly four months now, and he’s beginning to wonder if they’re ever going to put him back.

He’s completed fourteen successful missions during this time, with no obvious signs of scaling back his operational tempo. There’s been a recent rash of poachings of Soviet scientists and defections of KGB agents and officials to the West. As one of the primary arms of the organization, the KGB’s losses have deeply shaken Hydra leadership. As far as the Soldier can tell, anyway. He’s insulated from much of it, though Lukin has shared more strategic information with him in the last month than he has in the past several years. Their dynamic is evolving. Into what, he’s also not sure. He mostly lives in uncertainty, finding brief footing only in his missions.

After eating as much as he comfortably can, he takes a seat at the desk and looks over the dossier on his next target.

Sergei Ivanovich, 52-year-old KGB Second Chief Directorate assistant director. Employed with the MGB from the end of World War II until the organization’s transition to the KGB in 1954. The cover sheet reads like so many of the others he’s seen recently, except at the bottom, scrawled in flowing Cyrillic cursive is:

“He knows too many of our secrets and mustn’t be allowed to defect. Failure is not an option.”

He rolls his eyes. No shit, he thinks. Is it ever?

He looks through the photos, which show Ivanovich from nearly every possible angle. There’s one from his army days, his face handsome and serious. Its inclusion is illogical, he thinks. The resemblance between the pictures across time is only vague, as he’s aged terribly. He’s now portly, balding, and mustached, his face cracked with wrinkles and somehow also bloated by God knows what. Stress. Booze. Both.

When he knows Ivanovich forwards and back, he gets up from the desk, puts on a pair of rubber gloves, opens his black brief case, and pulls out his semi-disassembled rifle. He lays everything on the bedspread and strips down the weapon further to its smallest parts, cleaning it despite knowing it’s already immaculately clean. It’s how he fills his time. The only way he knows how to fill it, really. With tasks. His mind contains only a small amount of biographical information. People he’s met in the past few years, places he’s been, missions he’s completed. Many of the pieces are uncannily similar. There are small differences. Countries. Methods of termination. Levels of risk and struggle. Minor details. But on the whole, the job itself has become underwhelmingly routine.

After a light night of sleep, the Soldier dresses and styles himself again as Greg Simon and checks out of the hotel. He walks four blocks East and enters a five-story office building located two blocks from the U.S. embassy. He climbs the stairs to the roof and lays down his bags. Using the high walls as cover, he changes into his tactical gear. He paints around his eyes with black grease and fully assembles his rifle.

Leaving his luggage behind, he then moves deftly across the rooftops until he reaches his vantage point, situated directly across from the embassy. There is a low wall around the perimeter of the roof, perfect for cover and to take a steady, clean shot in the kneeling position. He checks his
watch and pulls a small pair binoculars from his cargo pocket. A car is set to pick up Ivanovich within minutes. He sees two men at the top of the five stairs leading to the embassy entrance. Neither are Ivanovich, but both have pistols concealed in their jackets.

The car pulls up. One of the two men opens the embassy door and calls into it. Ivanovich then emerges, wearing a button-down shirt and coat befitting the chill in the air. He moves slowly. Excellent. The Winter Soldier raises his rifle, resting the bipod on top of the small wall and aiming the barrel downward. Through the scope, he follows Ivanovich until he’s on flat ground.

He lines up the shot for one bullet straight through the heart. Maybe he can sink another for good measure, if he can manually chamber the next round before he hits the ground. There’s significant variability there, he’s found. How fast a body collapses. Some reel and stagger while others drop like lead. He figures Ivanovich is a dropper.

His finger just begins to depress the trigger when something abruptly enters his sight picture.

A little girl in blue, arms wide, flinging herself wildly at Ivanovich with a squeal.

The Soldier swears, reflexively angling the barrel up. The shot lands hard in Ivanovich’s left shoulder.

There’s screaming, but he barely registers it. He ditches the rifle and jumps straight down off the roof, slowing his fall by catching outcroppings of ornamental facade and windowsills with his metal hand. Pieces of building crumble and fall with him.

He lands and scans the street for his target. Being Sunday morning in Germany, virtually nothing’s open except church, leaving the sidewalks relatively free of obstructive collaterals. He sees Ivanovich and charges after him at an all-out sprint. The target has a head start and is surprisingly fast for appearing so un-athletic and pulling a little girl along with him. The two men from the stairs whip out their pistols, and the Winter Soldier pops off two quick shots to their t-zones with his own sidearm, dropping them instantly.

He chases Ivanovich and the girl into a side alley and, remarkably, nobody follows them. The alley reeks of filth and piss. Ivanovich is crouched on the ground, holding the little girl in his arms. She’s weeping frantically, her face half-buried in his chest, gripping his coat tightly in her little hands. Tears stream down Ivanovich’s face as well. He grits his teeth and pulls her closer when he sees the Winter Soldier approach.

“No, please,” he says in Russian.

“Do you really want her to see this, Ivanovich?” the Soldier asks.

“Don’t hurt her,” Ivanovich pleads.

“She’s in no danger if you let go of her. Tell her to stand over there.” The Winter Soldier points to a spot approximately four meters away.

“No, Poppa, please!” the little girl cries as he gently pushes her away.

“Go, dear one. Go stand over there.”

The little girl shakes her head and tries to cling tighter, but after more hushed words of encouragement, she finally releases him, crying, mumbling ‘no, Poppa’ repeatedly. She takes small, hesitant steps backwards, glancing fleetingly at the Soldier, who looks down on her with stone-cold countenance, still pointing to where she is to stand. Her face is freckled and wet with
tears and snot, hazel eyes pinched with sorrow.

When she’s in place, the Soldier holsters his pistol. Another gunshot will draw too much attention. Instead, he pulls a seven-inch tactical knife and approaches Ivanovich, who drops to both knees as he awaits his execution.

The Soldier looks over to where the girl now stands. She can’t be older than eight, dressed in a full blue skirt with a matching little jacket, brunette hair cut fashionably in a bob. She’s trembling uncontrollably, her tiny hands flitting like hummingbird wings. Her eyes are now wide with terror as her as she pieces together what’s about to happen. Her mouth falls open and her jaw quivers soundlessly.

The Winter Soldier kneels in front of Ivanovich, who’s taken to praying under his breath. Ivanovich glances over one last time to ensure that his daughter holds fast. The Soldier wraps his left arm around his Ivanovich’s shoulder, as if to fold him into an embrace. And indeed he does, pulling the man towards him as he drives the knife into his right ventricle. The Soldier feels the warm creep of Ivanovich’s blood as it touches his wrist, slips beneath his sleeve, and crawls up his forearm. He then pulls the knife out and stands, leaving Ivanovich to crumple facedown in a scattering of wet garbage.

The Soldier turns away from Ivanovich and looks down. He’s covered in blood. It drips off his gloved fingertips and slides down his water-resistant tactical pants in racing trails. He hears the rush of tiny footsteps as the little girl runs to her father’s body and begins quietly sobbing. He wipes and sheaths his knife, then climbs onto the lone dumpster in the alley and leaps up to catch hold of the lowest level of the fire escape of the adjacent building. He scales it quickly and travels the rooftops to go retrieve his bags. The rifle is lost, undoubtedly seized by this time.

He strips out of the top half of his tactical gear and is paused by the long smear of blood on his right arm. His enhanced senses pick up the acrid smell of iron. He’s clapped by a brutal wave of nausea and stumbles several feet away to vomit. He stays bent at the waist for some time, hands on his knees, breath heaving, retching once more before returning to his bags to finish undressing.

He pulls out a different outfit this time, a pair of casual slacks, a light turtleneck sweater, and a brown leather jacket. He wipes the eye black from his face, situates a high quality brunette wig on his head, styled longer than his own hair, and uses a small mirror to carefully affix a matching thin mustache to his upper lip. He then pulls a Russian passport for Alexei Tarasoff and a matching West German visa from his duffle bag and tucks them into his jacket pocket. He leaves the rifle case and heads back down to the ground level.

The next day, he’s in Moscow, grinding his molars as he enters the office of the KGB official who ordered the hit on Ivanovich. There are two other men as well, both Hydra.

The Hydra men stand to greet him. Mr. KGB stays slouched in his chair.

“So, may we assume the mission was a success?” the youngest man says. Petrov, the Soldier thinks his name is. Hydra. One of the up-and-comers.

“It was. Barely,” the Soldier says coolly. “This is the second time you didn’t provide me with adequate information about collaterals.”

He remembers the first vividly. The bullets through the wall. The dead boy. The screaming mother. The fall.

The… something else… What was it…?
“Who was with him?” the other standing man asks. He’s older, bearded, and familiar. One of Lukin’s superiors.

“His daughter. She was with him.”

“And so what?” Mr. KGB sneers. “Should we have told you that he has a dog, too?”

“I’ll follow my orders and complete the mission,” the Winter Soldier says, “but I can’t do that if I don’t have the correct information. Collateral damage compromises the mission, not to mention my operational status.”

“We’ll give you what information we see fit, Soldier,” Petrov says.

“I shouldn’t have little girls running into my sight picture when I’m about to take a shot,” the Soldier argues, voice laced with anger.

“What’s a dead little girl, in the greater context?” Mr. KGB says.

“So I should be leaving two, three, four bodies for every target? At best, that’s extremely inefficient. At worst, it’s - ”

“Remember your place, Soldier,” the old man says. “Or Comrade Lukin will hear about it.”

“Let him hear it! He’ll probably agree with me,” the Soldier spits in English.

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” the old man replies. “And I’d watch your tongue, if I were you.”

The Soldier scowls. “Am I dismissed?” he asks, correcting himself back to Russian.

The old man waves him off reproachfully, and the Soldier leaves.

Two hours later, he’s on a plane back to Siberia. By nightfall, he’s wiped and back on ice.

“I’ve read a lot of your mission reports,” Bard says. “I believe I actually read this one in particular. And what you just read, that was pretty much a mission report.”

Bucky stares back at him blankly.

“Meaning that, although you did a great job of getting the details of the narrative written, that wasn’t the assignment. In fact, you did exactly what I told you not to do. Do you remember what I asked you to do?”

“Include thoughts and feelings. Especially feelings,” Bucky grumbles.

“Right. That was probably the most important part.”

Bucky looks at Bard’s expression, which doesn’t appear disappointed but is still blunted somewhat. “Sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologize,” Bard tells him. “You’re driving the boat, remember? Let’s look at it closer. Why do you think you didn’t complete the assignment?”

“I don’t know.”
Bard waits patiently for him to move past ‘I don’t know,’ which Bucky eventually does with some irritation.

“I don’t want to feel those things.”

“What would happen if you let yourself feel them?” Bard asks.

“I might never stop.” He rolls his eyes. “I know, it’s a stuck point.”

“What are the feelings?”

“Anger. Shame. When I think of myself being a monster, that’s what I picture. Me in that alley, dripping with his blood, with that little girl’s face…” He begins to feel nauseated and lightheaded, and he grips the arms of his chair. His next words are quiet and distant. “She was so terrified of me. She couldn’t even make a sound. It was beyond sound.”

Bucky shakes his head, trying to shake away the feeling like he’s not making any sense at all.

“You had a strong reaction to it, didn’t you? Did you usually vomit after missions?”

“Never.”

“What were you feeling at that time, when you saw that blood on your arm?”

“I guess disgust with myself and with how it all happened. It was an absolute mess, literally and figuratively. The whole mission.” A shit-show, he would have called it, if he had that in his vernacular back in the ‘60s.

“You look like you’re feeling that right now, too.”

Bucky nods slowly. He feels it everywhere, like cancer in his blood, permeating every capillary.

“You were also angry, right? I mean, you yelled at your boss’s boss.”

“That was one of those moments of clarity I wrote about in my impact statement,” Bucky says. “One of those where you’re supposedly responsible for everything that happens after?”

“Yeah.”

Bucky thinks through the what-ifs. If he’d only. He has a laundry list of ‘if he’d onlys’: Spared Ivanovich. Wounded him instead. Left everything in his hotel and fled to America to live as Greg Simon. Slept in that morning. Yanked KGB Man from his chair and smashed his head against his desk until his skull went soft. Spat in Old Man Hydra’s face. Skipped the flight back to Siberia. Crushed the doctors’ windpipes. Ripped The Chair apart piece by piece. Dismantled every computer. Taken an RPG to his cryochamber, back when there was only one near-priceless prototype.

“So, wait, how was that a moment of clarity?” Bard asks. His tone has shifted from its usual buoyancy, taking on a sharper, more skeptical edge.

How was it clarity? Is that a real question? Isn’t it obvious?

“I was disillusioned,” Bucky explains. “I was angry. I knew something was wrong.”

“But how is that clarity?”
“I could see what was going on, and I didn’t like it.”

“See what?”

“That they were careless and cruel.”

Bard holds up his index finger and points it at Bucky. “Okay, careless, yes. But did you think they were cruel at that time? Or just as you’re looking back on it?”

Bucky pauses to consider this. In truth, he didn’t make moral judgments of them at that time. Of anyone, not even himself. He didn’t even think on that level at all, which is puzzling, because he seems to be hopelessly stuck at that level now.

“Only looking back on it. Not at the time.”

“So there wasn’t clarity like ‘Ah-ha! I’m Bucky Barnes, and wow, I can’t believe I’m working for Hydra! These guys are evil, and I should really quit before I kill more people’?”

Once. Just once he had that. And after, he put a gun to his head.

“No,” Bucky admits. “It wasn’t like that at all.”

“It sounds like you were dissatisfied with your employers and your job.”

“But I knew something was wrong, and I didn’t do anything about it.”

Bard’s eyebrows rise. “You didn’t? You got yourself put back in cryo pretty fast for someone who didn’t do anything about it.”

Yes, that was clearly punishment. But for what? Sassing off to the old man? Speaking in English? Was that really defiance? Was that enough? And why didn’t he do more?

“And what was this ‘something wrong’ that you knew?” Bard asks.

“They didn’t plan well. They also had either poor intelligence or poor communication with me.”

Of course, now Bucky that says it, now that the words hang in the air between them, it sounds flimsy and trivial.

“So you should have left Hydra because your bosses weren’t good at logistics? Or intel? Maybe paperwork?”

Bucky makes a sound, half a syllable of half a reason, but he stops himself.

“What do you think you should have done?” Bard asks.

“I shouldn’t have gotten on that plane back to Siberia. I should have run.”

His other ‘if he’d onlys’ lemur off a cliff in quick succession once it becomes clear that none of them would have constituted reasonable options for him at that time.

“Again, because of bad planning, intel, and communication?” Bard repeats.

“I don’t know.” Bucky shrugs tiredly. “I guess that wouldn’t make sense.”

“Did you think they were bad or evil, or that you were bad or evil, in this great moment of clarity?”
“No.”

“Then why would you leave? Why would you run away from the only thing you knew at that time?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you think there’s a difference between being pissed about your missions or your bosses and fully understanding the context of your captivity but choosing to stay captured?”

“…I guess.”

Bucky feels himself withering from Bard’s meticulous assault. He starts to check out, his eyes losing focus, his body and mind slowly numbing.

“Did you feel bad for that little girl back then?” Bard asks gently.

“I don’t know.”

“Sure you do.”

Bucky bites at the inside of his lower lip. “I must have. That’s why I had such a strong reaction.”

“And now?”

“Obviously.”

Bard nods. He smiles then, a thin smile that both conveys empathy and captures the gravity of the incident and their current exchange.

“Hate to tell ya,” Bard says, “but if you want to talk monsters, monsters don’t feel bad about that stuff. They don’t give a crap about murdering fathers in front of their little girls in dirty West German alleys. They don’t even blink at that. That doesn’t make them sick or so defiant that they have to be pulled off duty and put on ice.”

“Steve said that, too,” Bucky states dully. “Something like that.”

“Well, maybe we both have a point. Blue sky and all that.”

They sit in silence for several minutes. Bucky doesn’t know if Bard is waiting for him to say something or if the silence is deliberate. Either way, Bucky’s already decided he’s done for the day.

“I’m hearing a lot of what’s called hindsight bias,” Bard says. “Meaning that you’re looking back on an event with your current perspective but not remembering that you didn’t have that perspective at the time. Like looking back and thinking you had this clarity, and that you knew exactly how evil Hydra was, and choosing to stay anyway. But I didn’t hear any evidence that you had anything close to true clarity back then. It was all very vague. Did you hear any evidence of clarity? Real clarity?”

“No,” Bucky mutters.

“You said there were many incidents of so-called clarity like this, right? As you remember these things, I want you to test to see if hindsight bias is really at play here. Because I have a strong suspicion that most of it involves hindsight bias, if not all of it.”
Bucky looks up at Bard from his mindless gazing at the ornamental rug beneath them.

“You look angry,” Bard observes.

“I am.”

“At me?”

“No.”

“At what, then?”

“This. This whole process. I hate it.”

“That’s very normal for this stage of therapy. Remember, this is one of the hardest parts. I’d also wager that there are other emotions underneath besides anger, so be aware of those as they come up. In the next couple of sessions, I’m gonna teach you to ask these kinds of questions yourself. I’m going to start shifting more responsibility onto you to do the things I did today.”

“Fine.”

Bard smiles reassuringly. “If this process wasn’t working, you wouldn’t be feeling like this. Don’t forget that.”

“Can I go now?” Bucky asks, voice gravelly.

“You’re free to leave whenever you want. You know that.”

Without another word, Bucky does just that.

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Bucky hole’s himself in his room for the next 24 hours, emerging only once to eat. Steve and Sam establish the right amount of distance, checking in with him often, asking what he needs, but generally leaving him be, because that’s what Bucky tells them he needs most.

During that time, Bucky alternates between running through what he remembers from his dozens upon dozens of missions and trying to push those same things out of his mind when they threaten to overtake him. He’s searching frantically for clarity. Real clarity. The type that might hold up to Bard’s scrutiny. Some of moments that he was so sure about appear to not even be real at all, crumbling quickly under careful examination.

After a while, he starts chasing the same tired scenarios around and around, the ones that end with him feeling like he’s still to blame but without more than an insinuation’s worth of proof. He knows the proof is there, it has to be, but his brain is toast, and he chalks up the fruitlessness of his search to not sleeping for 40 hours.

By late Saturday night, he’s completely worn himself down, and all he wants to do is forget. Desperate for distraction, he invites Steve to his room to watch TV, which they’re now half-doing, lying on their backs on Bucky’s bed.

“You can touch it. It doesn’t bite,” Bucky says, turning his head to look at Steve.

He’s seen Steve eyeing his metal arm before, just like he’s doing now, his own arm scarce inches away.
Steve smiles a bit shyly and rolls over on his side toward Bucky. He reaches out, gingerly, and lays his hand on Bucky’s left forearm.

“It’s warm,” he says. “I noticed that last week.”

“There’s some sort of coating on it that reads my body temperature here and generates heat.” Bucky touches the seam where metal meets skin at his shoulder beneath his t-shirt. “The old one was freezing. If I touched my leg or something in the middle of the night, I’d wake myself up,” he says with a breath of a laugh.

“Does it hurt?” Steve asks.

“The old one did. All the time. This one doesn’t. You weren’t there, but when Van Der Laar first looked at the amputation and the old implantation site, he had a shit fit,” Bucky remembers with some amusement. “Said the whole thing was a hack job and wondered how I did anything with it at all.”

Bucky feels Steve’s hand running down his arm. The level of sensitivity certainly doesn’t match that of his right arm, but he definitely feels it, thanks to the electrical signals that feed directly into the nerves at the end of his stump. He tenses a little, fingers of both hands drawing in.

“Is this hard for you?” Steve asks.

“Yeah,” Bucky says. “But I want it.” He hesitates, then shifts to his side as well, his metal arm still lying between them. “You know my dad wasn’t a very nice guy, right?”

“I gathered that,” Steve replies. “You never let me come over when he was there.”

“Yeah, he didn’t like you. He had a lot of strong opinions about stuff like this, and he made sure I knew…”

Bucky trails off when Steve’s hand moves to his other arm, skimming over his bare skin.

“This stuff?” Steve says, threading his fingers through Bucky’s.

Bucky exhales audibly, attention locking on the way their hands look joined together. He’s held so many hands in his life, none of them ever male. Except once when one of his men was bleeding out in the Italian mud. While the medic scrambled to triage three traumatic amputations in a single body. While they all exchanged glances confirming that the private was already dead. While they waited for the light to leave his eyes.

Bucky shoves the memory down, as he’s been doing with so many others since he left Bard’s office. He re-focuses on their hands, on Steve’s face, which is light embodied, which no death could darken.

“Yeah. That’s why I always… why I didn’t let anything happen before. I wanted it, but my head was so messed up around it. Surprise, what’s new.”

Suddenly, as if the universe was listening, there’s a loud thud from Clint’s room next door. Something falling on the floor. Bucky startles, yanking his hand from Steve’s and bolting upright. His eyes are wide and searching the room, his body electrified by an old alarm circuit soldered into him at some point in his life. Maybe during the war. Maybe after. The ‘60s, the ‘70s, five years ago. Who the hell knows when exactly each toxic thorn was pressed into his flesh and buried there.

He startles again, this time when Steve touches his chest. Bucky looks down at him, then the wall,
the door, then back at Steve. He knows it’s nothing, that it’s just his fucked up brain glitching. Some part of him knows that, anyway. Another part is absolutely certain – beyond where any reasoning can shine – that something terrible is about to happen.

But Steve tells him differently, his body relaxed, his blue eyes placid and soulful.

“It’s okay,” Steve says calmly. “Everything’s okay.”

Bucky slowly sinks back down and takes Steve’s hand again. He uses his breath to calm himself.

“I can’t contain anything anymore,” Bucky tells him, his expression and tone both resigned. “It’s all giving way, all together. Stuff around what happened and what I did. Around my emotions. Around you. Maybe it’s a good thing,” he pauses, pursing his lips, “but it feels like shit.”

“Well, we’re all here for you,” Steve reminds him. “I’m here for you. Whatever you need. Just let us know.”

Bucky squeezes Steve’s hand tight. “Thank you.”

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Bucky kicks Steve out a half hour later with a smile and a lazy wave. He’s exhausted, so much so that he could probably sleep even without his meds. He showers quickly and crawls into bed, deep under the covers. He typically sleeps on the right side of his bed, along the very edge. He originally chose the spot because he could easily drop down off the side and get quick cover if anyone came through his door. It’s where he used to keep his pistol and knife, just underneath the frame, before he gave them to Steve and never saw them again. He calculated that he could get off a few disabling foot or shin shots from the floor that way.

But now, no gun. No knife. Out of the entire time they’ve been there, there’s yet to be an attack from any one of the many agencies and organizations that are after them. After him. One part of his mind reads this as an increased probability that it will happen soon, but another part reads it as the exact opposite. Another example of one of his old notions beginning to fracture. He leans into that fracturing, and in the spirit of different and better, he rolls over toward the middle of his bed.

Bucky stares at the empty space stretched before him, where Steve slept that one single time and where he lay tonight. He moves over even more, onto the pillow Steve used. He detects the faint, lingering scent of his shampoo, or maybe whatever product he uses to make his hair look so damn amazing. He thinks about tonight, the touching, Steve’s hand on his arms, his chest, their fingers intertwined. He thinks about all those moments in the past, those near-touches and barely-touches, the touches he shut down or completely preempted. The touches he wanted from Steve but gave himself instead, alone in his bed in their apartment, in the shower, once even in the sleeping bag right next to him in their tent, after Steve’s breath entered a deep, slow rhythm.

He feels himself stir as he thinks about it. It’s been so long since he’s touched himself, or even thought of himself as a sexual being. Since he’s been in Wakanda, he’s either been too mired in depression or too ashamed, too convinced of his disgustingness. And yes, those feelings are still there, percolating just below, but like the memories, he uses some of his expert compartmentalization skills to box them up for later.

Bucky kicks off the comforter and sheets and lies on his back, reaching into his underwear to stoke what’s been quietly burning in him ever since Steve first laid hands on him tonight. Without any of Bucky’s usual self-denying checks, his mind goes wild conjuring a sequence of fantasies, giving himself permission to go a little further with each shift. He pushes down his underwear, continues
stroking himself, and imagines Steve’s hand in place of his own. Then Steve between his legs, sucking his cock. Then him between Steve’s legs, fucking him senseless, making him come, shoving deep inside him and letting himself go…

It doesn’t take much time, given how long it’s been. His body tenses and he bites back a groan, shuddering as he ejaculates into his hand. He gives himself a minute to revel in the haze of his orgasm before walking to the bathroom to clean up.

Bucky then flops back onto his bed, still on Steve’s side. He sighs, wholly relaxed now. There’s something both exciting and terrifying about what he just did, both emotions tied into the same realization that those things might not just be fantasy for much longer. The idea is still so alien that it doesn’t quite sink in, but he’s pretty sure it’s a very good thing.

He looks over to the nightstand on his side of the bed. On it is that damnable notebook, its pages still wrinkled beneath the lightly damaged cover. After a rare evening of enjoyment, the last thing he wants to do is his homework, especially this homework, which is to read his trauma narrative at least once every day. He pools enough brain power to build a semisolid rationalization for skipping it, because a) he’s already spent the past day obsessively combing through his past, b) he never skips his homework and could certainly afford one slip, and c) he just jerked off and feels pretty good, and he doesn’t want to sully that with meditations on his own inhumaness and cruelty.

So he skips it and turns off the lamp instead. In the dark, he tries to think about pleasant things. Pleasant moments from the past. From before the war. His growing collection of pleasant moments since he got his memory back. He even dares to imagine what pleasant moments might be ahead, particularly where Steve is concerned.

But as he entertains these moments and fledgling possibilities, other moments begin to splice in as well. They’re whisper-thin at first, barely noticeable and easy to shake. But soon they grow in intrusiveness and painfulness, each seeming to give its successor even more power.

Before long, he’s back to ruminating about Sergei and Raisa Ivanovich. He then has the sinking realization that even if he can somehow prove to himself that he’s not responsible for everything, even if that utterly unbelievable concept could one day be believed, he will still have to live with the horror of everything that he was made to do for the rest of his life. There will never, ever be a true escape from the images, the sounds, the smells, or the remorse.

Anger wells inside him, but below that, something even more sinister enters the fringes of his consciousness. It has the gut-wrenching flavor of despair, but he’s done plenty of despairing before, and this isn’t quite it. He presses the heels of his hands against his closed eyes and wills the anger to return, which it quickly does, now transmuted into anger over starting to feel the most frightening emotion of all.

It works. Too well, in fact. He seethes, his body hot and charged. He throws his blankets off for the second time tonight, changes into his workout clothes, and makes his way down to the gym as quietly as he can.

He full-on sprints on the treadmill for ten minutes, then makes his way to the heavy bags. He starts punching, snapping his fists into the vinyl with tight control, the way he learned so many decades ago.

But with the monotony of the activity comes the wandering of the mind, back to the Ivanoviches, back to Hydra, back to the entire cascade of recalled horrors from the last 36 hours. And with that, he’s consumed once more. The control in his punches deteriorates and the bag swings off balance, his fists pushing violently into it like he means to break it open and spill its insides. As if the
transference of energy could actually help in any appreciable way rather than make him feel worse, because in fact it doesn’t help, and, indeed, it never has. He hears the sound of his own rage-filled scream echoing off the walls.

The bag wobbles but holds, clearly purchased to handle the abuse of people like him. Bucky steps back and slowly drops his fists. His lungs strain for oxygen, leaving him gasping for the stuff. He drops into a low squat and lets himself fall further, taking a seat on the hard floor. He rests his forearms on his updrawn knees and drops his head to rest upon them.

At long last, his mind is an open expanse of nothing, an ephemeral intermission of peace in a never-quite-ending nightmare. He holds that space gently, cradling it like a newborn, until it inevitably fades away.

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The next thing he notices is footsteps. Bucky opens his eyes and lifts his head from the gym floor.

“Long night?” T’Challa asks, now standing over him.

Bucky frowns as he slowly sits upright, confused, squinting against the florescent light from above.

“I guess,” Bucky mumbles, rotating his head to loosen his stiff neck. “It’s morning?”

T’Challa nods and extends his hand and Bucky. He takes it, allowing T’Challa to help him to his feet. T’Challa, perceptive as ever, wisely avoids an attempt at conversation. Instead, his expression conveys what it typically does when he looks at Bucky – caring and respect, neither of which Bucky has earned in the slightest.

But still, Bucky accepts it with a nod of his own and slowly makes his way back to his room. It’s so early that nobody else appears to be awake, not even Sam, whom Bucky pegged for a super early riser.

He shuts his bedroom door behind him, pulls off his shoes, and collapses in bed. He doesn’t wake for a very long time.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Bucky has some ups and downs.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Bucky arrives 20 minutes late to his next session with Bard, furnishing the excuse that he overslept their usual 9:00 start time. A lie, if there ever was one. He’s been up since before dawn. His mind is in a state of high revolt and has been since his last session, and it’s taken great effort to keep himself imitating the motions of a functional life.

He’s late because he doesn’t want to be here. He doesn’t want to see Bard. Doesn’t want to talk about his past. Doesn’t want to hear anything more about processing or feelings. Doesn’t want to be interrogated. Doesn’t want to learn how to interrogate himself. Doesn’t want his old ideas and beliefs and stuck points to disintegrate, because their disintegration has been leaving behind a merciless vacuum that in some ways is even worse.

Bucky and Bard have an honest conversation about this, and Bard normalizes and validates every word out of Bucky’s mouth. Bucky wonders how many other miserable motherfuckers have sat in front of Bard like this, saying the exact same things, offering the same poor excuses with the same haggard, unshaven faces and tired eyes. Bard shepherds him forward anyway, like he probably does with all of his other troubled souls.

“I’m going to be out of the country next week, so I thought we could double up our session today and introduce two new tools so that you can continue to work while I’m gone,” Bard says. He then hands Bucky two sheets, one entitled the **Challenging Questions Worksheet** and the other called the **Patterns of Problematic Thinking Worksheet**. “How’s that sound?”

“Okay,” Bucky replies, glancing over the sheets. “Where are you going?”

“New York.”

“Yep. Want me to bring you something?”

Bucky’s mind drifts back to the last time he was in New York, back in 1973. When he made his way there on a series of trains and Greyhound buses from Dallas, switching and backtracking to shake possible tails, no clue who the hell he really was, just knowing that New York was where he wanted to be. It was a Category 5 malfunction, *acute operational avolition with complete accountability loss*. In other words, he simply wandered off after completing his last mission, during which he drowned a senator in his swimming pool. He spent two weeks sitting on park benches, watching people, wandering the city on foot, sleeping in a flop house with people too drunk or high to even notice that he had a metal arm, let alone give a shit about it. He remembers when they finally found him, when he ran, and when three men tried to tackle him, and he kicked and punched and bit until someone stabbed a syringe in his ass and pumped him with enough
tranquilizers to drop a rhinoceros. As he drifted out, he remembers them explaining to the gathering crowd that he was crazy and dangerous, and that he needed to go back to the hospital immediately.

He notes with some vague amusement that he’s still technically in a Category 5 malfunction from when he wandered off after the Triskelion fell. He also notes that he can no longer say that he never tried to fight Hydra, because he remembers very clearly that he did. At least that one time.

“What’s on your mind?” Bard asks.

“Nothing,” Bucky says bluntly, turning his attention back to the sheets. “So how’s this work?”

“The first sheet is going to help you ask questions around a particular stuck point to see if it’s really true. You’ll see on the sheet that you have ten questions here. You’ll take a stuck point and run it through these questions to see how well it holds up.”

Bard then goes down the list of questions, explaining each one to Bucky in detail. They also run through several examples that Bard brought with him. Bard then asks Bucky to pick one stuck point to work through using the sheet.

“I dunno. I guess ‘If I let myself be sad, I’ll fall apart.’”

“Good one,” Bard says. “Has that been coming up for you lately?”

“A little.” Or a lot. He’s not sure. He can’t tell if he’s on the edge of sadness more frequently or if he just notices it more now that he’s looking.

“Okay, run it through the worksheet. What’s your evidence for that?”

“It feels like that’s what would happen. Every time I feel any sadness, even a little bit, it feels like it’s gonna completely wreck me.”

“But is that proof?” Bard asks, tilting his head. “The kind of proof that would hold up in court?”

Like with most of these types of questions, the answer ends up being “No.”

“Can you think of any other court-proof evidence that this stuck point might be true?”

Once again, “No.”

“Okay, how about evidence against this stuck point?”

“I’ve been sad before, and I didn’t fall apart.” He pauses, then clarifies: “But that was before. That was different.”

“Maybe, but maybe not. Why would you experience sadness differently now compared to then?”

“Because that was nothing compared to this. Nothing,” Bucky says gravely.

He was sad when his grandma died. When his cat died. When his men died. These deaths didn’t sink him. He even cried for the first two, as a full-grown man, and the crying did stop.

But death is supposed to happen. It’s awful, but it’s expected. What happened to him, that’s not supposed to happen to anyone. It’s the stuff of nightmares and horror films and other manifestations of unreality.

“Any other evidence against this stuck point?”
“Other people have been really sad and probably didn’t fall apart.” He imagines that some people were sad when he died. Steve, his parents, his sister, his friends. Young men die in war, without exception. They die, you grieve, you move on.

Except when they’re really alive, but the parts you loved are dead. Then it becomes complicated.


“I guess it’s based on habits rather than facts. I always think that I’ll fall apart, so maybe it’s just a habit I’ve gotten into.” Bucky skips over several questions that don’t apply. “And it’s based on feelings rather than facts. I feel fear and anger when I feel sad, so I use those feelings as proof of the stuck point.”

“Perfect! That’s exactly what this form’s about. So looking at it, does this stuck point hold a lot of weight?”

Bucky looks up from the sheet. “No. And I get that logically, but it still feels like it’s true.”

“You’re right. It can take a little time for these things to go from here,” Bard points to his bald head, “to here.” He then points to his heart. “Oftentimes people have to keep reminding themselves of these things over and over before it gels and becomes something they really believe. For example, the next time you find yourself pushing away sadness because you’re afraid you’ll fall apart, remind yourself that you don’t have any evidence for that, and that it’s based on habitual thinking and your emotions, not facts.”

“I’ll try.” He doesn’t know how successful he’ll be, but he’ll give it a go.

“Now let’s run through this other worksheet with the same stuck point.”

Bard introduces the Patterns of Problematic Thinking Worksheet, which highlights several patterns of faulty thinking that underlie many stuck points. They determine that the stuck point involves Bucky jumping to conclusions about the consequences of sadness, exaggerating the consequences of being sad, and relying too heavily on his emotions as proof.

“So I do this for all my stuck points?” Bucky asks.

“You got it. This is where I’m going to teach you to be your own therapist. That way you don’t have to depend on me forever. Your homework will be to fill both these forms out for at least one stuck point per day. So I’ll expect at least 14 sets by our next session.” Bard then hands him a stack of papers, 28 in all, which Bucky stuffs into his homework folder.

“You seem really tired today,” Bard observes. “And your PTSD symptoms have increased in severity, which is to be expected at this point in therapy. How’re you holding up?”

Bucky shrugs. “I’m here. I’m alive.”

“How are things with Steve?”

“Good. Better since we talked.”

After Sam found out what happened with the notebook, he told Bucky in no uncertain terms that he was going to run some interference with Steve. It was a rare example of Sam’s unflagging allegiance to Steve flagging, if only a little bit. Of all the things Bucky never expected to see, Sam aligning with him against Steve was definitely near the top of his list. The two of them have had talks, according to Sam. Bucky doesn’t know exactly what about. He suspects that Sam might be
playing counselor, or maybe relating his personal experience of going through therapy. Whatever is happening behind closed doors, Bucky’s reaping the rewards. Steve is doing exactly what Bucky asked him to do: being present, containing himself, and being an ally, not a defender.

Bard pauses for a moment, making a contemplative face, then says, “Feel free to tell me to piss off if you don’t want to answer this, but I’m curious – what, exactly, is the nature of your relationship with him?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean.”

Bucky sinks deeper in his chair. He doesn’t know why. Surely he can’t still be ashamed of it – or can he? Maybe it’s one of those things that is still rattling around in his head and hasn’t yet reached his heart.

“We’re not just friends,” he says simply.

“I figured.”

“Okay, Sherlock, when did you ‘figure’?” Bucky asks, his tone ringing more defensive than he intended.

Bard shifts and crosses his ankle over his knee. Bucky notices that he’s wearing a pair of argyle socks that contain shocking shades of safety orange and purple. Despite their vividness, the colors somehow manage to complement the restrained tones of the rest of his professional attire.

“I started considering it when I first got here, while you were still in cryo,” Bard explains. “At least, on Steve’s part. His devotion to you was obvious, and there was a more-than-friendly flavor to it. Then I read between the lines with the issues you’ve been having. Also, I’m gay, so I kind of have a sixth sense about these things.”

“I’m not gay,” Bucky says firmly. “I like women.”

“So you’re attracted to women and men?”


“When was the last time you were in a relationship?”

One of Bucky’s eyebrows rises. “Like a romantic relationship?”

“Yeah.”

Connie Cassano. She was sweet, though he learned later that she was also a heartless bitch. He still doesn’t get how she could so convincingly be both.

“1943. I got the old Dear James letter when I was in Italy.” ‘I’m sorry, Bucky, but I can’t bear the thought of you being away for so long. I’m so lonely without you here. And I found a Jody who isn’t fighting for his country, and he cute and, more importantly, here, so, sorry about that,’ was the gist of it. “Good riddance,” he grumbles.

“Do you love him?” Bard asks.

“I’ve always loved him. It just changed over time.” He’s a little surprised how easily the words
Bard smiles. “Well, if anything comes up as things evolve, that’s definitely something we can talk about here. If you’re comfortable.”

Bucky sighs softly and looks out the window. “I’m never comfortable here, Bard. I’m never really comfortable anywhere.”

“I know,” Bard says patiently. “I just want you know that we don’t exclusively have to talk about PTSD all the time. We should focus on that, but if other issues come up, maybe I can help with that, too.”

“I know that’s what you meant,” Bucky says, looking back at him, his expression apologetic. “Sorry I’m being such a prick today. I shouldn’t take it out on you.”

“It’s okay. I can handle it. Do you think you might need your meds adjusted? Your sleep meds?”

“I’m okay.”

“How many hours are you sleeping a night?”

“Maybe three or four.”

“And you don’t want your meds adjusted?” Bard asks with suspicion.

“I’m sick of meds, and I don’t want to take more than I am now. I want to feel this. I need to.”

Bard nods in the way he does when he’s about to call Bucky out on something. It’s such a clear tell that Bucky usually knows exactly what’s coming next. “Is this your stuck point about deserving to suffer?”

“Oh, probably,” Bucky says with a thin smile. “Don’t worry, I’ll do some sheets on it. Who knows, maybe they’ll actually work.”

Over the next week and a half, Bucky does sheets. Sheets and sheets and sheets. He has a pile of them, and he reviews the ones he’s already completed every day. He asks Sam to help with some, which Sam excels at. He helps Bucky cut through some of his stuckness joyfully (maybe a little too joyfully), tells him when he’s full of shit, and claps him on the shoulder encouragingly when frustration curls his fingers into fists.

Having Sam there makes it easier for Bucky to separate the work he’s doing from Steve, even though he has a mounting list of things related to his stuck points that he badly wants to talk to Steve about. Sam’s competency only extends so far, because he only knows Bucky so well. And Bucky, he only knows himself so well too, and he barely trusts the few things he does know. For now, Bucky keeps a record of these matters in the back of his notebook under the heading “Things to Talk to Steve About.”

Bucky’s days and nights remain fraught with memories, often unpleasant ones, dragging along their concomitant snarls of stuck points and shitty emotions. They have a more natural rhythm to them now. He knows they’ll come when he’s alone. When he’s trying to fall asleep. When he wakes from sleep in the middle of the night. When he’s working on his homework. Sometimes they’ll creep up when he’s with the others, especially Steve. Usually some variation on how dare you think you deserve any of this emerges, or maybe something about his hands.
So many of his worst memories involve his hands. Pulling triggers, driving knives, punching faces, kidneys, and ribs, assembling weapons, smashing skulls, strangling necks, Howard, Martha, Howard, Martha, Tony effing Stark, then on and on, the trail of memory and thought diverting, circling, plummeting, each thread unwinding five others.

Inevitably, there are threads and threads that lead in some way to Steve, and less often in a purely platonic way. Bucky’s become preoccupied with sex, like puberty redux, as if the first wasn’t awkward enough. They touch now, frequently, sometimes deliberately, sometimes passively. Mostly arms, hands, and fingers, mostly in the privacy of one of their rooms while ostensibly doing something else like talking or watching TV. Everything is both exquisitely and frustratingly chaste, and Bucky berates himself for wanting more and for the blistering obscenity of some of his thoughts.

He’s also discovered an insecurity around sex that he hasn’t had since he was fourteen, when he was first kissing girls, feeling them up, clumsily fingering them when they’d let him. He hasn’t had sex with anyone since New Year’s Eve of 1943, when he went back to a drunk WAC’s tiny apartment during his final spell of R&R in London. And even that was something of a bust, because all she did was give him sloppy head before passing out. No effort on his part was involved, except for picking her up and tucking her, fully uniformed, into her bed. The only thing memorable about it was that he was never with anyone again. He wonders despondently if he even knows how to kiss anymore.

And he can’t read Steve to save his life. He can’t tell if Steve’s holding back for his own comfort or if he thinks it’s what Bucky needs. Maybe both. Sometimes doubts creep into his mind about whether Steve even wants him like that at all. That certainly would fit his stuck points about being undesirable. Perhaps some of his doubts are because Steve has historically been solidly virginal in his eyes. Surely he can’t be an actual virgin anymore, not with his body, his face, his charm, and his celebrity status. In truth, Bucky simply hasn’t seen that side of Steve, though he anxiously hopes that it not only exists but is also as raw and ravenous as his own.

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On Wednesday, Bucky goes with everyone to the gym. Steve’s adopted him as his spotter, as he’s the only one who can handle the amount of weight Steve can lift, his typical bench running between 700 and 750 pounds for multiple reps and multiple sets. Bucky thoroughly enjoys the view from above and hopes it’s not too obvious that he does. It’s becoming harder to remain impassive about these things.

Bucky’s also been recruited by Scott and Sam to teach them advanced combatives. Bucky absolutely refused the first two times they asked. The thought of even casually sparring with them struck a deep nerve, inflamed with pain from the many regrettable – if involuntary – incidents of dealing serious physical harm to Steve, Sam, and others he would now consider friendlies. He was nervous about his ability to restrain himself, about going into some old Winter Soldier fighting mode, a state of flow and muscle memory, which only terminates when someone’s dead or has escaped under the greatest duress. He ran some stuck points about his dangerousness through his CPT worksheets, and there was enough doubt generated by the end that he capitulated and said yes. So far, so good. No accidental murders or serious injuries thus far.

After finishing, they all tromp back to their living quarters, alive with post-workout energy. Bucky can almost see himself sitting at the table so many weeks ago, cringing at the thought of interacting with the others, body and mind heavy with melancholy and self-pity. They make small talk in the kitchen as everyone rattles around the cupboards and fridge for nutrition. Steve is making them both his special shake, which lights up Bucky’s eyes, because everything Steve does now glistens
with a new sheen. It means something different now. To Bucky, anyway. Maybe it always meant the same thing to Steve. Maybe he always made Bucky’s shakes with such affection, and Bucky was just too sick to notice.

Because he was sick. Very sick. He can see that clearly now. By medical and psychological definitions, he still is.

But goddamn it, he’s fighting it harder than he’s fought anything else in his life, because he’s finally caught a glimpse of what happiness looks like. What recovery looks like. There are moments that he’s with Steve when he can’t tell what century he’s in, how old he is, what he’s seen or done previously in his life. These moments exist out of time, untouched by suffering. There’s only silence and weightlessness and the warmth of Steve’s body against his own. They’re only moments, and he knows that’s not how real life goes, but maybe in recovery there are more moments like these. Maybe in recovery, these moments aren’t intercepted by vicious countercoups that wrench him back into time, throwing him at the feet of all of his sins, kicking him while he’s sprawled there, warning him to keep his face in the dirt where it belongs, for there is a lifetime of penance to pay and no room for men like him among the stars.

Later that evening, he helps Wanda prepare dinner, because fuck the misogynistic, homophobic rantings of George Barnes. He likes being in the kitchen. After dinner, they all watch a movie, and he sits so close to Steve that the entire length of their thighs touch. He remembers exactly jack shit about the movie because of this. Afterwards, Bucky has every intention of pulling Steve into his room, God knows exactly what for. Definitely something more than just handholding. But Sam suddenly has things he wants to talk to Steve about, and Bucky’s too big of a chicken shit to try to draw Steve away with some lewd suggestion of what he wants to do, something on the light side from the compendium of perversions he has stored in his mind.

So he goes to bed, horny and frustrated and too pissed off to even rub one out. Pissed at Sam for having the nerve to want time alone with his own best friend, then pissed at himself for anything he can think of in that moment. Sleep eventually draws him in, no thanks to his own efforts. In his foul mood, he forgot to take both his meds.

And he pays for it.

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His lungs are filled with fluid. At least, that’s how they feel. His coughing, wet and productive, scrapes their insides. He rolls his head over the side of his cot and spits a thick wad of greenish-brown sputum onto the floor. He rests his cheek on the cold metal frame. It feels good against his overheated skin. His glassy eyes drift to the metal plate near the door, which contains a hunk of bread and some sort of stew, now hours cold. It’s something the guys on the floor would throw punches over, but he can barely muster enough energy to eject the sickness from his body, let alone crawl out of the cot and close the few feet of distance to get to it. He knows one could assist the other, that eating is something he should do to keep up his strength.

But keep it up for what? His escape? Unlikely. He tried to work something out some time ago, he can’t say how many days. He sleeps in such irregular, fitful spells that he can’t even count meals. When they first brought him back, he tried to memorize as much as he could, but he was drifting in and out of consciousness then, so he only has a disjointed series of untrustworthy flashes to go off of. Plus, he’s sick as a fucking dog, delirious with fever, sicker than he’s ever been in his life, and he thinks he might have crossed the point of no return somewhere around the past day or so.

He occupies his mind with thoughts about his sister, his mother, and Steve. It keeps him from despairing too much. He pretends Steve’s okay, that he’s healthy, that he’s holding down a job,
paying the rent, that he’s not worrying because it’s been so long since he’s written. He gets it now, what it’s like to be deathly ill, to experience a kind of manic disbelief at how weak the body feels when it’s being consumed by infection, and the absolute lack of control over the process. It makes him happy that he could be there for Steve when he was like this, because the magnitude of that disbelief is second only to the barren isolation of grave illness.

Guess that’s why they call this the isolation ward, ha-ha-ha-haaaaaa. He almost laughs. He really almost does.

Suddenly, there’s a sharp clang, then the scraping of metal. He tenses weakly but doesn’t bother to lift his head. Two goons enter first, dressed in their threatening goon gear, followed by a thin man dressed in a white lab coat. Lab Coat sets down a bucket and a hand towel.

“You will wash yourself,” Lab Coat tells him in heavily accented English.

Two weeks ago, he’d already be swimming in that bucket. He’s so unspeakably filthy – all the guys are – that he doesn’t even remember what clean skin feels like.

But now, all he can think is why? For what? For his funeral? Sure as shit, it’s not for anything good.

“No.”

“You will wash yourself,” Lab Coat repeats. “Or we will wash you.”

“The fuck you will,” he mutters. “Go fuck yourself.”

With a nod from Lab Coat, the goons move forward. Goon 1 kicks his legs off the cot and yanks him by the arm to pull him upright. Goon 2 moves to grab him, but he rides a surge of survival energy and plants the heel of his boot into his balls. This earns him a hard whack across the cheek with the butt of Goon 1’s pistol.

Now he really does laugh as he slumps over bonelessly, which descends into a fit of rough coughing. Goon 1 moves to grab his shoulder again, but he swats him away.

“Fine, fine. I’ll wash,” he finally says through his hacking. “Now fuck off.”

They leave his cell and close the door. He lifts his torso and sees that Goon 1 is watching him through the observation window. Slowly, he begins peeling off his uniform, which is an otherworldly sort of foul, crusted with two months’ worth of dried sweat, mud, ash, blood, and another man’s vomit. He throws each piece in a pile at the foot of his cot.

When he’s finally naked, save for his dog tags, his door opens again, and Goon 1 swiftly grabs all his clothes and slams the door shut behind him. He’s too slow to even process what’s happening until it’s already happened.

For a minute he just sits, buck-ass naked, perched on the edge of his cot, swaying a little, pondering what will happen after he washes the grime and stench from his body.

Only one way to find out, he figures. He also figures he’s definitely dead now, that whatever they’re planning to do with him will take him out even before the pneumonia. He’s heard the blood-curdling screams of others, some voices he recognized, most he didn’t. A bizarre sense of existential calm washes over him, because after two months of uncertainty, war followed by captivity, he finally knows what’s coming next. And if they’re going to take him, if they’re just going to kill him anyway, he’s at least going make it unpleasant for them every step of the way,
whether with his words and whatever final reserves of strength he has. And one other thing’s for sure – he’s gonna die a clean man.

He tries to stand, but his knees give out almost immediately. Instead, he drops to the floor and sits on the cold concrete. He then reaches over, grabs the towel, and dips it into the freezing water. Joke’s on you, assholes, he thinks with a twisted smile. Although it was probably intended to be aversive, the cold water feels like a godsend as he drags the wet towel over his emaciated body, which is still fantastically sore and bruised from Lohmer beating the everloving fuck out of him.

He takes his time. It’s the first thing he’s found even remotely pleasant since he got off the ship, so he wants it to last, especially if this is the final thing he ever does. Goon 1 watches him through the observation window entire time.

“Like the view?” he asks, then presses his lips together in a kissing face. “You gonna be thinking of me next time you stick it in your ugly wife?” He says the words real loud and real slow, with an accompanying gesture around the “stick it in” part, just in case it doesn’t translate so well.

He can’t see the goon’s face because of his goon mask, but from the way he starts flashing his sidearm and yelling, he imagines he gets the gist. He’s glad he waited until he was mostly done washing to pull that one, because not 15 seconds later, the door is open, and they’re dragging him out of his cell.

They lift him onto a leather-upholstered table. He thrashes feebly, which is the best his half-dead body can manage, even with a push of adrenaline. They strap him down with thick restraining belts at the torso and thighs. His heart is racing wildly, and he swallows back a fit of coughing as his body tries to hyperventilate.

“Sergeant Barnes.”

The little man with the droopy eyes emerges from the shadows. He flips the switches of the surgical lamps that hang above him, which are so bright that he starts to see black spots. He’s seen the man before, Doctor Dickface Zola, trolling around their holding cells with his goon squad. Picking off the weak and sick.

“Do you know who I am, Sergeant Barnes?”

“Orson Welles’ inbred cousin?” he sputters, the sound part terrified laugh, part choking on phlegm.

“I understand you are very sick,” Zola says, ignoring the insult. “Very sick, indeed.”

“I’m very sick because you won’t give me any medicine, you stupid fuck.”

“I thought we might try a different sort of remedy.” He pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “Something that could benefit the greater good.”

“No, thanks. I’m not feelin’ very generous today.”

Zola’s eyes pass over his body from toe to head, and then he pats him on the shoulder in a way that could be construed as affectionate if he were anywhere but a medical torture dungeon.

Zola then says one word in German, and suddenly he’s swarmed by lab technicians, four of them, seeming to materialize out of nowhere, each with a loaded syringe in their dominant hand. He hisses weakly as they begin poking at him, injecting whatever the hell into his arms, shoulders, chest, abdomen, thighs, and calves, trading out empty syringes for new ones full of electric yellow liquid once they’ve emptied everything into him. The goons loosen the straps. He throws his
elbows and fists and kicks like crazy, but like a child trying to fight off grownups, the goons easily overpower him. They roll him onto his side, and the techs drive needles into his upper and lower back, buttocks, and hamstrings. They then slam him back down on the table and strap him in tightly. Someone feeds a needle into the top of his hand and pumps in liquid of a slightly different hue, this one more piss-colored.

The injection sites burn like wasp stings at first, and that same sting permeates his vasculature from the IV. But then the pain burns deeper, and burning becomes cramping, like an unrelenting, full-body Charley horse. He writhes in agony, his jaw clenching and clamping down so hard that one of his bottom molars cracks. One of the technicians takes notes, regarding him aloofly, as if bored.

This pain, it turns out, is but an appetizer. He’s soon learns that he’s never known pain, real pain, until another technician rolls over a large, menacing-looking device, which they position over him. It looks like a space gun from *Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe*, and his eyes go wide with fear when they aim it at his legs. His entire body breaks out in sweat and he shivers, trembles, still cramping, while Zola exchanges foreign words with the techs.

They all put on protective goggles, and his face contorts with bewilderment when they put a pair on him, too. He then realizes they’re not killing him, not trying to anyway, which fills him with abject terror.

With a self-satisfied smile, Zola flips the switch on the space gun. And he screams and screams...

…and he screams, bolting upright. He frantically scans his surroundings as he gasps for air. His lungs are clear. He sees the full moon, which soaks the room with light. He’s in his bed, the blankets twisted around his legs and middle, bedding soaked through with his sweat. He curses, closes his mouth, and breathes heavily through his nose. His lips draw into a tight line of ire. He throws off his covers and climbs out of bed.

He rarely dreams of Zola and rarely thinks of his time in the isolation ward. Rarely remembers the aftermath of the events of his dream. When he woke up in his cell after, his atrophied muscles reconstituted, his pneumonia gone. When they gave him a dead man’s clothes to wear. When he broke Goon 1’s neck and nearly bludgeoned a tech to death with his meal tray. When they threw a canister of sedative gas in his room every time they needed to work on him. When Steve found him one night, babbling and mumbling as the sedative burned off.

He spent the better part of his remaining days as a Commando deep-sixing these memories, he thought for good. He thought successfully. But like so many others, these memories too have come calling in recent weeks, clamoring for his attention, impervious to his efforts to suppress them.

Remembering Kreischberg almost destroys him. It always has. It’s a special kind of pain, the pain of absolute vulnerability, of absolute victimhood. He did nothing, *nothing*, to earn what happened there. Any of it. None of them did. All the men he hurt and killed before and during the battle of Azzano were put down under the clean auspices of declared war. And before that, he was normal. Just a regular guy with a regular blue-collar job doing regular guy things.

Those people weren’t Wehrmacht. They weren’t even Nazis. They weren’t taking revenge for the losses he personally caused them. They were something else entirely, and they stole him. Zola and the others, Hydra – they fucking *stole* him.

He paces the length of his room, fuming, beating back the insidious creep of anguish and, God, what is that? He huffs and angrily pulls off his t-shirt, which is cold and wet, and throws it in the
corner, leaving him in nothing but his underwear. He paces and paces, barely burning off anything, unable to string together two pieces of logic, unable find a single tool he’s learned.

There’s a knock at his door. He stops pacing and glares at it. His body is frozen in a position of readiness, and he hears the soft whirs of a perfunctory left arm functions check. After a few more heavy slams of his heart against the wall of his chest, he grits out reluctant permission to enter, because he’s pretty sure he knows who it is.

The knob clicks and the door slowly opens. Steve walks through, dressed in his sleep clothes – a t-shirt and drawstring pants. He closes the door behind him and moves towards Bucky, his steps light and cautious.

“I heard you pacing,” Steve says quietly. He avoids mention of the screaming, which Bucky knows was actually the first thing he heard.

Bucky doesn’t say anything. He’s trying – God, how he’s trying – to calm himself down. But this is when he’s dangerous, he thinks. This is when he could hurt people. When he’s about to explode. When his fuse is burning, burning, burning down to the core.

Steve doesn’t seem to read this, or if he does, he ignores the danger here like in so many other domains of his life. He doesn’t stop. He doesn’t hesitate. He wraps his arms around Bucky and holds him.

Bucky’s respiration rate ticks up as the black hole blooms in his stomach, its event horizon spreading wide, sucking in Zola and the ward and his bleak helplessness and some of his fury. He still feels unhinged, so he doesn’t touch back.

“Oh, Buck…” Steve whispers against his temple, squeezing him tighter, holding and holding him, then releasing him and stepping back a little, his hands lingering on his upper arms. Bucky stays still, just looking. He wonders what Steve sees that casts such sorrow on his face and seizes his voice. He also wonders if Steve grieves for the person Hydra stole from him, if this is what grief looks like. Or maybe he grieves for what’s left over. He wonders if you can grieve for someone who’s still alive.

He feels tugging as a thread pulls back through time, back to when only some parts of him were gone, left behind in that factory, the parts that didn’t know what real cruelty was, what real sickness or suffering were. He sees the two of them in their tent on the day his blood and humanity spilled out and seeped into the snow. He sees himself, railing against his own nature, and Steve’s face, stricken with hurt. He sees himself decades later, in his bed, railing against his sadness, humming about apple trees and aching with regret. He sees a repeating pattern of the things he wants taken by the words and actions of others. His father. His captors. All of the poison they left in him so that he doesn’t even need them anymore, so that he can damage himself in perpetuity.

But he can’t lose anything else to them. He won’t. Not now. He won’t give another goddamn inch of himself, because that inch is all he has left. At some point, he has to stop placing sacrifices on the altar of his past, and that point might as well be now.

With that decision, he leans forward and kisses Steve on the mouth, just briefly. He pulls back, and like a fast-moving storm, Bucky watches as Steve’s eyes narrow, focus, and darken. Bucky moves in to kiss him again, and their mouths meet with intention. They touch and kiss at first as if the other might break, which falls away after a short time when neither of them does.

The charge between them intensifies quickly, and soon Bucky’s pushing Steve back, fists balled in his shirt. It turns out that he does remember how to kiss – kiss hard, kiss deep – and Steve knows
how, too. Steve’s legs hit the foot of Bucky’s bed, and he breaks contact to let himself fall back. Bucky lifts his knee onto the mattress and plants it at Steve’s hip. He then pushes Steve’s chest with open hand, and Steve lays himself upon the bed. Bucky crawls after him on all fours.

“Oh, God,” Steve whispers, to God, himself, him, or nobody, Bucky’s not sure.

“What’s wrong?” Bucky asks, kneeling tall at Steve’s side, his body painted with moonlight.

Steve’s eyes rake over him. He then lifts his hand and lays it on Bucky’s sternum, from where it trails down, down, over his stomach, pausing momentarily at the band of his underwear and then sliding, slowly, coming to rest over his cock, which is hard and straining against the fabric. Bucky sighs at feel of it, and he lays his hand over Steve’s, pushing it closer as he presses himself against his palm.

He looks down at Steve, whose full lips are parted, his own cock visibly twitching beneath the thin material of his pants. He wonders how the hell the universe made such an error in accounting when it decided that he could have this man. This beautiful, flawed, incredible man. He sears this moment in his memory – the moment when they finally laid waste to wall he so diligently constructed and crossed the un-crossable line. And the world did not end. And they reveled in it wholly.

Steve then twists his hand to grab Bucky’s, and he pulls him down, pulls him in, devours his mouth. Bucky unfolds his body and presses it against Steve, grinding against him while his hand slides up his shirt. Steve touches him back, everywhere he can reach. Bucky had forgotten what this feels like to have someone want him. And not just to say it, but to show it with hands and lips and hardness. They make out, hungrily, and the sound of their heavy breathing fills the room. Somehow, miraculously, in his ecstatic state of lust, Bucky keeps his hands out of Steve’s pants, because he doesn’t trust himself not to go too far.

And then.

And then Steve rolls him, flat on his back against the cold, sweat-drenched part of the bed he woke up in. And then Steve is on top of him, one thigh between his legs, bracing himself on his hands, looking down at him, wanting.

And then, like the flip of a switch, Bucky’s eyes go wide, and panic sets in, and he’s overwhelmed by the sudden surge of vulnerability he feels, catapulting violently back into the past, blinded by fear, suddenly forgetting that Steve is Steve and Steve is safe.

The assault on his reasoning is fast and ruthless, and he acts on pure instinct. He shoves Steve away and scrambles to the edge of the bed, where he drops his feet to the floor and sits, shaking with nerves and hot with humiliation, elbows on his knees, holding his head as he settles back into the present. Back into his body. Very slowly, as the logical parts of his brain rewire, he links the sequence of events, which spells out a pathetic cautionary tale of what happens when a ruined man tries to pretend he’s not ruined.

“Are you okay?” he hears Steve ask, his question heavy with worry.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Bucky repeats under his breath, his throat so tight that he almost gags.

He feels the bed shake, then he feels Steve’s arms wrap around him from behind, linking in front of his chest.
“No, you don’t get to be sorry for this,” Steve says soberly. “This was my fault.”

Bucky shakes his head, blinking back the stinging in his eyes. It’s the closest he’s come to crying since he woke from cryo. Part of him wants to cry, desperately, because all he wanted was one fucking thing for himself, one small thing that Hydra or PTSD couldn’t wrench back out of his hands once he took hold of it. How stupid, he thinks. How stupid and naïve and childish to think that there would be no consequence, no payment, no sacrifice, even for that one thing.

“I’m so tired….” Bucky starts to say, voice cracking, breaking. Tired of being a burden. Tired of hating himself. Tired of remembering. Tired of everything.

“I know you are,” Steve says, laying his cheek on top of Bucky’s head. “I know.”

They sit like that for Bucky doesn’t know how long. A while, he imagines. Long enough for Bucky to expend most of his remaining energy fighting back tears and choking back his sadness, eventually winning on both fronts.

“Can we go to your room?” Bucky asks into the darkness.

Steve releases him and slides off the bed. He takes Bucky by the hand and leads him there. They crawl into Steve’s bed and converge near the middle, curling on their sides, facing each other. Between their bodies, they join hands. They look at each other, Steve’s expression warm with a hint of concern creasing his brow. Bucky’s, by contrast, is a mask of emptiness. He breaks eye contact and stares down at the lump under the comforter where their hands are.

“I want you,” Bucky says. The last thing he wants is for Steve to get the wrong idea about that. “Don’t think that I don’t, because I do. I have for a long time.” Something starts to trickle into the emptiness then, heating his face. “You wouldn’t believe the things I think about.”

Steve lets out an edgy breath. “I bet I’ve got you beat there,” he says, and then, very seriously: “And it was my fault. I went too fast, and I should’ve known better. I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.” He frowns. “I just keep fucking things up, don’t I?”

Bucky’s face grows even warmer, both from Steve’s admission and from his apology. How many times has he fantasized about that exact thing? Steve pushing him down, hovering over him, looking at him like that. But God, he didn’t know, either. He didn’t know it would scare him. Disorient him. Throw him back on that cold leather table.

“You didn’t fuck up,” Bucky assures him. “There’s no way you could have known, because even I didn’t know. This is just me. This is the type of shit I’m trying to work out. And I will work it out.”

He doesn’t know exactly what changed or when it did, but something in him has shifted radically over the past few weeks. Where hopelessness once reigned there’s now a small but fierce determination kindling. All his beliefs about not deserving to get better, about deserving suffering, they still feel very true to him. But something else is becoming possible, too – the idea that these might just be thoughts. Cognitive malfunctions. Habits. Failures of logic. Bucky wants to uncover it all, tear apart the lies, sort reality from its distortions, bear down like a maniac until everything burns away except the truth. Whatever that is.

Bucky looks back up at Steve, his face tired but resolute. “I’m not gonna stop working until I get my life back. I’ve decided that. I don’t know what the fuck having my life back means, or what I’ll be left of myself when I take out all the trash, but I like the idea of it.”

He pauses for a moment, gathering his thoughts, then continues.
“I know my life will probably never be normal again. It’ll never be like it was before. I don’t know how it could be. But at least it’ll be my own.”

Steve smiles bittersweetly. “I wish you could see yourself the way I see you.”

“What do you mean?”

“You see yourself as all these things, these terrible things. As weak, as a monster…” Steve’s expressive blue eyes search Bucky’s face in the dim light. “But all I see when I look at you is goodness and strength. I wish you could see that.”

“Me, too,” Bucky replies softly. “Maybe soon. That’s why I’m working so hard. It feels like a long shot, but maybe it’s possible.”

Steve squeezes Bucky’s hand, then glances over his shoulder, out the window. “Sun’s coming up.”

Bucky groans. “Already?”

“I don’t know about you, but I’m feeling a bit under the weather,” Steve says. “I might have to stay in bed for most of the day. Don’t want to get the others sick.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll take care of you.” Bucky closes his eyes. “Later. When I wake up.”

“You’re missed your calling as a nurse, you know. You got some real bedside manner.”

“I thought you liked my bedside manner,” Bucky says, opening one eye and smirking. He swears he sees Steve blush, even in the darkness. “Well, yeah, now that I’ve finally seen it.”

They both close their eyes, and Bucky hears Steve quickly drift into sleep. Bucky’s not sure if he’ll be able to join him. He’s exhausted, painfully so, but there’s also a small thrill in his body and mind that won’t settle.

*What a fucking day,* he thinks. What a fucking rollercoaster. And what a fucking lucky break, that he had a meltdown and somehow bounced back, that he’s here in Steve’s bed, that he’s kissed him, felt him, that they’re here, and that things are okay.

Somehow, he is absolutely, completely okay. If only for this moment. And that’s good enough for him.

**Chapter End Notes**

I referenced Captain America: First Vengeance #7 for parts of Bucky’s dream/memory, which is also the issue where Dum Dum calls Bucky “Jimmy” for a bunch of panels, which amuses me greatly.

Bucky’s trip to New York (true story!) was sourced from Captain America Vol 5 #11
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Bucky struggles to reconcile his time with Hydra. Steve takes Bucky on a field trip.

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all the kudos and lovely comments. Just a heads-up: my posting throughout the months of December and January may be more erratic because of upcoming academic obligations, but I will try to post as often as I can.

Friday

The next session is not an easy one. Bucky and Bard run circles around each other for over an hour, spinning their wheels on the stuck point I wasn't treated that badly by Hydra. It's a stuck point that Bucky fought Bard over to even include on his list in the first place, insisting that it’s true and that it isn’t keeping him stuck. That it’s an incontrovertible fact. He can generate a list of things that could have been worse.

“Like what?” Bard asks, expression doubtful.

“Well, nobody ever raped me.” At least, he doesn’t think they did. He doesn’t remember anything like that.

“Well, that’s good,” Bard replies, scratching his beard, “but don’t you think that’s kind of a low bar?”

Bard has Bucky run the stuck point through the worksheets. When Bucky comes up with nothing on both, Bard makes a concerted effort to try to reframe Bucky’s view on the subject by asking his own series of questions. In response, Bucky contorts his logic into a sequence of novel arrangements that seem to leave Bard perplexed, frustrated, and, dare he say, impressed. In fact, Bard even tells him as much.

“I’m impressed with how much effort you’re putting into defending Hydra, which is essentially what you’re doing when you minimize your time in captivity. I can tell by your face that you don’t even like it when I use the term ‘captivity.’”

He hates the word. He thinks of Austria as captivity, because he raged against that with every breath he had. But his life with Hydra after he fell felt more like a… what? He has trouble putting a word to it. Not a voluntary arrangement, but at least something that was agreeable enough to him that he didn’t take advantage of the countless opportunities he had to escape it.

“I’m not defending Hydra,” Bucky says irritably.

“Really? Could have fooled me.”
“And why would I minimize it?”

Bard purses his lips. “I would guess it’s a defense mechanism, because if you were to acknowledge how terrible it really was, that could be emotionally overwhelming. Making up nice stories about your time with Hydra, saying your handlers weren’t mean or that it wasn’t so bad or that you weren’t a victim, it protects you from that. But it’s not the truth.”

Bard pauses, making a pensive face as he taps the end of his pen against his portfolio before continuing.

“I try not to insert my personal opinion into our work too much, because it’s not about me. But I’ll break that rule of thumb here to say this, because I think it might be good for you to hear: What they did to you is some of the most fucked up shit I’ve ever heard of, pardon my French. And I’ve made a career out of working with victims of torture, genocide, you name it. If you want the truth, as you told me you do, you have to be prepared for all the emotional fallout of that, because it will be big.”

Some of the most fucked up shit I’ve ever heard of. The phrase reverberates in Bucky’s head. It bounces and echoes and tumbles.

Bucky bites his thumbnail. “Shouldn’t some things just be left alone?” he asks. “If I’m making sense of it by minimizing it or whatever, what’s wrong with that?”

Bard’s mouth quirks, his disagreement with this tack obvious. “But all that minimization ties back to ‘I am not a victim’ which, as I’ve said before, is your core stuck point. The one around which many others revolve. You’re still not letting yourself go there. Until you break through that one, I don’t think you’re gonna make it very far in your recovery.”

Bucky’s not trying to be obstinate or obtuse. He’s really not. Bard’s right – there is a Berlin Wall-sized block around that part of his experience. Maybe what he needs is perspective from someone else who can interpret what happened in ways that he can’t. Maybe if he hears it enough or hears it in the right way, something will shake loose.

His thoughts go immediately to Steve. After all, didn’t he say he wanted to know about what happened? Of course, Bucky also has reservations about saying anything to him about that period of his life, because he doesn’t want Steve to have to live with the details of what went through. But then, even the existence of that reservation suggests that the stuff is bad, or really “fucked up shit,” as Bard coined it. If anyone can take something and polarize it radically in a chosen direction, it’s Steve. Maybe he can take the information and distill it into a neutron star of truth so obvious that even Bucky can’t deny it. Maybe he’ll be brilliant at it. Maybe it’ll really help.

Speaking of Steve.

Bucky knows he should say something, and a strong part of him wants to. Because he said he would work on it, that he will work on it. And he really does want to.

Still, maybe it’s his maleness, or the fact that he grew up in the 1920s, or the fact that he’s still trying to debride the rotten remains of his resistance to his own personal queerness, but Bucky feels like he’d rather punch himself in the face repeatedly rather than talk to Bard about his sex life. Or, more specifically, his sexual inadequacy.

He curls his left hand into a loose fist and rests his chin on it. He tosses around language in his head, testing different ways to say:
Steve and I were fooling around two days ago – did I mention we’re doing that now? – and then just when things were getting really hot I had a boner-destroying flashback and a meltdown and I almost started crying like a child and then I slept in his bed all day and I’m still sleeping in it and I’m nervous about touching him again in a sexual way because I don’t want to be embarrassing and weak but I want to touch him like that all the time because I’m fucking obsessed with him and please help me not be so messed up around this because I’m gonna lose my mind here pretty soon if I don’t make some sense out of this.

Somehow he stitches together a description of what happened that’s factual and preserves a little bit of his dignity. It’s strange, because he could always talk shop about sex with his peers without even blushing – his friends, the guys in his unit, partners he’s had over the years. But something about doing it in therapy makes him profoundly uncomfortable.

“Probably because you’re not just ‘talking shop’ about sex,” Bard explains when Bucky tells him this. “What you’re really talking about is PTSD. In my clinical experience, sexual issues with PTSD are the rule, not the exception. And that makes a lot of sense, because sex involves matters of safety, trust, power, control, intimacy, and esteem, which are areas that are often negatively impacted by PTSD.”

“I don’t want next time to be like that,” Bucky tells him. “I want it to be good. I wanna be confident that I’m not gonna freak out.”

“I don’t necessarily think it’ll happen just like that again. Think about all of the very specific triggers leading up to it. You had a horrible nightmare about being very vulnerable, your fight-flight system was cranked up to 11, you were having your first sexual experience with someone you’re still rebuilding trust with, and he’s not exactly a small guy. He’s capable of – ”

“Steve would never hurt me like that,” Bucky interjects bluntly.

“I’m sure you’re right, but your brain clearly didn’t know that at the time. All it perceived was a big, strong guy manhandling you. So when you combine all of those triggers together, don’t you think it makes sense that things went the way they did?”

“I guess.”

“There are a few approaches you can take, aside from continuing to do the work we’re doing here. One, you can try to use the mindfulness techniques you learned during our first few sessions to stay in the present in your body while you’re together, so that you’re less likely to get sucked into your head. Another approach is to ask if you can take the lead on things for a while, until you’re more confident that you can handle being intimate with him. Unless he has a bunch of power and control issues himself, I imagine he won’t mind.”

“Well, part of the problem is that I don’t really know what I’m doing.” He grits his teeth in discomfort. “Procedurally.”

From a practical perspective, he has no fucking clue how to be good at sex with a man. He doesn’t know how to give a good blowjob. He knows what he likes, but receiving and giving are two different things, one requiring substantially more skill. And he only had one girlfriend who ever asked him to give it to her in the ass, and she was less of a fan of it than she thought she’d be (was that my fault? he now wonders), so it only happened once. He’s pretty sure it’s different with a guy, anyway. For all of his sexual adventurousness, nobody’s ever gone up there for him either, and, even worse, he’s never really explored that part of himself.

One of the few things he prided himself on in his old life was that he was good at sex – at least, as
far as he could tell from his partners. He worked hard at it. And now, like then, he wants to be
good. He wants to make Steve feel good. But he’s about as good as a virgin at this point, the way
he’s got it figured.

Bard smiles. “That’s the beauty of the internet. There’s a lot of really good information about sex.
Straight up educational stuff. There’s also a ton of bad information and pornography, too, which
I’d avoid if you want to feel more confident in that regard. Just don’t get so preoccupied with being
great in bed that you end up avoiding the emotional experience of it. If you’re treating it like a
mission rather than something you’re doing to connect to someone you care about, it’s not going to
be nearly as fulfilling. And, like I said, it’s just another form of avoidance.”

“Yeah, yeah, avoidance is bad. I get it.”

This concern is not off the mark. Even though Bard isn’t privy to much of anything about his life
from before the war, he’s apparently already tuned into Bucky’s standard operating mode when it
comes to sex: high hedonic enjoyment, high technical proficiency, and almost zero emotional
intimacy. It’s not a tradition he wishes to continue, but he’s not quite sure what sex would be like
any other way.

“Don’t forget to have fun,” Bard says. “And be safe.”

Bucky covers his face with both hands. “Can we stop talking about this now?”

Bard smiles wider. “Sure. But you brought it up.”

“I know, and you’ve been very helpful,” he says, lowering his hands. “Thank you. Now can we talk
about something less personal?”

“Like your PTSD?”

The humor is not lost on Bucky, and he can’t help but smile too.

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Saturday

Steve looks ill, his skin pallid, his eyes glazed and staring listlessly at the rug Bucky bled out on a
few months ago. He’s on the far end of the couch with Bucky’s socked feet on his lap, his hands
resting on Bucky’s right shin. Bucky’s stretched out on his back, telling Steve about his time as the
Winter Soldier. Specifically, how he was treated by his handlers, the docs, and the techs. Steve
agreed to hear everything, to be his sounding board, to help him cut through it, to try to help him
see things the way everyone else apparently sees them. Bucky told him to be ruthless, to use
whatever leverage he has with their shared history, in order to help him. Do what needs to be done,
his told him.

There’s something Freudian about it, as far as he understands the cultural reference, lying on a
couch and speaking in freeform about his past as he looks up at the ceiling. Bucky speaks with a
detached nonchalance, as if recounting the plot of a movie he only sort of enjoyed, starting back as
far as he can remember. As he does this, as he tries to patch together a chronological narrative, he
realizes that there are giant swathes of time he can’t account for. This is the only time his voice
waivers, as the uncertainty settles in and he strains to recall nothingness. At one point, Scott
wanders in and appears to consider sitting with them, but Steve flashes him some look that Bucky
can’t see, and Scott nods big and slow before turning away and finding some other place to relax.

He starts by telling Steve about the structure of the Winter Soldier program. He talks about how
different primary handlers transformed the program and utilized him in different ways. How Lukin treated him like an agent of Hydra, sometimes like a person, and how Karpov revamped the program in the late 1980s and shaped him into a sophisticated weapons system. He talks about the chain of command, how orders came down from Hydra or one of their government or corporate subsidiaries, how his primary handlers ensured his readiness in Siberia before sending him out into the field to be managed by his secondaries.

Then he talks about sleep. He remembers at some point being deprived of sleep. Early on. He doesn’t know what year. When he only had one arm. They’d wait for him to fall asleep, then wake him up by blinding him with lights and deafening him with a scratchy recording of Kalinka-Malinka played over and over and over. Bucky sings a few bars of it for Steve, which comes as easily as breathing. He dreams of it. Hums it while he brushes his teeth. Whispers the lyrics under his breath when he cuts up vegetables. It’s indelibly grafted onto his brain. And when they sufficiently roused him wide awake, they’d turn everything off, wait until he fell asleep again, and repeat the process. He doesn’t remember to what end. Maybe there was no end. Maybe they just did it to do it.

Bucky then tells Steve about the darkness, the twin brother of sleep deprivation. Where they gloved and bound his arms and hands – he had two, at that point – and put something over his head that blocked out all light and sound. He has no idea how long this went on, but he recalls it being worse than not sleeping for a week, if only because of the hallucinations. He spent untold weeks trying to re-interpret reality after each round. Again, he doesn’t remember what the point was.

He tells Steve about the barf bucket film series. He tells him about the suicide movie and, for the first time, he wonders where they got all that footage. He then tells Steve about the time one of his secondary handlers saw him looking too long – maybe too wrong? – at a woman during one of his training exercises. It was only a look or two, maybe a single off-topic conversation with her, but when he returned to Siberia, they strapped him in, needled him up, and had him puking over pornographic movie clips. That is, until Karpov came in approximately fifteen minutes into the film and had an unholy screaming, throwing, shooting fit. Apparently they hadn’t cleared the exercise with him, so, after unhooking his IV and ushering him into a safe corner of the room, Karpov shot the secondary handler in the kneecap and trashed everything, including the projector and screen. He was one of those deep calm motherfuckers who barely sweat over anything, so seeing him lose his mind over that made Bucky wonder if Karpov might have actually cared about him. Or maybe he just hated having his authority undermined. He remembers that Karpov apologized to him afterwards for what happened, which was one of his fondest memories of his time with Hydra.

He tells Steve about being drugged in various ways to enhance his functioning. Dopaminergics to bolster his reward system around hitting targets. Amphetamines to sharpen his mind enough to acquire ten languages, learn multiple flight systems, weapons, anatomy and physiology, maps, covers, and whatever miscellany they chose in a brutally short period of time. He speaks with a dry chuckle about the tech whose job it was to wax off his body hair before his missions (“wonder who he pissed off to get that thankless task,” he says). When he glances over, he sees that Steve does not find this amusing. He flits over the casual violence and deprivation of necessities, the punching and kicking, the insults, the humiliation. These incidents were less common once Karpov took over, so he doesn’t think much of them anyway. Karpov didn’t want anyone damaging his equipment. Not too badly.

“All in all,” Bucky says at the end, “it wasn’t that bad. It couldn’t have been. After all, I stayed, didn’t I?”

“That’s your reasoning?” Steve asks, still staring at the floor. “Because you stayed, it couldn’t have
been that bad?”

Bucky shrugs. “I didn’t resist much, overall. I wanted to do my missions. I wanted to succeed. It wasn’t like Bucky Barnes was some angel sitting on my shoulder telling me not to kill people, and I had to fight him or something. I wanted to do all of it.”

“All of it?”

The question is heavy with implications about D.C., about Bucky’s multiple malfunctions during those missions once he began interacting with Steve. What’s not implied, but what comes to mind, is Ivanovich and Category 5-ing his way to New York. He’s gotten so used to saying “all of it” and still hasn’t successfully replaced his internal monologue around it to reflect the things he’s reconciled in the past few weeks.

Steve sighs. “I don’t get why you think that what happened was okay just because you thought it was okay then. You keep repeating that over and over, like it actually means something, but it doesn’t actually mean a goddamn thing. It just means that they brainwashed you to be okay with the way they treated you. And why wouldn’t they?”

It’s definitely a valid point. Bard said the same thing to him, how he keeps circling stubbornly around the same shoddy reasoning, like a broken algorithm.

Steve lightly slaps the bottom of Bucky’s foot a couple of times with his hand. “Get your shoes. We’re going on a field trip.”

Bucky’s left eyebrow lifts in suspicion, but he pulls his legs off of Steve so he can stand, then takes the hand he offers to help him off the couch. He goes to his room, which is still somewhat out of sorts from Wednesday night, and grabs his boots from the closet. After putting them on, he meets Steve in the hallway and follows him through the palace, past the guest quarters, skirting the edge of the palace proper, where they see T’Challa’s staffers bustling about with the business of running the country. They descend a minor stairwell, down to the ground floor, then out the door into the humid air.

The hangar.

The energy in Bucky’s steps wanes dramatically, and he visibly pulls behind Steve. Steve slows his pace so that Bucky catches up, looking over at him with a small smile that pulls him forward. They stop in front of the biometric access panel, where Steve waits for Bucky to press his hand against the scanner. Bucky wonders when Steve was last in here, since he wasn’t part of any of the trials. He imagines he was involved in the initial transport and unloading of everything from Siberia – the boxes and boxes of files, The Chair and its awful accessories. The scanner reads his fingertips and they hear a click as the magnetic lock releases.

It feels like forever since he’s been here, which is just fine by Bucky. They haven’t done any trials since his surgery, perhaps because Bard is finally satisfied that he will no longer prime. The overhead lights detect their motion and turn on sequentially with a series of hearty slamming noises. Before them, front and center, is The Chair. Despite his many, many times laying eyes on it since awakening from cryo, where no real negative consequence ever emerged from seeing it or being strapped into it or hearing Clint say The Words, he still feels a wave of nausea and dread every time he sees it. He feels it now and stops cold, regarding it warily.

Steve, on the other hand, does not stop. He moves forward, all calm and confidence, heading directly for The Chair. Bucky’s eyes go wide and his heart beats riotously when Steve closes in, turns on his heel, and takes a seat in it. A silhouette of acute discomfort passes over Steve’s face as
he settles, as he grips the armrests, but it seems to dissipate.

“What are you doing?” Bucky asks, his voice thin and distant over the thrum of his own pulse in his ears.

“You forgot to mention this part back on the couch,” Steve says smoothly. “But you didn’t actually forget, did you?”

“Get out of the chair, Steve.”

“Why?”

Bucky clenches his jaw tightly. His brain trips over the input it’s receiving. There is a profound incongruence between these two things, Steve and The Chair. One belongs in one world, the other in another. Steve belongs in a protected place, a safe place, a place without the burden of knowing what it feels like to be subjugated like an animal – worse, a machine, because even animals are afforded compassion.

“You know why,” Bucky says.

“I want you to say it.”

Slowly, his mind threads the two together. He imagines Steve being strapped down, pumped full of paralytics, having the guard shoved in his mouth, screaming behind it as he’s electrocuted, as his mind is destroyed… Panic twists his insides. He wants to run over and grab Steve, pull him out of it, drag him away from it, save him from it. But he’s immobilized.

“It’s bad,” Bucky says, regressing to primitive words, primitive emotions.

“But I thought things weren’t so bad for you with Hydra.”

“Please,” he begs, fists tightening, fear and anger saturating him.

Steve doesn’t relent. “Imagine if it were me. Imagine if I was tortured like you were, because what you described to me, that’s pure torture. Straight from the CIA handbook. Close your eyes and imagine it.”

Bucky says and does nothing.

“You said you wanted me to help you. This is how I’m helping you.” If Steve has any doubts about what he’s doing, he’s showing no sign of it.

The harsh sound of Bucky’s breathing is his only response – until he finally closes his eyes. And, God damn it, he does imagine it. Not very well, because every time an image forms, there is such a revolt in his guts, threatening to cost him his lunch, that he can barely hold onto any of them. He can’t access what he felt when he went through all of those things, but when he imagines Steve in his place, however briefly, he manages knock a small brick out of that Berlin Wall. It’s thin and narrow but still substantial enough for him to start to feel a powerful, poorly defined sensation, something that is akin to horror, only somehow worse. It has a flavor of devastation.

And as soon as he perceives it, he mentally scrambles to try to put that brick back. But he finds that it’s crumbled into dust.

“What you’re feeling now, that’s what we feel when we think about what they did to you,” he hears Steve say. “Me, Dr. Bard, Sam, the others. Anyone who knows even some of what you went
through feels the way you do now.”

Bucky turns around, slowly, unsteadily, away from the awful vision of Steve sitting there, which he seems to see even through his closed eyelids, like an afterimage permanently burned there. He brings a trembling hand to his forehead, pressing it there as he tries to ground himself.

“Why can you see how awful it would be for me, but you can’t see how awful it was for you?” Steve asks gently.

The best answer Bucky can come up with in this moment is the thing that seems the truest:

“Because you’re Steve Rogers. Because you’re good.”

“And you’re Bucky Barnes. And you’re good,” Steve retorts firmly.

“I don’t know about either of those things.”

Steve doesn’t push further, even though Bucky can feel that he wants to. And he’s glad. His brain is a confused, emotional mess of swill, and he couldn’t crank out a semi-coherent defense of himself if he wanted to.

He hears the creaking of decades-old leather and Steve’s footsteps coming toward him.

“Wanna go back?” Steve asks as he lays his hand on Bucky’s left shoulder, squeezing.

“Hell, yes. Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

Tuesday

Steve was good. Brilliant. As creative and merciless as Bucky needed him to be, doing the things that Bard couldn’t do. And like he hoped for – and he can’t believe now that he hoped for it – something’s been rattled. There’s no thunderclap moment of realization, no silvery beam of glorious revelation from the Tower of Insight. It’s very new and largely unformed, but it’s there. Through the churning, Bucky can feel his rigid false logic starting to buckle. It’s scary, especially when he thinks of what that false logic is there to protect him from. The monstrosity that lies beyond that wall. But he reminds himself, as he’s taken to doing multiple times a day, that this is what he needs to do to get better. And as the Russians are fond of saying, repetition is the mother of learning.

They’re lying in Steve’s bed, on top of the covers. They don’t even pretend to watch TV when they really don’t want to. They don’t devise excuses to be together anymore. But all of Bucky’s previous high hopes for using this time to explore the new dimension of their relationship have been crushed under the heel of all the shit from the hangar. The experience triggered a temporary backlash, a blaring *Abort!* signal inconsistent with everything he actually wants. It was something that made him shrink, fold in his emotions, and hide himself for a couple of days. He’s finally crawling out of it, because he’s grown weary of being alone, and because he can hear Bard’s voice in his head chittering about avoidance, and his own smartass retort of *yeah, yeah, avoidance is bad.*

He’s tried to tease out its genesis. Perhaps because he shared with Steve more about his experiences in Hydra than he’s shared with anyone except Bard, who’s presumably being well-paid by someone (T’Challa, he supposes guiltily) to hear about all of his “fucked up shit.” Perhaps this is his emotional-intimacy-is-weak-and-bad garbage from before the war. Or perhaps it’s because he’s recognized the alarming possibility, one that had not struck him before, that
something terrible could happen to Steve. This Steve. Strong and capable Steve. And instead of drawing him closer, this possibility made Bucky want to flee from everything they’re creating together, because the pain of that loss would surely grow more unbearable with every touch, every word, every shared moment.

Whatever the origin of this backslide, he feels about as sexual as a turnip at the moment. Steve, who is probably thoroughly cognizant of the fact that nothing in their relationship will be simple, at least not at first, has been very patiently following whatever lead Bucky gives him. And Bucky has settled with resting his head on Steve’s shoulder, his right palm flat against his broad chest. Steve’s arm is around him, his hand resting lightly on his waist.

It’s difficult. Bucky wasn’t prepared for it to be difficult, though maybe he should have been. He doesn’t know how to be held. Doesn’t remember. He strains to understand how he was ever comfortable with it. He hasn’t let himself be held by Steve until now, not like this, anyway. Standing, in the throes of a meltdown, yes. But not like this, so simply, for no purpose other than to be close. Even now that they’re often sleeping in the same bed, Bucky spends most of his time curled near the edge. They sometimes fall asleep holding hands – at least Steve does, because Bucky can’t fall asleep before him – and he finds himself pulling away as soon as Steve’s out. Being so close makes him feels too vulnerable, too raw and exposed, and not just physically. In fact, the concern is rarely for his physical integrity.

Every time they get close, an internal battle sparks within him. On one side is a desperate desire for closeness, to be near him, beside him, to be consumed by him until there’s nothing left of himself. On the other side is absolute fear. And the fear is strange, because it’s not a fear of Steve. It’s a fear of harming him, of losing him, of sickening Steve with the same poison that sickens him. Like the faces of Janus, one side looks to the future, their future, with hope. But the other looks to the past, to all the misery there that Bucky is beginning to unravel, and it cannot, will not, look away.

He feels like a robot doing a rather poor impression of a person, a feeling especially pronounced because of Steve, who takes him in his arms so easily, so readily, so naturally. He has a remote thought that he shouldn’t have to re-learn how to be a man, that he shouldn’t have to modulate his breathing and use a bunch of cheap therapy tricks just to have prolonged physical contact with another human being. But he can’t blame himself for that, can he? When was he ever touched when he was with Hydra, not to be “handled” or disciplined, but because he was a person, because he had some sort of non-utilitarian value? Lukin laid a hand on his shoulder a couple of times, back in the ‘60s. But then, so did Zola. Maybe he can’t blame himself. And if he can’t blame himself, he supposes he has to blame someone else. Right?

He’s trying. He’s trying to be a human again. So he uses his tricks and tries to write new protocols. And after 45 minutes of trying to be mindful amid the relentless agitation in his brain, amid the bow-tightness of his muscles, amid the battle raging within, he’s finally, finally relaxing a little.

“So, are you still Captain America?” Bucky asks, hoping that some conversation will ease him further.

Steve’s diaphragm jumps as he lets out a small, joyless laugh. “I don’t even know. Everything’s so strange right now. There’s no mission anymore. No big bad to fight.”

“There’s always a big bad to fight.”

“Good point,” Steve concedes. “I guess I should say there’s no big bad that I can fight, because I don’t know what it is or where it is. And even if I did, my hands are tied. All our hands are tied.” He lets out a huff of frustration. “I hate it. It’s feels like before, when the war was happening but I
couldn’t do anything about it. Except I don’t even know what type of war is going on.”

Bucky’s hand edges down Steve’s shirt, mindlessly, nonchalantly, until he feels a small but palpable ridge beneath his fingertips. He passes his index finger over it, his brow furrowing as his brain cards through a catalogue of wound types. He’s seen them all, done them all. GSW. .37 or .45 caliber. He lifts his head and pulls up Steve’s shirt until a raised, round scar is visible, just below that diaphragm that jumped a few moments ago. How did he not feel it last week, when his selfish hand touched every inch of that glorious territory?

And God, when the realization sets in, when he remembers that he did that to Steve, remembers pulling that trigger, the satisfaction he took in it, the look of dumb shock on Steve’s face as he saw himself start to bleed, when he collapsed in pain… when that all hits Bucky, he pulls his hand back in disgust. He pulls back even more, out of Steve’s grasp, several feet over, until he’s lying on his back on what he supposes is now his side of the bed.

Steve follows him immediately, shifting until he’s at Bucky’s side, clearly understanding his realization and accurately perceiving his turn toward self-loathing. Is he that fucking predictable? Is the Bucky Barnes hate show so tired and worn that everyone knows it by heart?

“It felt good when I did that,” Bucky tells him. Because he thought Captain America was down. Because he thought he’d neutralized him. Because he made a clean shot right through the abdominal aorta.

Or so he thought. Clearly he missed.

“That’s what they trained you to feel,” Steve reminds him, his fingers touching the edge of Bucky’s sleeve.

Trained him. Is that even the right word? The Army trains soldiers. A human trains a dog. There’s something consensual in those situations, or, at least, mutually beneficial. Soldiers get paid. A dog gets a treat. What was his incentive? Where was the consent? Bucky thinks the better word might be “program.” They *programmed* him to feel that way. When they broke into his mind, when they took it from him, that was programming.

“No matter what, you always have your moral compass,” Bucky says. “It’s the thing you can fall back on when everything else is totally fucked up.”

“It’s not the best compass,” Steve says grudgingly.

“Maybe not. But it’s yours. Nobody can take it from you. That’s how it should work.”

Bucky points to Steve’s left thigh “I shot you there.” He then reaches over and touches the front of his right shoulder. “I stabbed you here –”

Steve grabs his wrist firmly. “That’s enough.”

“No, it’s not. How is that even close to enough?”

Steve’s eyes soften. “Because I forgive you. Even though you haven’t done anything that needs to be forgiven.”

Bucky wrenches his arm from Steve’s grip. “Clearly we have differing opinions on that.”

“Then what’s the solution?” Steve asks, tone dancing on the edge of exasperated and inspired. “Are you just gonna keep hating yourself forever? What good’s that gonna do? If you’re gonna
hate somebody, hate the people who took your moral compass away from you. Hate Hydra. Hate Zola. Hate your handlers, who were so awful to you that one half-cocked apology was the best thing to happen to you in 70 years.”

Good Lord. When Steve’s on, he’s on, and he’s latched onto this like a rabid bulldog. Bucky’s almost beginning to regret enlisting his help, because now he has a terrible trifecta of people – Bard, Sam, and Steve – who won’t let him get away with wringing himself through his old self-flagellation routine without some form of accountability.

“I don’t know why that’s so hard for me,” Bucky says, deflated.

“Well, if you hate yourself, then it must be all your fault. You must get something out of telling yourself that.”

“True. In therapy, we call that emotional reasoning. Using the hate I feel toward myself as proof that I was to blame.” He not entirely sarcastically gives himself a gold star.

“I’m assuming that’s probably not a good thing to do,” Steve says. He begins idly tracing the juncture of two vibranium plates on Bucky’s arm with his finger.

“Nope. It’s bad,” Bucky admits. “But it’s a very hard habit to break.”

“Guess you need a new habit, huh?”

Bucky snorts. “Yeah, I need a lot of new habits. I think 95 percent of my therapy involves finding out how stupid and destructive my habits are and trying to make better ones.”

“I think there’s a little more to it than that,” Steve says.

“I guess.”

They lie in silence for a few minutes, Steve tracing, Bucky watching him trace.

“Thank you,” Bucky finally says.

“For what?”

“Kicking my ass. You’re good at it.”

“Let me know if it’s too much,” Steve says, laying his hand over Bucky’s metal bicep. “Please.”

Bucky nods. Looking at Steve, he’s overcome rapidly by a swell of fondness. These moments are more common now, perhaps because he doesn’t shut them down anymore when they arise. They’re strong, and they blindside him more often than not. Sometimes when he looks at Steve he almost feels sick, wracked by a sharp amalgam of affection, exhilaration, and anxiety. In these moments, he doesn’t know what to say, and he’s never been that great with words anyway. So instead, he rolls on his side, props himself up on his elbow and lifts his right hand to touch Steve’s face. He cups his cheek and runs his thumb feather-light across his lower lip.

“Can I just…” Bucky trails off, gauging Steve’s expression. He searches for permission and finds it in those eyes, those blue seas that shift like mercury, an ever-transparent window into Steve’s mind and heart. He leans in close and kisses him.

Steve melts into it, running his hand through Bucky’s short hair, and he pulls back just enough to murmur, “You can do anything you want to me.”
A small sound escapes Bucky’s throat, and his eyes flicker shut against the wild blitz of imagined possibilities that those words elicit. “I just need a little more time,” he says, with some disappointment. “Get my head on straight. I don’t want it to go like last time.”

“It won’t,” Steve assures him. “You take the lead. Whatever you want.” He kisses Bucky and lets himself be pushed back, pushed down by the weight of Bucky’s hand against his shoulder.

“Bard and I had a very embarrassing conversation about what happened, and that was actually one of his suggestions,” Bucky says.

“Can’t argue with the doc, now can we?”

“Yeah, he figured you wouldn’t mind.” A wry smile curves Bucky’s lips.

“Are you kidding me?” Steve lifts his head and presses his cheek to Bucky’s, so that his next words are whispered in his ear. “What do you think I’ve jerked off to for half my life?”

Bucky exhales sharply. “Wow.”

Whatever anxiety he previously harbored over his performance has just ratcheted up by several exponents. He also has a thought, one of those fucked up, intrusive thoughts, about what happened after he died. Did Steve still think about Bucky Barnes? Did he long for him? Or did he drive him out of his mind, banish him to the sad dimension where dead almost-lovers go?

“Just being honest,” Steve says, all innocent Wonder Bread again as he lowers his head back down onto his pillow.

“Well, hope I don’t disappoint you,” Bucky says weakly.

“I don’t think that’s possible.”

“Don’t be so sure.” Bucky almost makes a comment about his current track record being 0 for 1 when Steve touches his finger to his lips.

“Shh. None of that,” Steve says. He kisses Bucky once more, gently. “Wanna go grab something to eat?”

“I’m just gonna need a minute,” Bucky says, adjusting himself in his pants. Between the kissing and touching and the vivid image of Steve jerking off to fantasies of him having his way with him, Bucky’s not exactly ready for public viewing. Steve looks down at his crotch and his eyebrows rise.

“Cut me some slack,” Bucky grumbles. “It’s been a while.”

“How long?”

“Too long.”

Steve tilts his head thoughtfully. “Have you ever been with a man?”

“No,” Bucky says flatly. “And don’t look so surprised.”

“I dunno. I just figured. You’ve been with a lot of people.”

“You figured I’d do it with other guys and not you? You’re nuts, Steven Grant.” The idea is beyond preposterous, that he would ever choose anyone before Steve, even despite all of the
“pressure he’s now imposing on himself because Steve will be his first. “Have you been with a man?”

“No.”

“You’re not still a virgin, are you?” Bucky asks.

Steve appears greatly amused by the question, smiling playfully. “Do I kiss like I’m a virgin?”

“No, you definitely do not.” In fact, while he’s giving out gold stars, he would love to find the person who taught Steve how to kiss so damn well and stick one on their shirt. “Who?”

“I dated a bit when I was with SHIELD,” Steve says casually. “Nothing too serious.”

“That’s good. Being your first would have been a little too much pressure.”

The amusement in Steve’s face drains away, leaving behind a wistful shadow. “I wanted you to be,” he says.

Oh, what Bucky would give for that. What he would give for a chance to go back in time, even knowing what would later happen to him, and be the man they both wished he could be.

“I’m sorry I was such a dumb fuck,” Bucky says, voice full of regret. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Steve tells him. He reaches up to Bucky’s cheek, his touch soft and reverent, his eyes brimming with adoration. “I’m just glad you’re alive. It’s the first thing I think of every day when I wake up. How glad I am. How lucky I am that I get to see your face.”

It takes Bucky a few moments to reply. Steve’s words lance deep into him, straight into his chest. He feels that increasingly familiar pressure behind his eyes, except it’s not sadness that beckons this time.

“I think that’s the nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me,” Bucky says quietly.

“It’s true,” Steve replies. “I love you.”

Bucky’s heard the expression from others, often too soon, too hollow, or too unwelcome. Only from his mother and sister has he ever believed it – until this moment, when it hits him like white light, scattering the darkness, the sadness, the terror burgeoning as he slowly begins to understand what the past 70 years have meant.

He wonders if maybe he can let Steve love him, even when almost every part of himself says he doesn’t deserve it. Maybe he can accept it and let it drown his doubt. Maybe he can trust that the good things Steve sees in him are real. Maybe he can one day believe that he’s worthy of that love.

A smile blooms on Bucky’s face, and in his heart, he feels joy.

“I love you, too.”
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Bucky wonders whether he’s alive. Bucky and Steve get closer. Bad news strikes.

Two things happen at the start of today’s session: Bard plows through the small stack of worksheets Bucky brought him, nodding and murmuring approvingly, and Bucky learns that his PTSD score has gone down ten points from his baseline. It’s a big moment for him, where he can actually quantify some of the progress he thinks he’s making. He also thinks it might be a big moment for Bard, because his smile radiates with more than just his typical joviality.

“I think we should take a closer look at the stuck point ‘Bucky Barnes is dead,’” Bard says, swimming in quickly to attack one of the stickiest of his stuck points.

At this point in their treatment, they’ve whittled down his stuck points to the most intractable, cutting down 34 warped worldviews to only a large handful. But these final few are tenacious, burned in deep, deeper than flesh. They feel burrowed in his bones, webbed in hard mineral.

“Yeah, you’re gonna have to walk me through that one,” Bucky says.

Bard looks over Bucky’s shoulder, to the wall furthest from the door. He stands and motions Bucky with his hand.

“C’mere. Let’s break it down.”

Bucky follows him over to the wall, where a large white board hangs. Standing next to Bard reminds Bucky of how short the man is. He forgets sometimes. Bard’s presence, his poise, his expertise, the things about him that Bucky envies, those things make him forget. Bard snags a black dry erase marker from the small tray below and writes the following in large lettering at the top of the board:

**WHO IS BUCKY BARNES?**

“Really?” Bucky says, crossing his arms.

“Really. You say Bucky Barnes is dead, but his body’s clearly standing here, right? So we’re talking about some constituent part of him. His personality. Character. Whatever we might call the ‘self.’”

“Gettin’ pretty philosophical, doc.”

“On one hand, yeah, it is. But what I want is to break down the concept of Bucky Barnes into its parts so you can help me understand why you think he’s dead.”

Bucky shrugs slowly. “Whatever you think’ll help.”

Bard positions his hand at the ready. “Okay, think about Bucky Barnes. What qualities does he have?”
“He’s hardworking.”

Bard nods in agreement and writes that on the board.

“Pretty smart.”

Bard turns his head and looks at Bucky skeptically. “Just ‘pretty smart’?”

“Smart,” he concedes. “Not very well educated, but smart.” The type of smart that sailed him through primary and secondary school with little effort and kept him mostly out of trouble as an adult.

“What else?” Bard asks.


Bard pauses his writing. “Understanding? Of what?”

“I dunno. Generally kind.”

Soft. Weak. Full of all that mush that always seemed to leak out despite his best efforts to keep it contained, every rupture delivering a dual dose of regret and relief.

“Great. What else?”

“Good,” Bucky states.

“What does that mean?”

“What do you mean?” Bucky asks, frowning. “Good is good.”

“Good is a judgment,” Bard reminds him. “It’s not an actual trait. You might look at this collection of characteristics and say ‘this guy’s good,’ but good isn’t a trait in itself.”

Bucky figures it’s like pornography. You know it when you see it. You know good when you see it. It’s a visceral feeling, something that can’t be operationalized. That’s why Bucky so often doubts his own goodness. It goes beyond the basic knowledge of all of the damage he’s done and all the misery he’s caused. It’s an empty feeling where something once sat, something that was warm and reliable.

Bard turns back to the board. “Okay. So, he’s shaping up to be a really decent guy, if I do say so myself. Any not-so-admirable traits?”

This part’s easy.

“He’s insecure, but he pretends he’s not. A little vain. Cowardly.”

“Bucky Barnes was a coward? You sure we’re talking about the same guy?”

Bucky nods seriously. “He’s too scared to be his own person. He doesn’t like himself. Maybe because of that.”

He impulsively thinks that his reasons for disliking himself before were absurd, especially in light of all of the reasons he has now. But there were real consequences to his years of self-denigration, with ripples that extend even to the present. Especially as he tries to be a real person in a real relationship.
“Okay,” Bard says, considering everything written on the board. “So, now I want you to think about who you are now. Let’s look at these traits and cross off the ones you don’t possess now.”

Bucky looks. He initially expected to black out the entire board in one fell swoop. But if he’s being honest, truly honest, only a couple of things strike him as inaccurate representations of who he is now.

“I don’t pretend I’m not insecure anymore,” he says.

“Okay.” Bard draws a line though that description.

“I’m no fun anymore.” God, how he used to be fun. And funny. Light. “And I don’t know if I’m kind anymore.”

Bard looks confused. “You don’t think you’re kind?”

“I don’t think I’m considerate of others, as a whole. I’m very self-absorbed now.”

“Okay, why do you think that might be?”

He traces a path through the months since he’s been living with people again, after the agreeable solitude of Romania and the vast nothingness of cryostasis.

“First, I was depressed,” Bucky says. “Now I’m spending most of my time working on my own shit. All this therapy stuff.”

Bard smiles in a distinctly paternal way. “Don’t you think maybe you’ve earned the right to take care of yourself, be a little selfish, after being a prisoner of war for 70 years?”

Bucky makes a sour face at the ‘prisoner of war’ comment.

“I know, you hate that term, too. But seriously, don’t you think you’ve earned that?”

‘Earned’ is a bit of a stretch, but he ultimately agrees. Earned or not, it’s necessary now.

“Okay,” Bard says, “so there’s a good reason Bucky Barnes maybe isn’t as kind and considerate as he used to be before decades of prolonged trauma. What else?”

“I don’t know.”

Bard puts his hands on his hips and glances between Bucky and the board. “So it looks like you’re pretty much the same person, in most ways.”

Bucky shakes his head, glaring at the board. What is it? Something still doesn’t add up. “It’s the fun part,” he says. “Not exactly fun, but…” He pauses, chewing on his lower lip. “Something’s gone there. Something light.”

Bard thinks for a moment. “Innocence?”

No, no, that’s not it. Is it?

“Some part of me that didn’t know how bad things could be,” Bucky says. “How brutal I could be. How I could enjoy killing people.”

Those really are two separate things. Learning how bad things could be is all part of that constellation of Kreischberg and everything after falling. His “captivity,” as Bard would put it. The
brutal killing part, that was just him, Bucky Barnes, unlocking something dark and frightening and powerful in himself and using it to annihilate men joyfully.

“Well, when you were with Hydra – ”

“I was talking about during the war. The brutality. Enjoying killing,” he clarifies.

Bard doesn’t seem at all fazed by his comment. “A lot of veterans would cop to that. Infantrymen especially.”

“I don’t like that I liked it. I think that made Hydra’s job of turning me pretty easy.”

Bard puts his marker back in the narrow tray. He mirrors Bucky’s wide stance, crossing his arms.

“War changes everyone. What happened to you during the war and after, that would change anyone. And yet, it appears from this exercise that you’re still very similar to who you were before.”

“It still feels like he’s dead, though. Even looking at this.” Maybe this is yet another concept stuck in a tight holding pattern in his mind, doomed to circle pointlessly until serendipity or desperation decides it should drop into his heart, where it can be understood and absorbed.

“Do you think it’s helpful for you to keep telling yourself that Bucky Barnes is dead? Does it help you reach your goal of getting better?”

His train of thought stops cold here. They’ve talked about a lot of things during their time together, but Bard hasn’t ever used that angle with him before. Not so explicitly, anyway. Can he really justify overhauling a belief simply because it’s unhelpful, even if it seems believable?

Bucky shakes his head. “No, it doesn’t help.”

“What’s another way you could phrase it?”

Bucky looks to the floor as he thinks. “Maybe ‘a part of Bucky Barnes is dead’?”

Bard nods approvingly. “When trauma happens, it can be very important to mourn the parts that are lost, because you can never go back to exactly who you were before. Those things lost could be characteristics, things like innocence, or possibilities that will never come to fruition. It may not be that Bucky Barnes is dead, but he lost some things, and you might have to let yourself grieve for those things that he lost. That you lost.”

“Well, that sounds horrible.”

Bard smiles. “Grief isn’t generally known for being fun.”

“How do I do that?” Bucky asks. His own tone strikes him as childish, lost, like he’s wandering through a thick forest of elephant grass with only Bard’s voice to guide him through to whatever’s on the other side of it.

“I think you’re already grieving for it, on some level, but you’re still mostly shoving it down. Maybe it sometimes flies out as anger when you’re vulnerable. It’s all already happening in you. All this stuff that we’re working on. The memories, the emotions, they’re all there below the surface. Getting you to face those things, acknowledge them, and let them play out is another story. The thing you might need to do is to just let go. Stop fighting.”

“Who’d’ve thought doing nothing would be so hard?” Bucky mutters.

When Bucky’s eyes crack open, it’s already light. He’s a bit surprised, because for the past few nights, he’s been waking up before dawn. He weaned himself off of his trazodone when he started sleeping with Steve. It made him extremely tired, and he hated spending the night fighting the drug because of that lingering unease around being in Steve’s bed. He would find himself jolting awake, only to be dragged back into the abyss of sedation before jolting awake again. All night long. Surprisingly, now that he’s off the medication, he’s now sleeping almost as well as when he was sleeping alone on the trazodone. He decides to call this progress. He still loads up on his nightmare meds every night, even getting his dose upped out of concern over bothering Steve. It mostly works.

He reaches over to his nightstand and checks his phone. He feels a ripple of nervous electricity when he sees that it’s well after nine. Stupid. As if they have somewhere to be. As if they have plans. As if any of them do a goddamn thing of any import during the day. The ex-Avengers might not like it, but Bucky sure as hell does. He wonders with a sort of fanciful dispassion if he’s still trying to rest off all those sleepless years of Winter Soldiering. After all, cryo does not foster a regenerative state. There is no rejuvenation, no refreshment, no neural or bodily repair. The Winter Soldier was practically dragged through the decades, stealing small sleep whenever and wherever he could. It’s a wonder he could even see straight, toward the end.

He puts his phone back and rolls over onto his left side. There he sees Steve situated similarly, the broadness of his shoulders beneath the blankets, which are drawn up all the way to his neck and blond head. Somehow, he still seems to be sleeping, and Bucky wonders if he was up during the night. Bucky’s used to being the fucked up one, but Steve has his share of restless nights, too. What a pair, he thinks, smiling a little to himself. Because they are a pair now, neither of them quite whole or hale, but a pair nonetheless.

Bucky then has a debate with himself. Should he or shouldn’t he? Should he slide over? Should he wake Steve? Touch him? Should he let him rest? Should he keep his hands to himself for one more day, as if that one more day will imbue him with unshakable bedroom groundedness? It’s been two weeks already. Is that enough? Does he need more time? How much?

God, that this is even a debate is embarrassing. Why does everything have to be so fucking complicated? He catches himself veering down that well-tread road of frustration and self-pity and jerks the wheel back. Not today. Or at least not so early in the morning.

He drops the debate altogether, doing what he wants for a change. What his heart wants. What his body wants. Doubts be damned. If things go south, and not in the good kind of way, he’ll just have to deal with it then. He slides closer, and as the blankets between them lift, Bucky notices with a thrill of excitement that Steve is naked from the waist up. He glances down to the foot of the bed and sees his t-shirt flung there carelessly, confirming Bucky’s suspicions that he didn’t sleep well.

Bucky hesitates. Then he hears Steve sniff and shift slightly. He chances a few more inches and reaches out, laying his right hand on the muscles overlaying Steve’s shoulder blade. He keeps it there for a moment, letting the warmth of Steve’s body radiate into his own, before sliding his hand up, slowly, fixating on the feel of every contour. Steve makes a small sound, a lazy mmrm that becomes a deep inhalation when Bucky starts kissing the back of his neck and lets his hand drift
over his shoulder, over his bicep, and down to his stomach.

Bucky closes the remaining distance between them, his chest flush to Steve’s back. It takes so little to set him off now, and the smell of Steve, the lingering scent of last night’s shampoo and soap mixed with a hint of dried sweat, fuels that maddening pull, the desire to press, to bury, to be consumed and obliterated. He trails his lips lightly down Steve’s neck, to where his shoulder begins, and he ghosted his fingertips over his cock. Steve sucks in a sharp breath when Bucky slides his hand below the waistbands of his pants and underwear and takes hold of him, stroking him hard.

Steve throws the blankets down, and Bucky peers over his shoulder, watching, as if to make sure that it’s all real. He feels himself go light in the stomach and a little dizzy at the rush of input, the feel of Steve responding so readily to his touch, the sound of his breath coming in heavy waves, the taste of his skin, the sensation of blood rushing to his own groin. He’s about to pull his hand out to push down Steve’s pants when the sound of soft knocking registers in his consciousness.

He freezes and watches as Steve’s expression shifts rapidly from strained pleasure to sharp alertness.

“Steve?”

Wanda.

“Yeah?” Steve replies, clearly attempting to sound as if another man’s hand is not currently wrapped around his cock.

“Is Bucky in there?” The question is hesitant, like she feels strange or embarrassed for asking.

“What?” Bucky says, grumpy and blunt.

“We’re doing a store run, and I’m not sure what you plan to make for your side dish tonight. Do you need anything?”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Bucky says under his breath. Reluctantly, he removes his hand from Steve’s pants and rolls back to his side of the bed to grab his phone. He can barely concentrate enough to find the recipe he chose, and the trembling of his hand doesn’t help things, either. “Can I just text it to you?”

“I’m sorry, but my stupid phone died. My new one won’t be here ‘til tomorrow.”

Bucky grits his teeth and angrily jumps out of bed. He storms over to the door and opens it a few inches. Some of his irritation dissipates when he sees Wanda’s face, clearly apologetic – at least, until she glances down and sees that he’s not wearing pants, at which point her eyebrows draw together in confusion. He sticks his arm through the crack and thrusts his phone at her.

“Here. This one.”

She reaches out slowly to take it from him. One side of her mouth then quirks up. “Are you two – ”

“Yes, now scram, will ya?” he says, jerking his head to the side to motion her away. He’s trying to smile a little, because he really likes Wanda and doesn’t want her to feel bad, but he also really wants her to fuck off right now. He doesn’t even give a shit that he just outed them, and she doesn’t seem to really give much of a shit, either. She does smile though, in earnest now.

“All right,” she says. “See you later, I guess.”
“Yep.”

He closes the door and turns back around. He feels his mouth fall open when he sees Steve leisurely stretched out on the bed, completely naked, staring at Bucky with heavy-lidded eyes. Bucky blinks a few times, clumsily attempting to process what he’s seeing, then he holds up his index finger and veers to the right, toward Steve’s bathroom. He doesn’t have a toothbrush here yet, and, quite frankly, he needs a long minute to collect himself, so he reaches into the medicine cabinet and pulls out Steve’s mouthwash. He takes a swig of it and swishes it around his mouth.

Bucky looks in the mirror. Aside from the dark circles under his eyes, he’s doesn’t think he’s looking too bad, especially for how simultaneously excited and scared shitless he is. Because it’s really happening, something more than horribly derailed messing around. He hopes, anyway. God, he hopes. As to what that something is, he has no clue. He tries to give himself a mental pep talk, which ends up sounding more like hope you don’t embarrass yourself and hope you can keep it up and hope you don’t blow your load in five seconds.

He bends down to spit in the sink, and when he rights himself, he looks back at the mirror and sees Steve behind him. Steve snakes his arm around and grabs the mouthwash from Bucky’s hand, taking his own swig from the bottle before setting it down on the counter. Steve’s arms wrap around him, sliding down to grab the hem of Bucky’s shirt, and Bucky lifts his arms so he can pull it over his head. Steve drops the shirt onto the floor and embraces him again from behind, still swishing, pressing his hardness against his ass.

It’s at once new and familiar, exhilarating and casual. They’ve known each other for so long, been through so much, both together and separately. It’s a small miracle that they’re here together now. Especially like this. Bucky leans back against him and regards their joint reflection, his nerves calming by the barest of measures. Even with a mouth full of mouthwash, Steve still looks ridiculously handsome, his hair tousled from sleep, his eyes bright and expressive, his profile all sharp angles as he nuzzles at his sideburn.

When he’s done, Steve maneuvers around him and spits. Bucky then turns, lays his metal hand on the back of Steve’s head and pulls him in for a deep kiss. His right hand finds its way back down to Steve’s dick to continue where he left off before Wanda interrupted them. He gives it a couple firm pulls before Steve backs away a little, breaking the kiss.

“Bed,” he says, and Bucky nods, following him back into his room.

“Lie down,” Bucky tells Steve, and he does, flat on his back between their two sides. Bucky stands by the edge of the bed and takes a few moments to admire him. He’s seen Steve naked plenty of times. When they were kids, when he was nursing him through one of his many illnesses, when they were in the Army. Never did he allow himself to just unabashedly look, despite wanting to on so many occasions. So he looks now, drinks in the sight of Steve’s perfect body, his perfect proportions, his perfect cock, as perfect as he ever fantasized about, especially in its full erect glory.

He feels suddenly possessed by some echo of Bucky Barnes, whom he apparently still is, if Bard can be believed. His nervous insecurity burns off, and he rides the high of the want that fills him, energizes him, has him crawling across the bed, parting Steve’s legs wide, and settling between them on his stomach. He grabs the base of Steve’s cock and lowers his face to it. He glances up and gets a good look at Steve’s delightful expression, eyes wide and lips parted as he realizes what Bucky’s about to do. Bucky responds with a hungry smile and descends on him.

Yeah, he read the internet. Yeah, he pondered and planned technique. But now that the rubber is meeting the road, so to speak, all that goes out the window. He just sucks him, licks him, taking his
cues from the halting, stuttered words of encouragement and gasping evocations of God and Jesus. It’s all such a turn-on that he can’t help but lift his hips and dip his left hand into his underwear to touch himself, overriding an irrational fear of some bizarre malfunction that might leave him with a crushed dick.

It’s probably not the most skillful blowjob ever given, but it does what he intends well enough. He soon hears Steve begin to pant, feels his fingers tightening in his hair, and prepares himself for the rush of come that accompanies the loud moan that rises from deep in Steve’s throat. It tastes about like he imagined it would, and he swallows it all. When Steve’s flesh is done pulsing, Bucky pulls away and laps up a final little bead of come with his tongue. Steve’s eyes are half-closed but intently watching him, as if he’s never seen anything more interesting in his life. Bucky releases him carefully and turns the small attentional capacity he has left to addressing his own aching need. He flips onto his back, still between Steve’s legs, knees up, resting his head on Steve’s quivering left thigh. He feels Steve’s eyes on him as he takes hold of himself, which he finds so fucking hot that he finishes after just a few strokes. Mostly in his underwear, but what the fuck ever.

They lie there, breathing heavily, floating. Steve’s hand is in his hair again, gently, and Bucky lays his flesh hand on Steve’s thigh, the one he’s not currently using as a pillow. He feels great. Relaxed. Unburdened.

“You sure do pray a lot when you’re getting your dick sucked,” Bucky drawls.

Steve laughs softly. “Consider it a compliment. I haven’t prayed in a long time.”

“Okay.” He smiles self-consciously.

He feels Steve shift, propping himself on one elbow.

“You’re beautiful,” Steve tells him.

Bucky turns his head to look at him. Steve’s expression is sincere, his head tilted just slightly.

“I was just thinking the same about you,” Bucky replies. “You always were, even before all that Captain America bullshit.”

“Even when I was a tiny bag of bones?” Steve sounds deeply incredulous.

“Yeah. Absolutely. That face of yours…” He reaches up and lightly brushes Steve’s cheek with his fingertips. “That never changed.”

Steve grabs Bucky’s hand and lifts it to his lips. “Do you really think it’s bullshit?” he mutters against his knuckles. “Captain America?”

Bucky shrugs his left shoulder halfheartedly. “Kind of. You could have done anything you wanted after you woke up. Anything. Not sure why you went back to all that.”

“I didn’t know what else to do. I guess I wanted to keep fighting,” Steve says simply.

After a few beats of silence, Bucky asks, “Do you think it’s like an addiction?”

“Fighting?”

“Do you like it?”

“Sometimes, yeah. Especially when it’s a fight I can win.”
Bucky’s biting his lip again. He doesn’t know why it’s so hard for him to ask. Maybe because he thinks this might be one area where he and Steve differ irreconcilably, and he’s scared that the end of the spectrum he’s on speaks more about how messed up he is, how different he is from Steve, than almost anything else.

“Did you ever like killing people?” he asks.

Steve takes some time to consider it, which is a relief to Bucky. He figured there was a strong probability he would get one of those pat Steve answers, hard and righteous and immovable.

“Not really,” Steve says. “I don’t feel bad about doing it if it’s necessary, not most of the time. But I don’t like it.”

Bucky looks up at the ceiling. He feels Steve’s fingers threading through his own.

“I like it,” Bucky confesses. “I remember my first. Shot him in the throat. Took him forever to die. I felt bad about that one, but most of the others, I didn’t feel bad. Those Hydra motherfuckers, I loved killing every one of them. The slower, the better.”

“Fuck ‘em,” Steve replies, squeezing Bucky’s hand. “They deserved it, after what they did to you. If anything, maybe I should’ve enjoyed killing them a little more.”

Was it all just revenge? Was it all just his blind anger for everything Zola did to him? He thinks back to Azzano, to the other men he killed before he was taken. The Wehrmacht. The expendable infantrymen fighting for their country, probably drafted, just like many of them. Did he enjoy killing them?

He searches his memory. It doesn’t seem that long ago. He calculated his current age to be around 31 or 32, so, chronologically, it’s only been a few years. A few years and a few hundred rounds of electroshock to the brain, that is. It’s a bit difficult remember how he felt back then. He remembers adapting fairly quickly to the field. Apparently whoever got the bright idea to make him a noncommissioned officer right off the bat hadn’t been too far off his nut, which was his initial thought about it when they assigned him his rank. He actually doesn’t remember killing many people at all before the Commandos formed. He made two clean kills as a sniper, got a few shots off with his rifle during Azzano, but most of his energy was spent leading his men, using the paltry training he got at Fort McCoy and whatever instincts he could rally. And the ones he killed… if anything, there was relief. The relief of eliminating a threat before the threat eliminated them. But not joy. He doesn’t remember joy. Not until after they took him and twisted him and showed him what desolation was –

For the second time this morning, there’s a knock on the door. Neither of them is particularly alarmed by this. They barely even move. Bucky realizes with some amusement that he apparently just needs to get laid for his exaggerated startle response to fizzle out.

“Steve? Can I come in?”

“Go away, Sam,” Bucky says. “We’re busy.”

Steve shushes him lightheartedly.

“Okay, but you’re gonna wanna turn on the news.”

“What is it?” Steve asks, some concern edging into his voice.

“It’s not good.”
“Thanks, Sam. We’ll check it out,” Steve says.

Bucky sighs loudly. Of course something’s come up. After all, it’s been a rare morning where things have actually gone better than he ever could have hoped. He sits up and slides up to where Steve is lying, then peels off his come-stained underwear and throws them in the general direction of Steve’s hamper. They sit up against the headboard, so close they’re touching, and pull the covers up to their waists.

Steve grabs the remote from the nightstand and turns on the TV. He finds an English language news station, and they watch with mounting anxiety as pictures – CC TV pictures, blurry smart phone photos – flash on the screen with the words “Fugitive Avengers spotted in Wakanda” below them. There are photos of Wanda, Sam, Clint, Scott, and Steve, some taken on the street, Steve’s clearly taken outside of the hospital. Bucky holds his breath, and just as he expects, his photo flashes on the screen seconds later, just him, his head shaven clean, probably taken the day of his surgery. They call him The Winter Soldier. They refer to him as a mass murderer. They say he’s wanted for killing at least 20 people. They flash pictures of the dead: Senator Harry Baxter; two natural gas company executives; eight SHIELD officers, five CIA operatives, and one FBI agent from various eras; Howard and Maria; Renata Escobedo, the one person of the bunch actually did not kill. They speculate about extraction. They speculate about extradition.

Steve’s finger hovers over the power button, but he can’t seem to press it. Can’t seem to tear himself away. Bucky’s eyes glaze over. He knew it was coming, at least on some level. In fact, he’s surprised it took the media this long to confirm and broadcast their location. For all of T’Challa’s confidence in his people’s loyalty, of course some of them could be bought. They’re people, just as shitty and selfish as everyone else.

“I don’t think Wakanda has an extradition agreement with America,” Steve says, his voice thin. “And I don’t think they’ll risk trying to come get us.”

Bucky nods absently. It doesn’t matter. If they really want them, they’ll find a way. There’s probably a statute in the Accords somewhere, some loophole, some back door that’ll let them walk right in – or, rather, storm right in – without repercussion. It could be Romania all over again except much worse, because they’ll send much more than just a squad of men this time.

“Hey.”

Bucky looks down to see Steve’s hand settle on his thigh, squeezing reassuringly.

“Nothing’s gonna happen any time soon. T’Challa can stall things until we can get everything cleared up.”

Bucky scoffs. Clear up what? What a load of horseshit. He thinks about telling Steve as much, but he decides against it. He lets Steve reassure him. Lets him believe that there’s any scenario that doesn’t involve James Barnes strapped to a table being pumped full of chemicals. Once again.

Steve turns the TV off and sets the remote down hard on his nightstand. He touches Bucky’s chin and turns his head toward him.

“It’s gonna be okay,” Steve says.

Bucky smiles, barely, and only with his mouth. Because it’s not gonna be okay. Not at all. Not for any of them. He’ll end up dead, either with a bullet or whatever method of execution some judge somewhere decides on. So far, they’ve apparently only learned about the dead Americans. What about when all the other countries he’s spilled blood in come for him? Shit, if the Russians get a
hold of him, extradite him there, they’ll make him wish he were dead. Steve and the others will go to the Raft, or worse, if such a place exists. He hasn’t read the Accords, but he imagines there are some pretty deep, grim provisions buried in there, or at least ones vague enough to allow for creative and inhumane interpretation.

So, no. It is most certainly not going to be okay.

But it was always going to end up this way, wasn’t it? Wasn’t there always a timer on all of this? What a sweet little fantasy he entertained, about having a life after this, a life with Steve. A normal life. A future. What a nice little delusion, one where the only thing standing between him and happiness was his own cross-wired brain.

“Hey,” Steve says again, this time firmer, snapping him out of his spiraling thoughts.

“What?” Bucky replies, just barely audible.

Steve looks him dead in the eyes, his own now burning with dark intensity. “I’m not gonna let them take you.”

“You might not have a choice, Steve. I don’t think you’ll be able to bail me out of this one. Because they’re coming for you, too. And everyone else.”

Steve’s intensity flares out almost as quickly as it kindled, revealing a combination of fear and dejection so striking that Bucky doesn’t quite know how to interpret it at first. It doesn’t appear to be the fear of pain or death. No. It’s the fear of loss. Bucky now recognizes it clearly, because it’s the same thing that caused his earlier recoil after the chair incident.

Only instead of pushing Bucky away, as Bucky did to him, Steve does what a normal person who loves someone might do – he pulls him into his arms and holds him tight. Eventually, Bucky wraps his arms around him and holds him back, even as his mind and heart go numb, as he stares dully at the door, as his last coherent thoughts become regrets and regrets and regrets.

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“Wakanda does not have an extradition treaty with the United States. Or Russia,” T’Challa says, directing his last comment to Bucky. “We do not have a formal extradition agreement with any country except Kenya.”

They’re all sitting at the dining room table, a place where they usually eat, laugh, bullshit with each other, and argue spiritedly about which bachelor or Kardashian is the worst. It’s not a place for conversations about their ugly reality, the one where they’re all criminals, including T’Challa now. Where they’re all about to be put in the hurt locker for crimes ranging from not signing the Accords to 20 counts of first-degree murder.

“I’m not about to do Custer’s Last Stand here,” Clint says, emphatically jabbing his finger against the tabletop. “I got a wife and kids, and I wanna see them again. Even if it’s in 25 years.”

Bucky looks over at Scott, who’s in a similar bind, his face a mask of worry. It looks so odd, like someone stripped all the varnish off of him. “We could run,” Scott says, his tone laced with uncertainty.

“And go where?” Wanda asks. “And for how long? Do you think they will just stop looking for us after a few months? We could be running forever.” She turns and looks at Steve. “I think we should stay. We’re safe here.”
“For now,” Sam says. He leans back, lips thinning as he thinks. “I know this won’t be a popular option, but we could always turn ourselves in.”

“No,” Steve says decisively. “We’re not criminals.”

“Technically, we are,” Wanda says. “From a legal standpoint. At the very least, disregarding the Accords, we destroyed a lot of property in Germany.”

“They’re not coming for us because we broke some airplanes and cars. They’re coming for us because we didn’t agree to the Accords. That’s what this is really about. This has Ross’ name all over it,” Steve says.

“Entering Wakanda illegally to apprehend you will be a diplomatic nightmare,” T’Challa says coolly. “I will make it one.”

Steve nods and looks around the table at all of them. Even after everything, it’s abundantly clear to Bucky that he’s still their leader, maybe now even more so because of everything they’ve been through together.

“Then I vote that we stay put,” Steve says. “This is a game of chicken, and I don’t think we should swerve first. Public support of the Accords is already fading, and if that’s the reason they’re coming after us, there’s a chance we could wait this out.”

There are nods of agreement, some enthusiastic, others less energetic. It’s quiet for nearly a minute as Steve’s choice settles over them. It’s Scott who finally speaks up, asking the question that’s probably on everyone’s mind:

“What about Bucky?”

All eyes lock on him. Nobody says it, but he knows they’re all thinking it – he’s not like them. His charges are real, not some technicalities borne from an international policy explicitly designed to criminalize everything the Avengers do. He looks down at his hands, remaining in the silence that’s possessed him since he left Steve’s bed, put his clothes back on, and went back to his room to shower, where he stood, unmoving, letting the water wash over him, wondering with shock-blunted indignation how everything got so messed up so fast. How the day went from absolutely incredible to simply awful in a matter of minutes. At some point, the anger burned away, and he completely checked out, letting old habits guide him, sending him on autopilot through the basic motions of bathing, dressing, and sitting at this goddamn table listening to this goddamn pointless talk.

He’s pulled momentarily out of his detachment by Steve’s foot tapping against his shin beneath the table. He looks over and sees Steve’s face, steel-hard in his resolve, like he’s ready to fuck whole world, just to buy them a little more time together.

“He’s not going anywhere.”
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Bucky processes the news. Steve surprises Bucky.

Chapter Notes

IMPORTANT NOTE: I re-posted this chapter on 12/23 because I realized that when I originally posted it yesterday, I accidentally back-dated it several days, causing some people to miss the update. So if you left me a comment, it was deleted 😞 I will address all comments left on the first post by cutting and pasting into the new chapter. Sorry about that!!

On the subject of sorry, I know I said I would stop apologizing for the length, but I'm going to do so anyway for this chapter because I've set a new record. Sorry :-/  

Also, thank you from the bottom of my heart for all the kudos and wonderful comments. I feel so lucky to have such awesome readers!!

Friday

Bard is watching him. Bucky can feel it. He’s not expectant. He doesn’t seem to want anything. It doesn’t feel uncomfortable. He’s not trying to fix or reassure him. He’s just letting him be, bent over in his chair, elbows on his knees, gripping his head like he’s trying to keep his brain from bursting out.

He’s feeling, letting despair fill him without rejecting or burying it. He doesn’t have to pretend here. Pretend that he’s okay. That anything is okay. He’s been trying to keep it together for Steve, because that seems to help Steve keep it together, too. But it’s made the past few days utterly exhausting. Today he was up before dawn, staring at the ceiling, counting down the hours until he could sit here like this and do nothing but feel like absolute shit. Never in his wildest dreams did he ever imagine he would want something like this, but now he welcomes it. He needs it.

“What are you feeling right now?” Bard finally asks. Bucky has no idea how long they’ve been in silence. Ten minutes? Fifteen?

Bucky’s answers come slowly, punctuated by lengthy stretches of quiet. “Hopeless... Angry... Sad...Scared.”

“Yeah,” Bard says softly. “Yeah, I bet. This is really scary stuff.”

Bucky lifts his head a little and tents his fingers over his mouth. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Well, what are your options? Realistically.”

“I don’t know. I don’t even know what’s gonna happen.”
“Which is stressful in itself, I imagine. Not knowing.” Bard takes an audible breath and crosses his legs. “Okay, so what are the things you do have control over right now?”

Bucky shakes his head minutely. He doesn’t feel like he has control over anything. He feels like he’s been pulled back under water, just after finally surfacing to take his first breath of freedom. He shares the analogy with Bard.

“Okay, let’s go with that. If you’re underwater and you can’t surface, what are the things you can control? What are your choices?” Bard asks.

“Panic. Suck a bunch of water into your lungs. Drown.” That’s about where Bucky feels he’s at right now. It would certainly require substantially less effort than the alternative.

Bard nods. “Yep, that’s one choice. What’s another choice?”

“Try to calm yourself. Conserve your oxygen so you can figure out how to get to the surface again.” Trick yourself into believing you’re not already dead. Maybe die with a modicum of dignity.

“So, in terms of the drowning part of this analogy – what’s the worst case scenario you’ve got banging around in your head?” Bard asks.

The worse case scenario is rotting away in a filthy, decrepit Russian prison until he dies of some super strain of TB or until someone he crossed the wrong way ages ago shanks him to death. However, given that the current threat is American, he tries to keep it more relevant.


“Okay. Let’s entertain that. We’ll talk probability in a minute. Let’s say you’re going to die in six months. A ridiculously short amount of time, given how slow America is to execute prisoners, but let’s pretend. What are your choices in terms of how you’re going to live the rest of your life until then?”

Bucky taps his index finger against the bridge of his nose.

“Quit,” he says. “Quit everything. Quit coming here. Go back to my room. Shut the door. Shut everyone out. Shut everything down again.” He glances out the window. “Maybe wander off into the jungle. I’ve thought about that. That’s kind of how I’m feeling today. ‘Cause if I’m gonna die anyway, who gives a fuck?”

Bard also turns to look out the window at the jungle that lies just outside. “Yeah, you could definitely do that. How would that be helpful?”

“Emotionally, it’d be much easier. Maybe I could also spare the others from getting caught in the crossfire when they come to drag me away.”

“Sure. You could just go back to square one. No relationships, no friendships, no love, no joy, no trust, no self-compassion. Letting fear run your life all over again,” Bard says casually.

“I know that’s not the right choice,” Bucky admits. “And I don’t even know if I could go back to square one, even if I wanted to. But I just – ” His voice cuts out momentarily as he tries to swallow down the lump building in his throat. “I don’t want to lose everything. Everyone. Everything I’ve gained.”

“That’s the flipside, isn’t it?” Bard says with a small smile. “The flipside of relationships.
Friendship. Love. There’s always a price, and the price of letting yourself love and be loved is that it’s painful when you lose those you care about. They go away, you go away, whatever it may be. You have to decide if the price is worth it. If it’s not, well, maybe you should shut down. Maybe it would be easier. But if it’s worth it, maybe there’s another option.”

Is that what this pain is? Is it all because of other people? Is it all because he cares and because they care back? Because he’s somehow over the course of four months negotiated a fragile deal with himself and the devil and the ghosts of Zola and his other handlers that allows him have a little bit of happiness? He remembers back to May, when the Germans took him. He was nervous. Fearful. Acquiescent. But he wasn’t sad. He wasn’t angry. He didn’t feel like anything was being taken from him except his freedom, which he knew was only borrowed anyway. Not like now, where he feels like he’s about to be ripped out of the universe itself and flung into nothingness.

And God, if that’s what this pain is, is it worth it?

“If it’s worth it,” Bard continues, “you let yourself feel that pain. Just like you are now. Because it’s real. You talk about wanting to be a real, feeling person, this is what it’s like.”

“So, basically, it’s awful,” Bucky grumbles. “What’s my other choice, aside from wandering into the woods?”

“Well, think about it,” Bard says, tipping his palm up. “What’s the opposite of shutting down?”

Bucky sits upright and keeps shifting back until he’s slouching, legs stretched out in front of him. “Doubling down, I guess.”


“Easier said than done.” Bucky rubs his left temple, pressing into the pain that’s been throbbing there for the last two days.

“Of course. But everything starts with a goal. If you believe this is going to end with you being taken away, whether to prison or to execution, having that as a goal can help you live as much as you can before that happens. And, by the way, let’s talk about the chance of that actually happening.”

“This isn’t gonna to go away.”

“No, it probably won’t,” Bard says, his expression resigned. “You all could probably stay here for the foreseeable future, but that would also present challenges, especially for some of the others. And if you were to be apprehended, there are extenuating circumstances involved here. You didn’t just wantonly murder all those people. In fact, there’s a whole hangar of files that tell a very different story. Those should all be admissible in court. I don’t think this is a slam-dunk death sentence, especially if you’re not found culpable.”

Bucky frowns deeper. “I could still go to prison.”

“You certainly could. You’d at least go to jail, if you went to trial. But I’ll tell you one thing, I guarantee having PTSD in jail or prison is worse than having it as a free man. You wanna talk about living in fear, having no control, that’s about as bad as it gets.” His grim tone leaves no doubt about the accuracy of this statement. “So that could also be a motivator to keep working.”

“Do you really think all those records would help?” Bucky asks.

Bard nods firmly. “I do. I’m not a lawyer, but I’ve sat through enough war crimes proceedings to
know that motivation, *mens rea*, meaning ‘guilty mind,’ matters a lot in court. And considering you were forced to kill all those people against your will, and that there’s proof of that, that has to mean something.”

Bucky’s brain feebly digests all of the possibilities, all of the worries, all of the worst and best case scenarios, all of his options for how to navigate this colossal mess. Nothing is clear, but the confusion is better than the dread that comes with blindly assuming he’s a dead man.

“Guess I was jumping to conclusions,” Bucky says with a frustrated sigh, referring directly to one of his worksheets.

“You got it. One of the most unhelpful things is to – ”

“Mistake possibility for probability. Yeah, I know.”

Bard grins in the way that he does whenever Bucky therapizes himself successfully. “So, shall we keep going with CPT?”

Bucky nods.

“Good! Because we’re gonna talk about safety, power, and control today, and the timing couldn’t be more perfect.”

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Tuesday

The Haircut Lady, a.k.a., the sweet old Wakandan-by-way-of-Uganda woman who comes the palace every five weeks to cut their hair, is armpit deep in former Avengers this afternoon. She’s got a queue against the wall of the small office she’s temporarily appropriated – everyone except Sam, who insists that he’s perfectly fine with his clippers, thanks to the United States Air Force. Clint was first, something about needing to look “snazzy” for the wife when he video chats with her tonight, followed by Steve, who’s getting his cut now. Bucky’s next, and he very nearly didn’t bother to stay in line because of the wait. He’s very pissy today, more so than usual, phasing in and out of anger at the slightest provocation. His tolerance for everything and everyone is about as thin as tracing paper, and he doesn’t know why. The act of trying to deconstruct it pisses him off even more.

But he’s getting beyond the bounds of his do-it-yourself competency as far as cutting his own hair, and he needs a professional touch to prevent himself from rage-shaving it all off because it’s getting so long and poorly shaped. He’s thought about doing it, when he wants to throw his fist through the wall because he doesn’t know how to channel the nervous agitation that’s been seething below his skin since the news broke.

He’s working hard, doing his worksheets, using his skills, trying not to catastrophize. He feels like he’s barely keeping himself threaded together, but he hasn’t totally lost his shit yet. He’s managing it. They’re all managing it. If anything, all the recent drama has brought them closer. And even though he feels that push, like he wants to stop before he enmeshes himself any further with any of them, he’s letting himself be brought close. Because he decided that being close is worth the pain of it, and even if it’s uncomfortable and feels wrong, he’s trusting in some higher wisdom that he’s doing the right thing.

The decision wasn’t hard, in the end. In fact, the decision was already made before the conversation even started. When he told Steve he wanted his life back, he meant it. Of course, back
then, he didn’t think that the span of said life could potentially be only a short time, truncated by the unknowns precariously hanging over them. Talking with Bard has instilled a sense of urgency in him, as far as living’s concerned, and whether they stay here until some illegal JSOC night incursion tears them apart or if they stay until they die of old age, he’s done fucking around. Done wasting time. And the suck has grown commensurately worse because of this resolve.

Haircut Lady is enraptured by Steve. His easy charisma, his dazzling smile. She laughs in an incongruously girlish way when Steve says something particularly charming, possibly on purpose but possibly just because he’s a walking beam of light today. Occasionally Steve will glance in the mirror and make eye contact, smile in a way that’s clearly intended for him. He even winked once, probably wondering if there’s anything he can possibly do to make Bucky less of a grumpy prick today. Bucky can see that he’s already getting his first wrinkle between his eyebrows from his perma-scowl, and that’s with his super soldier regeneration running at full steam. Or maybe it’s not. Maybe he’s losing that, too. Why the hell not?

When she finishes with Steve, he looks like a clean cut million bucks. Bucky nods appreciatively as he joins him against the back wall of the room, and they watch her sweep up Steve’s hair into a little blond fluff ball. Then she motions Bucky over and sits him down.

“I haven’t seen you here before,” she says. She runs her hands through his hair with a look of deep concentration. “Oh, no. Who cut this? This is terrible.”

“I cut it.”

“Oh, I can tell. My Lord, my Lord.” She shakes her head and tsks repeatedly. “Oh, my Lord. I will try to fix it.”

In the mirror, he sees Wanda’s shoulders shaking as she tries to hold back her laughter, her face buried in her hands. Scott and Steve’s faces are also contorted as they try not to make it worse.

“Ha-fucking-ha,” Bucky says to the three of them. They proceed to lose it, and Haircut Lady hushes him and gestures at him brusquely for cursing.

She sprays his hair down amply with water and gets to work. She doesn’t chat with him. Instead, she looks as if she’s working out a differential calculus equation, completely absorbed in the process of correcting a mess so bad that she has to call upon the Lord repeatedly to grant her the patience to fix it.

She finally finishes nearly 45 minutes later, and when he looks in the mirror, it’s only then that he realizes how bad it was before she got her hands on it. It’s about the same length and style as when he shipped out, before he let it get a little too far out of regs after the Commandos formed. Just because he could. Because his best-friend-slash-CO certainly didn’t seem to care and maybe even liked it better that way.

Haircut Lady blow dries the stray hairs off of his face, ears, and neck and then looks at him, beaming, like he’s her own son. She clasps her hands over her heart and smiles.

“Much better,” she coos. She then looks to the others, and Wanda and Scott nod vigorously.

Steve gawks. Bucky smirks back. Too bad he’s got plans after this. Important ones. Ones he’s been psyching himself up for over the course of several days. Ones that definitely do not involve Steve. Bucky already told him this morning that he needs a few hours alone, and Steve was more than happy to accommodate. Bucky figures that Steve probably needs a break from his oppressively negative energy.
After their haircuts, they say goodbye, which includes Steve lightly brushing Bucky’s hand with his own, as if by accident. Like the others don’t know. Like Wanda hasn’t told them. Like they’re blind and deaf and stupid. Like they would even care. But there’s something vaguely exciting about pretending it’s a secret, so they still sort of do. Steve does, anyway. Bucky mostly just goes along with it. He’s outta fucks to give in the concealment department, but he wants to try to respect Steve’s fickle modesty, which is so unpredictable that he can’t even keep up with it. Hell, none of them are ever sure when they’re going to get old man Steve or young man Steve.

Bucky heads toward the executive wing, then down the stairs and out the door, running his hand absently through his tidy hair. A gesture to calm himself, maybe, as he feels his nervousness ratchet up. As he approaches the hangar. He reaches the access panel and stands in front of it. Without anyone to pressure him, he takes the opportunity to surf his anxiety. It’s one of the tools Bard taught him. He’s never been surfing before, not for real, but he gets the gist: ride the wave of the emotion. Don’t feed into it. Don’t judge it. Just let it happen. Let go while it does its thing. Breathe. It’s just an emotion. Blah, blah, blah. Breathe. It’s only temporary, as are all things.

When he feels it start to dissipate, he presses his hand to the panel and opens the door. The lights turn on. The Chair sits, menacingly, front and center. He rides another wave and gives The Chair a wide berth as he walks past it. He’s not here for The Chair. He’s here for what lies beyond it – the wide field of boxes, arranged painstakingly by date.

He walks the rows slowly. The boxes start in 2004, then skip to 2001, then the mid-90s, and so on, leaping backwards through time, each box more worn and discolored than the previous. He walks until he starts to see German, back in the ‘40s. He stops in front of the second to last box, Februar – März 1944. He doesn’t need to see the last one, the one from 1943. He remembers that just fine. In fact, he remembers it so well that he’d give anything he could to forget it.

Bucky kneels and takes a deep breath before pulling the top off. The files are thick, bursting. They smell musty. He doesn’t reach in. He can’t. He just needed to make sure they were there. That they really existed. That what happened to him was real. He didn’t used to doubt the reality of what happened, but now that he’s processing more of it, turning it over in his mind repeatedly, it’s taken on an almost fictional quality. In a distressing moment of deliriously exhausted contemplation, he once even entertained the possibility that he made the whole thing up. That he’s wildly delusional. That there was never a Hydra or Zola or captivity or programming. That he’s truly insane – or maybe not even alive at all. Maybe he really is a pile of bones at the bottom of a ravine. Of course, everything in the hangar, including the files he’s looking at right now, speaks to the frightening reality of everything. And he’s pretty sure that dead men don’t feel pain like this. No. He can only wish that was all the imaginings of a madman.

He lays the lid back on, lifts the whole box, and stacks it onto the next one. He then hoists both back toward The Chair, wide around it, then out the door. Two by two, he brings the boxes to his bedroom, ten in all spanning from 1944 to 1959. He stacks them in the corner, closes his door, and stares at them, hands on his hips. It takes some time to fully sink in, that these files are all about turning him from who he used to be into someone else he used to be. Wherever the hell that leaves him now, he’s not sure. Is he both? Neither?

He was sure he knew most of what happened during those first few years, but seeing the physical immensity of the information before him, he wonders if he knows even half of it. And that scares the fuck out of him. He then wonders if he does know, on some level. He has no idea how much he’s got buried away, stuff so ugly that he can’t even let it into his consciousness.

Steve knocks on the door and tells him dinner is ready. Bucky tells him he’s not hungry. Steve wants to come in. Bucky tells him no, grouチャー than he’d like. Steve sounds disappointed. He
doesn’t really care. He doesn’t want to talk. He doesn’t want company. He wants to look at the
stacks of boxes. He wants to obsess over them in the way that one might if presented with a corpse
draped with a sheet. He wants to feel the polar pulls of revulsion and curiosity.

It took him three days of cheerleading and rationalizing and arguing with himself to get these boxes
here, to even go into the hangar alone, and he’ll be damned if he can just go eat dinner like a
normal person, like he doesn’t have handwritten notes five feet from him describing in excruciating
detail – what? He doesn’t even know exactly what. And he doesn’t want to know. And he does
want to know. So he sits on the edge of his bed, bolt upright, his body humming with unease. He
sits and he stares, because neither side is winning.

He startles sharply when he hears another knock on the door. Out of nowhere, he’s assailed by a
violent backdraft of rage, and he has to clench his jaw shut to not scream at whoever it is to leave
him the fuck alone. He gets up, over-controlling his every move, and opens the door to find Steve
there again.

“Hey,” Steve says, smiling. “You okay?”

Bucky’s nod is silent and forced.

Steve’s smile flattens out. “You sure?” He leans to the right, looking through the doorway at the
stacks. “What are those?”

“Boxes.”

“Yeah, I gathered.” He doesn’t press any further, maybe because he’s being blasted by the waves
of irritation radiating off of Bucky. Steve then looks uncertain, maybe a little nervous. “Do you
have a few minutes?”

Bucky glances over at the clock on his wall and does a double take when he sees that it’s nine
o’clock. Has he really been in his room staring at boxes for nearly two-and-a-half hours?

“Yeah,” he says curtly.

He startles again when Steve takes him by the arm and leads him to his room. All the lights are off
and the space is dimly lit by three candles – two on the nightstand, one on the dresser.

Bucky stops in his tracks, his eyes widening with alarm and confusion.

“What the fuck is this?”

Steve hesitates, the flushing of his face visible even in the darkness, his eyes darting back and forth
from the room to Bucky. He eventually replies, “It’s Valentine’s Day. I thought that…” He trails
off.

“What the fuck? What the fuck?” Bucky starts mumbling repeatedly, his body filling with panic,
with even more anger, and with absolute overwhelming incomprehension of what’s happening to
him, both internally and externally. What the fuck? is all he can think, over and over, and with no
filter whatsoever, no capacity to think about how absolutely unhinged he must appear, he continues
to speak it. His visual perception narrows to a slim, blurry tunnel, and he starts sweating, and he
can’t breathe, and his heart starts beating so fast he’s not sure if he’s going to retain consciousness.

He takes several uneven steps back, into the blessedly empty hallway. “I... this...” he tries and fails
to say, before turning and bolting back to his room.
As soon as he shuts the door, he tears off his clothes, rushes to the bathroom, and turns on the shower, cold as it goes. He then stands in the water stream with his hands against the tile wall, hyperventilating. He has a crazed thought that it might never stop, that maybe this is how he’ll die, smothering in carbon dioxide because of some fucking candles, because... *fuck*... because Steve was trying to do something nice, because he barely even knew it was February, let alone fucking Valentine’s Day, because – *fuck*, *fuck*, *what the fuck* – because he’s a rude, ungrateful, fucked up shitbag, because Steve’s face, the hurt and concern and confusion there –

“*Fuck!*” he yells between straining breaths. The sound echoes off the tiles.

The panic crests and starts to recede with excruciating slowness. The unbearable heat burns off until he’s shivering, until his teeth are chattering, and he lets himself freeze for a while longer to punish himself. A woefully insufficient punishment, but the only one he can think of at the moment.

His mind travels to what Steve’s intentions might have been, seeing the person he said he loves suffering, wanting to do something special, whatever that thing might have been. He thinks of Steve’s thoughtfulness, the endless, endless patience, the ferocity of his stubborn protectiveness, and the warmth and gentleness with which Steve cares for him. Everything he’s already given, how he still tries to give even more, and the painful futility of it sometimes. Like now, when he’s getting himself run through trying to hug a cantankerous, scared, brain damaged porcupine.

Bucky rests his forehead against the wall. He squeezes both eyes shut as tightly as he can to stop the pressure behind them from breaking through, and he tries to will his chin to stop quivering, as if they’re just simple mechanical malfunctions that can be fixed through force.

He then takes a few deep breaths and gives himself permission to turn on some hot water. He rights himself and slowly starts going through motions of showering, his arms and hands moving like they’re filled with molten lead. As he finds his footing in some reasoning again, he tries to figure out what happened, because he at least owes Steve a damn good explanation.

He tries to channel Bard, and Bard would ask about triggers. Okay. He was angry from the moment he woke up. Still stressed about the news, maybe more stressed than he’s let on to himself and the others. Disturbed as hell and extremely distracted by the hangar and the boxes and everything in them. Disoriented in his sense of time. Caught off guard by the Valentine’s Day thing, The day. The gesture. Maybe the fact that he should have done something. The shocking reminder that they’re a couple. Or whatever they are. Oh, and the PTSD.

*Okay, okay. Okay. Okay. It makes some sense,* he assures himself. Not complete sense, and it certainly was not at all justified, but it clearly wasn’t random.

And God, what a shitty response. What a shitty, hurtful, and truly senseless response. The further he gets from panic and the closer he gets to the ground, the more crazy and terrible it seems. Happy fucking Valentine’s Day, Steve. Your gift is an angry, insane person who mumbles expletives at you and runs away when you try to do something nice for him.

Bucky finishes washing and dries himself off. He looks in the mirror and winces at the redness of his eyes, the scruffy, tense, tiredness of his face. He looks like he just crawled out of a cardboard box after an all-night bender. He takes his time shaving his face clean, which gives his eyes some time to clear up. He can’t do a lot for the tired and tense parts, but when he’s done, he looks presentable. The haircut pulls more than its fair share of the weight.

Ah yes, looking spiffy for the wife. Now he gets it. Stupid. How dense can he be?
Bucky stands in front of his closet, surveying his selection of two shirts, the rest of which are in the hamper. He really should request more, but he feels bad asking when, technically, he does have enough clothes to make it through the week. Just exactly enough. Between being piss poor before the war and living in borrowed costumes, tactical gear, and bare necessities after it, he never really learned how to have or ask for more. He picks the charcoal grey sweater and black jeans, and as he puts everything on, he runs through how he’s going to explain himself. Everything he thinks of sounds contrived and, above all, wholly inadequate.

He checks himself in the full-length mirror and makes his way to Steve’s room. He feels sick as he steps into the hallway, which is atypically and ominously silent. Steve’s door is closed, and his fist hovers over it for a few seconds before he raps his knuckles on it.

“Come in.”

Bucky clears some of the discomfort out of his throat and enters, pushing the door open carefully. Steve’s in the chair against the wall, sketching something in a spiral bound drawing pad. The candles are out and the lamps on, as they normally are at night. Steve closes the pad and smiles at him in a weary sort of way. Bucky closes the door and leans back against it. His jaw works from side to side, and when he finally opens his mouth to speak, there’s only silence. He lets out a huff of frustration and looks to the floor.

“I’m sorry,” he says at last. “I’m so sorry. And I’m sorry I have to keep saying ‘I’m sorry’ because I’m so fucked up all the time.”

“You’re not fucked up all the time,” Steve replies. “You’re doing as well as could be expected, all things considered. Better, even.”

“Wow, if that’s what you call better, I’d hate to see worse.”

Steve puts down his pad and pencil and stands. He looks gorgeous, and Bucky feels his stomach flutter as he closes in, from more than just the guilt and nerves. Steve stops in front of him, takes his hands, and leads him away from the door.

“I wanna try to explain –”

Steve shakes his head. “Don’t. You don’t need to.”

“Oh, I think I do,” Bucky says forcefully.

“Listen, I know you’ve been going through a lot lately, and I can tell you’ve been working really hard to try to keep it all together. I can see that.” Steve reaches up with both hands, laying them on Bucky’s shoulders, squeezing his right one tight. “And you seem so tense. I just wanted to…” He pauses, pressing his lips together. “I wanted to help you relax. Give you a massage. ‘Cause it’s Valentine’s Day and all.” Steve’s face flushes again.

He had a breakdown over a massage. A massage. It’s so sweet, so considerate, that it makes Bucky feel exponentially worse about his reaction, and that sick feeling is back once again. This is countered just slightly by how ridiculously adorable Steve looks as he says, ‘Cause it’s Valentine’s Day and all. Jesus. Stick a fork in him. And twist.

Steve continues. “And maybe ‘what the fuck is this, what the fuck, what the fuck’ wasn’t exactly the response I was hoping for, at least I successfully surprised you.” He smiles in that sincere, good-natured way of his.

“I’ll say,” Bucky mutters, trying to grasp how Steve can be so amiable about it all. “I was in a bad
space when you brought me here, and I just wasn’t ready for that. For anything. Anything out of the ordinary. It wasn’t this, specifically, because it’s a really nice thing to offer. Really nice.” He’s babbling now, and he knows it. He thought he’d be better at apologizing and explaining his inappropriate behavior by now.


Does he want Steve’s hands all over him for an extended period of time? Of course he does. Whether he deserves it is another thing entirely. He reads Steve’s expression, his body language, and it’s abundantly clear that he wants to. How close he is. How his right hand is beginning to drift up his neck. Saying no wouldn’t do either of them any good. In fact, it would be yet another rejection, just to satisfy some belief that he needs to be punished. That he’s bad. Unworthy. And maybe all those things are true, but he sure as hell shouldn’t bring Steve down with him.

Bucky nods. Steve smiles, lets go of him, grabs a small book of matches from atop his dresser, and starts to light the candles again.

“Where’d you get those?” Bucky asks.

“They’ve been in here the whole time.”

“Really?” Bucky says absentmindedly, shamelessly ogling Steve’s ass when he bends over to get the flame close to the wick.

“Yeah. Didn’t even really notice them til a couple weeks ago. Thought they were just for decoration. Maybe they’re supposed to be. I dunno.” Steve shrugs nonchalantly.

When the candles are lit, he turns off the lamps. The room feels instantly cozier and more intimate. Like most things in this budding aspect of their relationship, it’s both exciting and a little nerve-wracking.

Bucky walks to where Steve is standing and lays his hand on Steve’s cheek.

“Can you forgive me?” he asks seriously.

It’s a real question, and a loaded one, too. It speaks to more than tonight. It’s for the whole day. The past week. The past few months. Bucky knows he’s been unbelievably difficult to live with since they got here, and he rarely asks for Steve’s forgiveness, not directly, maybe because he assumes it. But he shouldn’t. He doesn’t want to take anything for granted anymore, especially not after his conversation with Bard on Friday. He wants to grow up again, after regressing so far. He wants to think about the needs of others. He wants to own all of his day-to-day missteps, his foul moods, his yelling and snapping and door slamming, no matter how understandable and forgivable these things somehow seem to be.

“Of course I can forgive you,” Steve says. “Of course.”

Bucky kisses him, drawing his thumb over the smoothness of his jaw. Steve inhales audibly through his nose and kisses harder, his arms coming tight around his body. Steve then pulls back just enough to get a few words in.

“You smell good,” he says. “You look really good.”

“So do you.”

Bucky can see something dark in Steve’s eyes, something that’s definitely not old man Steve. Something burning and wild. Something that he’s sure is beginning to cloud his own eyes as well, like a strong weather front pushing away the shame and self-loathing, replacing it with something
far less coherent, less cognitive in nature. Bucky decides then with his swiftly fleeing rational mind that he’s going to try to fix this the best way he knows how, when all his words seem to fail and fail and fail again.

Bucky kisses him once more, nipping at his lower lip, before stepping out of Steve’s arms and pulling off his sweater and undershirt. He lets Steve stare, lets him touch his chest, which he does with reverence. Bucky then unzips his jeans and pushes them down with his underwear. He steps out of both, completely naked now, and lets Steve get an eyeful of him before he lies facedown on the bed. He looks over at Steve, who’s still standing there with a baffled look on his face, clearly tripping over the demolished expectation that this was going to be just a massage. He goes to put his knee on the bed when Bucky stops him.

“Nuh-uh. You too,” he says, resting his head on his folded arms.

Steve lowers his knee and starts unbuttoning his shirt. Slowly. He keeps his eyes locked on Bucky’s as he shrugs out of it and lifts his undershirt, unveiling his well-muscled torso inch by inch. He then does the same with his pants, then, finally, he pulls down his underwear, revealing his half-erection. Bucky smiles against his forearm and raises his eyebrows approvingly. Steve then walks to the nightstand and pulls out a bottle of liquid. Bucky reaches over, grabs it from his hand, and reads the label. Sure, it’s massage oil, but it’s also clearly lube.

“Got other plans for this?” Bucky says, shaking the bottle.

Steve crawls on the bed and straddles him, settling on his sacrum. He bends down and puts his mouth next to Bucky’s ear.

“Maybe later,” Steve says, taking the bottle back.

Bucky’s pulse quickens as he imagines the possibilities, but he’s also really hoping that Steve doesn’t want to go all the way tonight. As much as he wants it, as many times as he’s envisioned it, as much as he craves it viscerally, he knows damn well he’s not quite ready to take either role in that adventure. He wonders if Steve’s ready either and kindles some hope that they’re both on the same page.

He hears Steve rub his hands together and then feels them on his shoulders, smooth and slick. His fingers run over the seam where Bucky’s prosthetic meets his skin. He travels inward a little bit, toward his spine, pressing down.

“Does this hurt?” Steve asks. “And how far does it go in?”

“No. About two inches or so, I think.”

Steve finds the line where the metal ends below the skin, and he begins pushing his fingers and hands deep into the muscles on both sides. He manages to find a pressure that’s firm enough to work out some of the knots beneath but not so hard that it’s too painful.

Bucky stifles a groan. Many, actually. It feels wonderful. All of it. The massage, the weight of Steve on him, the way his brain is behaving itself. He’s staying present in his body, and whenever his mind starts to wander, he’s able to bring it back. He also gives himself a tiny bit of praise for allowing Steve to pin him facedown on the bed without freaking out. This is good. Very good.

“How are you feeling?” Steve asks later, after he’s meticulously worked his way across Bucky’s back and shoulders several times. It’s obviously a question to see if he’s enjoying himself, but there’s also a hint of checking in to make sure he’s handling it okay.
“Mmm, good. Really good. Feels great. I’m good,” Bucky replies ineloquently, making sure to cover all his bases.

“Good. Can I go lower?”

“Yes,” he replies automatically.

Bucky then feels Steve shift his weight down his body, until he’s resting on his legs. He then sucks in a sharp breath when he feels Steve lick a long, slow line up his left ass cheek.

“Was that okay?” Steve asks, sounding apprehensive.

Bucky makes a sound of assent, his brain fumbling to process the gesture, wondering where he got the idea to do that, whether he knew it would shoot a thousand volts of electricity directly into his dick. He braces himself against the sensation again, tensing his entire body when Steve does it to the other cheek. He then hears him oil up his hands before he runs his palms firmly over the places he licked.

Bucky pushes his face into the mattress to muffle some of the sounds coming out of him, which really doesn’t muffle them well at all. It doesn’t take long at all before he feels himself getting impatient, antsy, trying to move his hips, his nerves crackling from head to toe. Finally, he can’t take any more. He lifts his head.

“Stop.”

Steve stops, lifting his hands immediately. Bucky can’t see his face, but he imagines he might be preparing for the worst. He gets off and kneels at Bucky’s side.

Bucky rolls over and motions for Steve to come closer. Steve starts to move, then wavers.

“C’mere,” Bucky encourages, holding out both arms, a little irritable from his unmet, urgent desire for contact. He plants his left foot on the bed, knee up, and spreads out his right leg wide, inviting Steve between them.

Steve’s reluctance fades from his face, replaced by what could only be described as pure lust, like he’s finally releasing the check valve he’s been holding closed since the first night they messed around, when things went so terribly wrong. Steve crawls between his legs and gets on top of him, presses against him, plunges his tongue into his mouth, grinds down hard, fiercely stoking Bucky’s already overwhelming hunger for him. Bucky puts his hands everywhere, Steve’s head, his back, his ass, pulling him as close as he can while his reeling mind is completely hijacked by instinct.

Steve breaks the kiss and slides down, dragging his mouth along the ridge between Bucky’s pecs, down his abs, until his chin hits the tip of his cock. He kneels between Bucky’s legs and runs his hands up his thighs, looking down on him with an almost predatory expression. Bucky’s delighted to re-confirm that beneath all that all-American righteousness and rigidity lies just a guy, just as horny and sexually driven as most other men, Bucky very much included.

“I wanna repay you for last week,” Steve says, glancing from Bucky’s groin to his face.

Bucky lets out a shallow laugh. “It wasn’t a favor. I did it ‘cause I wanted to.”

“It’s a figure of speech.”

Bucky watches with rapt attention and anticipation, blood thrumming, as Steve bends over and goes down on him.
Bucky’s eyes roll, and his head falls back on the bed. It’s been so long since anyone’s done anything like this to him that he almost doesn’t know how to handle it, doesn’t know what to do with the mass of energy it’s creating in his body. It feels amazing. God, he nearly forgot how amazing. He used to live for the ability to lose himself in it, to let go of everything except feeling and pleasure. But he can’t seem to do that now, can’t get lost, can’t let go, because now there’s resistance there, too. Something that starts to drain that energy almost as quickly as it’s being generated, something that starts firing up his mind again, pulling him away –

Just like Steve’s pulling away now. Bucky orients his gaze and sees Steve coming close again, bracing himself on one hand. His other hand comes up and takes Bucky’s wrist. It’s then that Bucky realizes he has the side of his fist pressed against his mouth.

“You don’t have to hold back,” Steve says, guiding his hand down to his side. “They’re all watching a movie. They should be, anyway.” The way he says it, it sounds like he arranged it that way.

Bucky frowns, confused by his own unconscious actions. “It’s not that…”

Frankly, he doesn’t know what it is. He never used to hold back. Even if it was rude. Even if the neighbors pounded on the wall. He thinks back to the stifled groans, burying his face, and now, like with his tears, physically trying to push emotions back into his body.

“You can let go. You’re allowed to feel good,” Steve says, leaning in and kissing him gently. “Let me…”

Let him. Okay. Okay. Bucky nods and relaxes back on the mattress, taking a deep breath to settle himself and quiet his mind. Steve takes his time going back down, kissing, touching, rousing life back into his flagging dick. When Steve engulfs him again, he keeps his hands to his side. He tries to focus only on sensation, on Steve’s hot, wet mouth working him over, on the way he looks while he’s doing it. God, of all the raunchy fantasies he’s had of Steve blowing him, none of them even coming close to the way it actually looks and feels.

Bucky lets out a ragged breath and lets his mouth stay open, letting whatever comes out come out. The sounds are foreign to his own ears, almost like they belong to someone else. That’s how long it’s been since he’s let himself go. Soon he feels Steve wrap his hand around him, moving in time with his mouth, and he knows he’s about done for. He feels a burning bloom in his stomach, his whole body tensing.

“I’m gonna – ” he tries to warn, no idea if Steve heard him or if he even spoke it at all. All he knows is the rippling burst of his orgasm, which tears a gruff cry out of him as he spills in Steve’s mouth, his hands gripping the comforter tight.

He opens his eyes and looks down at Steve, who’s smiling as he lets him go. Steve runs his hands over his thighs once more before moving over to lie against his left side. Bucky wraps his arm around him and pulls him close. Maybe it’s just the afterglow, but he finds it oddly touching that Steve chose his left side and not his right, that he accepts a dreadful piece of metal around him just like it was his own flesh. Steve rests his head on Bucky’s chest, over his heart, and lays his hand on his stomach.

“Thank you,” Bucky says against the top of Steve’s head. “You’re good at that.”

Steve breathes a laugh. “Somebody once told me that enthusiasm counts for more than anything else.”
They lie there for a few minutes, until Bucky comes back down to Earth. Coming back down like this, with the weight of Steve’s leg draped over his own, his warm breath on his skin, feels perfect. Part of him still can’t believe it, that something he’s wanted for so long is actually happening. He’s gotten used to everything being so mind-bendingly fucked up that intermissions of true happiness and serenity seem almost like a dream – or, more recently, an omen that something terrible is about to happen. Right now, he’d be completely content to lie here like this for the rest of his life, where no bad news or past sins can touch them. Steve shifts a little, and Bucky feels him, still hard, against his thigh.

“What about you?” Bucky asks.

“It’s okay. I’m fine.”

“Well, it’s Valentine’s Day, so of all the days to leave you high and dry, today’s not the day. Especially after you’ve been so generous and after all the shit I pulled.”

Steve makes a small sound that doesn’t sound like agreement or disagreement.

“What do you want me to do?” Bucky asks. He wonders if Steve wants to ask for permission to fuck him, and he really hopes he doesn’t, because he doesn’t want to have to shut that idea down.

“Can you just… touch me? And kiss me?” Steve says haltingly.

Bucky smiles. “Are you embarrassed to ask me that?”

“A little.”

Bucky takes a moment to appreciate this, even if he shouldn’t, because it’s the one time he feels like he’s got some mastery over something that Steve doesn’t. He might be rusty, with a small host of insecurities, but at the end of the day, Bucky knows sex and knows how to negotiate it. And he doesn’t feel an ounce of shame over the act itself, barring his new hang-up over his own personal enjoyment of it, which he’s pretty sure is part of his struggle with experiencing emotions in general rather than something specific to sex.

“I asked you what you wanted, Steve. Even if I didn’t, you don’t have to be embarrassed.”

“I told you I dated when I was in SHIELD, but it wasn’t a lot,” Steve says, and Bucky can’t tell if he sounds regretful or self-conscious or both. “Nothing seemed to work out for long. And I’m not exactly a guy who rushes around the bases, so I never really got that far into things. Things just kind of happened.”

“Well, sometimes things happen and sometimes you want something in particular.” Bucky caresses Steve’s hair, which is wonderfully soft. “You don’t have to be shy with me. You want something, just ask.”

“Okay.”

Bucky lets go of him, puts his hand on his shoulder, and encourages him to move over onto his back. He rests on his elbow and pulls in close to Steve’s side, reversing their positions.

“Where do you want me to touch you?” Bucky asks, watching for the third time that night as Steve’s face pinks up.
Steve takes Bucky’s hand and lowers it down his body. “Like the other morning,” he says.

Bucky briefly pulls his hand away to reach behind him, where Steve left the bottle of oil. He gives it to Steve and has him put some in the palm of his hand. He then takes hold of Steve’s cock and leisurely moves his hand up and down to coat it. He keeps his attention on Steve’s face as he does so, as those amazing lips of his part and his eyes flutter closed.

“And where do you want me to kiss you?” Bucky asks.

Steve replies by opening his eyes, just slightly, and pulling Bucky’s head down. They kiss slowly, deeply, while Bucky strokes him, varying his pace and intensity, slowing down and lightening his touch when Steve seems to be getting close. When Bucky does that not once, but twice, Steve makes a small, frustrated sound and channels that frustration into his kissing, which takes on a desperate, needy quality that Bucky meets happily.

After a while, Steve seems to lose his ability to focus as Bucky pushes him toward the edge again, and Bucky leaves his mouth to kiss his neck. He works his cock in earnest now, relishing the sounds Steve’s making, his endearments, his sighs, and the way he starts squirming as he nears the edge. When he finally comes, he does so loudly, shooting onto his chest. Bucky’s own cock, which has rallied by this point, twitches at the sight of it. He follows his impulse to drag his tongue across Steve’s torso, licking up much as he can, an action which earns a hoarse God from Steve as he watches him do it.

They then roll onto their sides, facing each other, happy and mostly spent. In truth, Bucky could easily go for another round. However, he supposes they can’t just keep blowing and jerking each other off all night because they get off so much on each other’s getting off. Well, they probably could, but part of him doesn’t want to push his luck after everything’s gone so well.

“Happy Valentine’s Day,” Steve says, smiling sweetly. Growing up, Steve was always such a romantic, dreamy and adorable and a little awkward about it. Not a lot has changed, it seems. “Our first, huh?”

“Hopefully of many,” Bucky says quietly, now feeling heat in his own face as he says it. It’s a completely heartfelt response, one that ignores any possibility of something tearing them apart. And he’s okay with that for the moment, even when a nagging voice tells him to be careful with thoughts like that.

Steve takes his hand and holds it. “Eventually,” he says, “later, when you’re ready, when I’m ready… I want you. All the way.”

All the way. Yes, Bucky wants that, too, and he’s relieved to hear some hesitation still lingering in Steve’s voice. He still feels a twinge of irritation with himself, because he shouldn’t have to kick it down the road for another day, but he wants to be absolutely sure that he’s good to go before they cross that particular line.

“How do you want me?” Bucky asks.

He honestly has no preference. He’s imagined them in virtually every possible permutation and position, all of them almost equally appealing.

“Both ways,” Steve says, then qualifies it with “if that’s okay.”

“Of course it is. What do you want first?”

Steve bites his lip “You on top. Then me.”
This, of course, does not help soften his dick one bit. “I’d like that. Maybe in a few weeks. My stamina’s total shit right now. I’d just be disappointing and embarrassing.”

“Well, I guess we’ll have to work on that,” Steve says, grinning. “Want a quick shower?”

Bucky agrees, and they make their way to Steve’s bathroom. The shower doesn’t end up being as fast as advertised, since Steve feels compelled to push Bucky up against the shower wall and relieve him of his lingering hard-on with a quick-and-soapy hand job. By the time they’re done, they’re clean and tired, collapsing into bed just after 12:30. Bucky lets Steve hold him, because he’s trying to get more comfortable with it and knows that, eventually, his body and jacked up PTSD brain will figure out that it’s safe.

They talk in the dark, and Bucky’s mind starts to fade out of its blissful respite as the usual chorus of worries begins to tiptoe back in. Worries about what’s going to happen to him. What’ll happen to Steve and the others. Worries about how he was exposed, who put together all the pieces about his kills as the Winter Soldier, who reported it to the media. Worries about therapy. Worries about those goddamn boxes.

As if Steve could read his mind, he asks, “Are those boxes from the hangar?”

Bucky presses his lips together. He was hoping Steve wasn’t planning to revisit that tonight, because he’s not sure how he’s going to explain why he has them. “Yeah.”

“What are you gonna do with them?”

“Look at the files.” It’s the first time he’s verbalized his intent, and hearing himself say it kicks his anxiety into high gear. “I’m feeling kinda stuck in therapy now. I figure maybe that’ll unstick me.”

“What are you stuck on?”

“Bard says I need to accept the fact that I was a victim and let myself grieve for what happened. It’s been really hard for me to do that.”

Steve starts moving his hand lightly across his back. “Why?”

Why, indeed. The answer is stupidly simple, and he takes the leap to admit it to Steve.

“I’m scared to feel the emotions that would come with all that. Bard says I’m ‘very defended,’ and that’s why all my feelings come out as anger.”

“You’ve had to be that way for so long, I can see why it’d be hard,” Steve says. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

Bucky’s fingertips travel across Steve’s chest, passing over the scant, fine hair that grows there. “I don’t know. Maybe just be prepared for me to be in an even shittier mood than usual for a while, and know that it’s not personal. Maybe I’ll be a total wreck. I don’t know what’s gonna happen, but it needs to happen, and it probably won’t be pretty.”

“I’m here for you. Whatever you need from me, just tell me. And I’ll try not to take it personally when you bite my head off.”

“Good. And whatever I do, I promise I’ll try to make it up to you when I get to the other side,” Bucky says.

When he gets to the other side, he’s going to have a lot of making up to do to a lot of people.
“Okay,” Steve says, “but just to warn you, your birthday’s in a few weeks, and we’re gonna have a party for you, so try not to have a meltdown when we do.”

“Holy shit.”

“Yep.”

“You mean I can’t even have a meltdown over turning 100?”

“Well, maybe a small one.”

One hundred years old. Jesus tap-dancing Christ.

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Bucky looks through his files. Steve gets a phone call.

Chapter Notes

Note for CA comic fans: As with previous chapters, I’ve switched the names of Karpov/Lukin chronologically to be consistent with the MCU.

Also, some of you may have noticed that I’ve been fiddling frequently with the story summary. I’ve been going back and forth with what direction to ultimately take things in, assessing my creative and emotional endurance and overall ability to commit to this story. (I don’t know if any of you have experienced this in your own writing, but I’ve found that writing characters in deep, prolonged distress can be very draining.) However, I think I’ve finally settled on something that’ll be a good fit for almost everyone, characters included. Thanks for your patience!

Friday

Bucky’s bed looks like the hangar boxes exploded upon it. He sits in the middle of it, like a bird in a nest, surrounded on all sides by the files he removed from the 1944 boxes. Looking at it all, he doesn’t know why he did it this way. He should have just taken them out one by one or, at least, box by box. He wonders if there’s something subconscious about it, like he’s surrounding himself with all of this physically the way that he’s surrounding himself with it mentally.

Still, it’s stupid. Yet another stupid thing he’s done today, the first being skipping his session with Bard. It’s the first session he’s skipped since they started weekly therapy, and he hasn’t even bothered to fabricate a good excuse for why he didn’t go. In fact, his excuse is downright terrible: he’s worried that Bard wouldn’t want him to do this. He’s not sure what objection he might have to it, but just the remote possibility that he might not approve was enough to deter him. Maybe he’d say it was obsessive and unhealthy, because it sure as hell feels that way. Bucky realizes now just how attached he’s become to Bard, how he doesn’t want to disappoint him, and he’s also starting to realize that the disappointment of not attending session is likely worse than what he would have earned if he told Bard about the boxes and his intentions with them.

His intentions. Of course, now that he’s sitting here, he doesn’t even remember what he wanted to get out of this in the first place. In this moment, all of his resolve and noble intentions about living well have dissolved, replaced by a racing mind, trembling fingers, and a sour stomach. All he knows is that he has to do this, even though all the whys have completely escaped him.

Bucky looks up at the clock. He’s giving himself until 7:00, because at 7:00, Steve’s coming to get him, and they’re going to eat dinner. And then at 8:00 they’re all going to watch a movie. And then after that, he’s going to sleep. He’s trying to regulate this process as much as he can, create an overarching framework of control, to somehow scaffold his inevitable tumble into emotional chaos.
He sets an alarm on his phone to ten minutes before seven, takes a deep breath, and opens the first file.

The first thing he sees when he opens it is his face or, rather, his head and naked torso. Even though the photo is black and white, there’s something off about his coloring. He looks ashen, dead, his eyes closed, mouth just slightly open, the stump of his left arm a mess of dark, shredded flesh and protruding bone. The date on the photo is February 23, 1944. Despite his lifelessness, he still looks young, so much younger than he is now. He stares at the photo for several minutes. He touches a finger to his face, which is covered with maybe a day’s worth of stubble. He wonders where he was when this was taken. The mission was on the 19th, and they were in Bavaria catching an eastbound train. His sense of time was so distorted that he doesn’t even know how long they were onboard before he fell, and he doesn’t know how far they traveled. He doesn’t even know how long he was hanging there, clinging to that rattling latch, terrified, reaching for Steve…

Bucky shudders and turns the photo over. The next pages are all handwritten vitals – temperature, heart rate, pulse, brief physical observations. There are pages and pages of them, documented three times a day every day from February 23rd forward. He flips through them quickly, not really reading them, just to ensure that they’re all the same type of document. He reaches for his laptop and sets it on his lap, because he already knows he’s probably going to need some translation assistance. His German is good, but not great, certainly not with medical and scientific terminology. He knows that most of these files have been translated already in digital format, but he has to do it himself. He has to feel the pages and smell the old ink. He has to.

He closes the first file and picks up the second, which is marked Summary Logs: Pyotr Sokolov. Sokolov. Sokolov. Bucky’s brows draw together. He doesn’t remember any Sokolov. But then again, he doesn’t remember much at all about that time, and it’s not as if they were courteous enough to formally introduce themselves to him. He opens the file, expecting Russian but finding even more German. The writing is large and flowing, and even in the first sentence, Bucky has to translate several words. He snorts and shakes his head. Of course the guy writes like a Victorian novelist. Just great.

And maybe it is actually great, because the need to translate takes some of the edge off. It gives him the hope that maybe, just maybe, it’ll break up the gravity enough that he’ll be able to make it through without having an anxiety attack. Maybe.

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February 26, 1944

Summary Log: Pyotr Sokolov

In a truly unexpected turn of events, I am pleased to report that the prodigious Subject 9 has been returned to us through the most extraordinary circumstances. We still are not entirely certain of the series of events that led him to be discovered. The townspeople in Grainau reported that a hunter found the subject alive and dragged him to town on the sleigh he planned for his quarry. Upon reaching the town, the residents reportedly called for a physician, who declared the subject deceased. The cause of death appeared to be hypothermia. One of our former research physiologists, Dr. Gerling, miraculously happened to be in Grainau during this time to visit his son. Having caused quite a stir among the residents of this small community, Dr. Gerling learned of the discovery of the subject and recognized him from the consultation work he did in Kreischberg. Dr. Gerling identified the subject as a colleague and volunteered return his remains to the appropriate parties.

Eager to examine the physiological status of the subject, Dr. Gerling contacted me, and I arranged
for him to return to the facility with the body. Citing a case study of a Russian woman successfully revived after being found dead from hypothermia in a snow bank, Dr. Gerling hypothesized that it may be possible to revive the subject, were his body temperature to be slowly raised and resuscitation procedures implemented. Therefore, we organized transportation to the facility by truck and packed the subject in ice and snow, with proper precautions taken to protect his remaining digits (it seems his left arm was amputated through some form of physical trauma) and his cartilaginous structures from damage due to cold.

When he arrived at the facility, I confirmed that the subject was indeed clinically deceased based on lack of respiration and carotid pulse. His body temperature was recorded at 15 degrees Celsius. Our spirits were high and hopeful regarding the potential for resuscitation, particularly given the subject’s physiological modifications and his documented vigor. In anticipation of our success, we bandaged the amputation site, which will require further treatment. I am uncertain how Dr. Zola will approach this unexpected development, so for the time being, we have opted to only sterilize and bandage the wound until further notice. From my own perspective, I see great potential with regard to biomechanical enhancement, and I am hopeful that Dr. Zola will share my interest in this.

Using the procedures employed by the physicians in the study Dr. Gerling cited, we brought the subject’s core temperature up to 36 degrees at the rate of 1 degree per hour. When he reached optimal core body temperature, we conducted an electrocardiogram and found the subject to be in asystole. In response, we administered two milligrams of epinephrine every three minutes for fourteen-and-a-half minutes, at which point he spontaneously entered ventricular fibrillation. Drawing upon the inspired work of Prévost and Batelli, we opted to introduce a charge of 800 volts of alternating current to the subject using Dr. Baum’s ingenious modification of another piece of surgical equipment we had on site. Remarkably, after three rounds of external defibrillation, as well as two additional boluses of epinephrine, the subject recovered circulation and respiration.

Dr. Gerling, myself, and the rest of the team were awestruck and overjoyed by the subject’s revival. However, this excitement was quickly tempered when the subject regained consciousness in a state of extreme agitation. He became violent and attempted to attack Dr. Gerling and two of our technicians. Fortunately, his dexterity appeared greatly compromised by the shock his body endured, allowing our assistants to subdue him through physical and chemical means. However, it is clear that the subject has retained both his heartiness and his strength, a cause for celebration, indeed.

I am hopeful that Dr. Zola will negotiate himself out of Allied custody soon, as I am certain he will be elated at the return of what is arguably his greatest success to date on the front of human enhancement. I am eager to discuss the subject’s future, including the possibility of collaboration with Department X to help the subject meet his full potential. It is clear that there is much work ahead, but we enter these endeavors with great enthusiasm and optimism.

Hail Hydra

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Bucky slams the folder closed and pushes it down hard with his hand, as if to keep the pages from flying out.

He was dead. Dead. Clinically deceased. Not only that, he was dead for days. He always thought he was being symbolic when he talked to Bard about dying in the snow, but it seems that this is literally what he did.
He doesn’t even know how to process it. Through the blankness, he can grasp at some facts. For one, it explains a lot. His memory loss. There’s no way that being dead that long in those conditions – packed in snow and shipped off to Hydra in a fucking truck – wouldn’t have an effect on his memory. And it certainly explains his appearance in the photo.

Jesus. Right off the bat, this is already infinitely more fucked up than he imagined it would be. No one’s supposed to come back from death. Not like that. Not days’ old death. There’s something so disturbing and inorganic about it, something so wrong, a foundational violation of nature upon which so many other violations have been built. It’s deeply unsettling, and it fills him with anger.

He keeps going, running on that searing current of emotion.

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March 3, 1944

Summary Log: Pyotr Sokolov

I am pleased to report that one of our agents was able to make contact with Dr. Zola and inform him of the recovery of Subject 9. As I hoped, Dr. Zola was greatly excited by the prospect of introducing a weaponized prosthesis. In accordance, he requested that I make contact with my colleagues at Department X to inquire about possible biomechanical modifications that may further enhance the subject’s performance. Dr. Zola also informed me that he is in the process of working with the American government to secure his release, pending his agreement to offer his services to them in exchange. He indicated that he has submitted a request for a brief respite in Switzerland to tend to his ailing mother, during which time he expressed intention to briefly return to the facility to examine the subject himself. He is most excited to see him again. In the interim, he ordered us to perform the steps necessary to optimize healing of the amputation site.

As was our experience in Kreischberg, the subject remains exceptionally uncooperative. In fact, I would argue that he is even more belligerent at present, relative to his initial detainment. I believe this is partially a factor of what appears to be profound impairment in memory. He cannot recall his name, his military affiliation, or other basic biographical information we were able to obtain through our assets in the U.S. Army, and he becomes greatly distressed when he cannot recall these facts. It is difficult to keep him subdued, and he has injured two of our assistants, as well as broken several of my poor Dr. Baum’s fingers. We were able to restrain him enough to perform surgery on the amputation site, including debriding necrotic tissue, removing crushed bone, and creating skin flaps to close the wound. However, we had difficulties sustaining him in a state of unconsciousness. Although we were able to escape with a portion of our clinical notes before the destruction of the Kreischberg facility, we lost most of our files pertaining to dosing calculations. Therefore, we have been forced to use a trial-and-error approach when administering sedatives and analgesics. It appears that our initial calculations were incorrect, for the subject woke repeatedly during the procedure in what appeared to be a substantial amount of pain. We were able to finally render him unconscious, though, truly, I am uncertain whether he was actually unconscious or merely paralyzed. It is of no matter, of course, since the procedure was ultimately successful.

At present, the subject appears to be healing very well. After a period of initial defiance regarding intake of nutrition and hydration, the subject has taken to consuming all of his meals in their entirety and has been requesting even more food. Dr. Yurovsky expressed concern over this change, suggesting that he may be preparing an escape attempt. However, Dr. Yurovsky does not seem to be concerned overall about our ability to move forward with what has been aptly renamed the Winter Soldier Program. Indeed, Dr. Yurovsky has received permission from Dr. Zola to begin
deprogramming and reconditioning as soon as he wishes. I am eager to observe this process as well as its effects on the subject’s readiness.

Hail Hydra

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Oh, he remembers that. Waking up in the middle of surgery, while they were sawing through the remains of his arm. The indescribable pain of being conscious and under-anesthetized. And yes, you smug fucker, “merely paralyzed” was right. He’s pretty sure he felt every single minute of that, once they supposedly knocked him out. He’d wager that at least 20 percent of his nightmares – back when he had them, at least – are of that day.

If he was angry after the last entry, he’s furious now. Along that same vein, he’s delighted to read that he was so “exceptionally uncooperative.” Admittedly, he doesn’t remember much of that. He mostly remembers compliance and willful obedience, which underpins that dogged stuck point about not being a victim.

He checks the clock and sees that he’s got about 45 minutes left, enough for one more entry and some time to decompress so that he doesn’t completely wreck their night. There’s a strong addictive quality to this process, and he can already tell he’s going to have a hell of a time compartmentalizing all this. But he’ll try. Of course he’ll try.

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March 10, 1944

Summary Log: Pyotr Sokolov

As Dr. Yurovsky predicted, Subject 9 attempted escape today. Despite our concerted efforts to handle him with an appropriate level of force, the subject seized a small moment of distraction when Mr. Müller interrupted transport protocols while the subject was being taken from his holding cell to the examination room. The subject took advantage of this and relieved Schultz of his baton. The subject then violently assaulted Schultz, Mr. Müller, and Holt with the baton, disabling them, and then he ran, very nearly escaping the facility entirely. In another infuriating violation of protocol, Schultz shot the subject in the back with his side arm, which slowed him enough for our men to apprehend him. In addition to shooting the subject, Schultz showed a disappointing lack of restraint and further injured the subject with his reclaimed baton.

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“What the hell?” Bucky says under his breath, his face drawn in a look of confusion.

He carefully extracts himself from his mess of folders and walks to his mirror. He turns, reaches over his shoulder, and pulls up the back of his shirt. Sure as shit, on the left side of his lower back is an incision scar about six inches long. He runs his fingers along it and wonders how he never noticed it before.

It speaks to something deeper, to his negligence of himself, to a lack of self-knowledge both physical and psychological. He’s been functioning so long with the same tired stories, messages about who he is, what he did, and what it all means, and his blindness to any alternatives has been entirely self-imposed, because at least his stories put him in control. But now, it’s starting to appear that he might not have had a lot of control at all. Not at first, anyway. Hell, they wouldn’t even let him stay dead, and if they could exert such vast control over the natural order itself, what hope did
he have for himself?

He returns to the bed, crawls back to his spot, and keeps reading, fighting his mind’s attempts to retreat into a daze.

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All told, the subject was left with severe contusions on his face and arm, as well as a gunshot wound that, thank God, I was able to repair easily. I admitted lost my temper quite seriously with Schultz, as well as Mr. Müller, as I do not believe they understand the extraordinary nature of the subject, as well as his astonishing return to our care. Schultz was completely relieved of his duties, and Mr. Müller was sternly instructed to never interrupt transport operations again. I do not believe he will continue to be a problem, as the incident was very frightening for him and his injuries were significant. I do not believe he realized the potential of the subject until he experienced his capabilities firsthand. And to think, is but a small sample of the capacity of the Winter Soldier!

Dr. Yurovsky recommended that the subject be punished for his escape attempt, which was initially concerning for me. Although it is clear that there must be behavioral modification in order for the program to progress as planned, I have had my doubts about the use of force against the subject. We recognized in Kreischberg that he has a high tolerance for pain and discomfort, and I am concerned that efforts to use such force have the potential to effect permanent damage. However, Dr. Yurovsky assured me that his methods involve the generation of psychological stress rather than physical, which is intended to also assist in reconstructing his psyche to create a reliable agent for our organization.

I visited the subject today in his cell, and he remains insolent. He has demonstrated a penchant for creative and, I’m told, highly obscene verbal abuses. I’m somewhat disappointed that my English is not highly attuned to vulgarities, so I must rely on Dr. Baum – a native of Chicago – to translate for me. I have found that his defiant attitude is somewhat easy to disrupt with a simple question that highlights his inability to recall his identity. For example, while expressing his extreme displeasure with his captivity, I asked him where he would go were he to be released. It was fascinating to observe the change in his expression, one of fear and pain, when he could not recall a single place he might call home. It was after this visit that my faith in Dr. Yurovsky’s intended approach was renewed. I do believe that the most efficient and effective way to break him is to do so psychologically. Dr. Yurovsky has developed a plan for his initial deprogramming, which he will reportedly initiate next week or two. I look forward to assisting him in this endeavor.

Hail Hydra

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The fear and pain of not recalling a single place he might call home. That hits him deep, and Bucky feels sorry for the guy. He can almost imagine the look on that poor corpse’s face as he searches a dark, empty room without a flashlight, knowing that something should be there, his search growing frantic when he finds nothing, nothing, and more nothing still.

He’s stuck there, though. He can’t go any further. He can’t take the next step to acknowledge that he’s the corpse, and that maybe he should really be feeling sorry for himself. It simply does not compute, and he finds that he really doesn’t want it to.

Bucky startles when his alarm goes off. He takes that as his cue to pull the slip of Post-it flags from his back pocket so he can mark where he left off. He surveys the many other folders before him with a loud sigh. This entire endeavor suddenly seems ridiculous and entirely not worth it. What

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the fuck is this all for, anyway? So that he can plunge himself into despair? And for what?

It’s a terrible idea. Terrible. Stupid. Things are going okay, aren’t they? He’s already come so far. Maybe this is good enough. Maybe this is as good as it’s going to get.

His gaze shifts back to that first folder, and as if possessed of their own will, his fingers find their way inside. He pulls out the picture and stares and stares at it, like maybe if he stares at Sergeant James Barnes’ cold, dead face long enough, the loose wires in his brain will connect.

But they don’t. And soon, Steve’s knocking at the door. He quickly slides the picture back into the file and stacks another file on top of it. The last thing Bucky wants is for him to see it, because his wires are fully intact, and it’ll probably hit Steve with all the brutal force that it should be hitting him.

Bucky leaves his pile and meets Steve at the door, closing it fast behind him so that Steve doesn’t see his little madman’s cavern of obsession that he’s constructed over the past few hours. They all eat dinner together, some potato-based casserole that Clint threw together that’s actually really good, and Bucky’s able to fly below the din of their energetic conversation without saying anything. He gave them all the pre-brief, a general one, letting them know that he’s liable to be a moody and possibly raging train wreck over the next few weeks and that they should all probably just steer clear of him. They were all supportive, of course, but there were some subtle, dubious looks exchanged as if to say And how is this any different from the way you usually are? God, how sad. What a sad sack of shit he is.

The movie is an action film that makes Bucky flinch repeatedly and with such intensity that Steve, Sam, and Wanda shoot him – and each other – concerned looks. It’s thoroughly humiliating, and he gets up and leaves after less than an hour. He showers in Steve’s bathroom because he can’t stand the thought of going back to his own room. Fortunately, he’s moved over a small stash of underwear and shirts and most of his toiletries. He doesn’t know why he can’t just move everything of his over. Maybe he’s not yet ready to abandon the possibility that this relationship of theirs is doomed to crash and burn. Maybe once Steve finally realizes that all the things he’s bought into are just his own fantasies about Bucky and what he’s capable of giving. Who he’s capable of being. Things don’t seem to be going that way, but holding out for that remote chance seems wise and safe.

He exits the bathroom with a towel around his waist and finds Steve there, waiting for him. Steve’s gotten so good at giving him space, almost like he’s developed a sixth sense attuned precisely to Bucky’s moods and flare ups and backslides, as well as the occasional surges forward. He asks if he’s okay, and Bucky wants to tell him everything he read. Every single thing.

But instead, he tries to drown himself in the distraction of Steve’s lips and warm touch, and Bucky pushes him down on the bed, kissing him, then kissing him deeper when all he can see is that fucking corpse behind his closed eyelids. But it’s not enough to wipe the image away, and he can’t even come close to getting it up. So he apologizes, his cheeks hot with embarrassment, which Steve tries to kiss away, gently, with quiet reassurances.

Bucky lies on the far edge of the bed that night, wide awake while Steve sleeps. His mind is a vast hall of blankness interspersed with panicked clips of pure mayhem that just barely reach into his body. He’s able to shut them down quickly, disconnect his brain and numb out before he gets overwhelmed. But oh, it’s powerful and absolutely terrifying, and it sows grave doubt in his heart about his ability to handle what lies before him.

But then he looks over at Steve, at his beautiful face in the moonlight, and he starts to remember why he’s doing all this. To be normal, or something closer to it. To be able to watch a movie with
his friends. To be able to love and be loved and make love without slipping out of time, without tumbling into the abyss of the past. To live with clarity and purpose, maybe do some good in the world to repay the massive debt he owes it.

He keeps that hope burning in his heart, surrounding his doubt with it, until sleep finally claims him.

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Saturday

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March 17, 1944

Summary Log: Pyotr Sokolov

I am delighted to report that Dr. Zola was able to coordinate a visit our facility on Wednesday to meet with The Winter Soldier. (I have been instructed to refer to him by his codename from here forward, which has been a challenge for me.) He was eager to see the Soldier, and we were most surprised to see that the Soldier recognized him immediately. He had spent the week prior recovering from his wounds and had grown despondent in the wake of his failed escape attempt. However, his behavior became highly excited upon seeing of Dr. Zola, who was, fortunately, safe behind the fortified door to the Soldier’s cell. The Soldier screamed obscenities and threats of harm with renewed spirit, and he threw his body upon the door repeatedly in an attempt to reach Dr. Zola. I must say, we were concerned for a short time that he might accomplish this feat!

Dr. Zola was most pleased to see him in such a robust state of health, and he informed us that his new role with the Allies has put him in such a position that he must relieve himself of his responsibilities within the Winter Soldier Program. He informed me that the Soldier is to be permanently transferred to Department X under the direction of a gentleman named Aleksander Lukin. I was happy to learn that most of us will be transferred to the Department to continue our work. Dr. Yurovsky was most displeased to learn that he was not invited to join us, but he agreed to initiate a short course of his planned therapy to prepare the Soldier for transportation to Russia. There, I will have the opportunity to implant a most remarkable prosthetic that the Department has designed, made even more remarkable by their recent acquisition of a small amount of vibranium. Although it is only a small amount, its alloy is anticipated to be stronger than steel. Mr. Lukin will also reportedly take over the soldier’s psychological reconditioning in Dr. Yurovsky’s stead.

On a personal note, I am pleased to be returning home to Russia and am hopeful that we are able to successfully transfer the Soldier without incident. We are all placing our faith in Dr. Yurovsky’s protocols.

Hail Hydra

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March 31, 1944

Summary Log: Pyotr Sokolov

The transfer of the Soldier to the Department X facility was a great success! This is due almost entirely to the efforts of Dr. Yurovsky, who employed a remarkable sleep protocol that shaped the Soldier’s behavior substantially. He subjected the Soldier to 115 hours of sleep deprivation, with the assistance of an ear-shattering rendition of Kalinka-Malinka played at a volume so loud as to
almost be excruciating. The Soldier was his typically belligerent self for the first 70 hours, but as he entered his 75th hour, he grew greatly distressed and disoriented, and he even took to begging us to stop, which was the first time he has ever resorted to such indignity. We found him to be highly malleable in this state, and we informed him that he would be permitted to sleep once he got aboard the plane to Russia, at the end of the 115th hour.

Dr. Yurovsky insisted on continuing the protocol well past the point of psychological breakdown so that we may effectively use threat of the protocol in the future as a means of preemptively curbing his disobedience. By the end, several of us grew rather uncomfortable with the level of emotional upset the Soldier exhibited; it was absolutely pathetic to witness. I have noticed that Dr. Baum appears especially moved by the Soldier’s distress, and he has expressed concerns about his treatment privately to me on several occasions. Indeed, he has been criticized by myself and others for referring to the Soldier by his given name in conversations with team members (he avoids using the name in the Soldier’s presence, fortunately). I sometimes wonder if he has the constitution for the type of work we are doing, and I will continue to monitor him in the coming weeks.

To our great delight, the Soldier slept the entire way to the new facility and neither endangered our lives nor attempted to escape our custody. He has also been agreeable and compliant since awakening. Mr. Lukin informed him that further disobedience would be met with repetition of the sleep deprivation protocol, which was met with a look of profound fear upon the Soldier’s face. With the initiation of his psychological conditioning, I realize that we must harden ourselves against his discomfort and remind ourselves that this what is required for the program’s success. Still, I find it ironic that a man who responded so favorably to his physiological modifications also happens to be so difficult to subdue and win to our cause.

I am extremely pleased with the Department X facility. We will be able to conduct all physical and psychological procedures in one place, and I am truly impressed with the medical engineering advancements we will have access to in order to achieve our goals. I must start with the arm, which is an absolute marvel of mechanical technology. It has been designed to receive signals directly from the Soldier’s nerves at the amputation site and has the potential to be an extraordinary functional asset. I will write more on this in a separate report. Also of note is the Department’s cryonics research team, which has developed and is currently testing a cryogenic stasis chamber, which would allow an individual to be frozen for an extended period of time and revived later in what is, hopefully, a similar condition. It functions on the same principles that allowed the Soldier to be frozen and revived when he first re-entered our care.

If the Soldier remains well behaved, I have received permission from Mr. Lukin to prepare for the implantation. This will require the Soldier to undergo extensive neurological testing, and I am hoping that I will be able to do this without incurring a violent reaction from him. Mr. Lukin reported that he will begin experimenting with the most effective ways to punish the Soldier when he acts out. He has asked me about the possibility of a neurological implant that could remotely stimulate his nociceptors to induce acute pain, and although I am uncertain if this will be the most effective way to manage him, I agreed to examine the possibilities.

Mr. Lukin also informed me that he plans to attempt to bond with the Soldier in order to assume the role of his handler, which, I must admit, seems preposterous to me. Having been involved with the care of the Soldier over a cumulative period of several months, I do not believe he is at all prepared to submit to us. In fact, I believe his current submission is one of appearance only, a deliberate ruse, rather than a reflection of his actual subordination. I have observed him watching operations very closely and attending to his surroundings with great interest, and I believe he may be waiting for an opportune time to attempt another escape. I informed Mr. Lukin of this, but he retains what I believe is overblown faith in his abilities to shape the Soldier’s loyalties. Shape his
behavior, yes, I believe Mr. Lukin can accomplish this. However, although I am not trained as a psychiatrist, I do not believe that the Soldier will be moved to true obedience, body and spirit, using punishment alone. I imagine Mr. Lukin may have to resort to more sophisticated techniques to achieve the latter. Perhaps the resources of Department X can be utilized in this endeavor.

Hail Hydra

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Jesus. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.

Bucky covers his mouth with his hand as a wave of nausea barrels over him. It’s completely visceral, bubbling up from his guts, and it seems to simultaneously evaporate all thoughts from his brain. This makes it almost impossible to pinpoint where it’s all coming from, whether it’s Zola, his “pathetic” indignity, the mere mention of Lukin “bonding” with him, or the nonchalance with which Sokolov describes his torture. Maybe he’s hacked into some part of himself that actually remembers every second of those 115 hours, which he’s always passed off with light humor. The song’s about red berries, for Chrissakes.

God, did he actually beg? And did they actually keep going for another 40 hours, until even his own torturers could barely stand to see him falling apart? Maybe this is all starting to happen because there’s a glimmer of a “him” there, not some blue-lipped, dead stranger, but him, the person he is now. And even that small glimmer is absolutely sickening. He thinks to pull out the picture, to try to detach himself from all this and try to pretend that it all happened to that other guy, but he’s scared that when he looks at that photo, all he’s going to see is himself.

Okay, he’s done. He’s done for today. He marks and closes the folder, and then he shoves enough of the other folders aside so that he can lie down. He breathes and tells himself he’s okay, and slowly he gathers up his wits and settles his stomach. It’s almost 3:00, and he has a Durak date with Wanda, Scott, and Clint while Steve and Sam make dinner. He talked a lot of shit last week and promised that he and Scott would wipe the floor with Wanda and Clint today, but he doesn’t feel like he can even win a battle with gravity at this point, let alone a two-on-two match with a Durak pro. Clint’s no slouch, but Scott can be a cunning son of a bitch when he needs to be, so they might still have a chance.

Later, after nearly two hours of play, Bucky and Scott somehow tally up more rounds empty-handed than Wanda and Clint, declaring themselves the winners. Bucky’s pretty sure they only won because Clint was clearly distracted. He’s been in a near constant state of distraction, sometimes even dejection, since the news of their whereabouts broke. This seems to have been made even worse by the fact that as of four days ago, he has officially missed all of his children’s birthdays this past year. They can all see that he’s about had it with this arrangement, or this lack of arrangement, as it were.

They eat and go their separate ways. Bucky and Steve lie in bed and watch TV, during which time he actually falls asleep. Bucky wakes in the middle of the night, still clothed, on top of the comforter with an extra blanket over him. He must have been out cold, probably from being awake most of the night before. He remembers then that he forgot his meds tonight, and figuring that he’s more than due for a doozy of a nightmare, he crawls out of bed as quietly as he can and heads back to his room to take his pills.

Of course, when he turns on the light, he can’t help but look at the bed. And when he looks at the bed, he can’t help but be drawn to Sokolov’s folder. There are only two more entries, both short, and he stands there with his pills and glass of water, locked in indecisiveness. If he finishes tonight, maybe he can give himself a rest tomorrow. In fact, it already is tomorrow, according to the clock,
April 28, 1944

Summary Log: Pyotr Sokolov

I am happy to report that I have successfully concluded all necessary neurological tests on the Soldier without incident. Lukin’s methods, including ample threats and physical punishment using external electrical stimulation, appear to have been effective in containing incidents of misbehavior, as well as keeping the Soldier’s insubordinate behavior from escalating. The electrical stimulation can be delivered by our assistants and has been calibrated to a degree where it induces debilitating pain but does not risk cardiac effects or burns of such severity that his regeneration capabilities cannot repair them in a day’s time. I believe this is preferable to an implant, as suggested earlier, as there is much potential for abuse with such a device. At least with the current means, one must be within physical range of the Soldier, requiring some premeditation and courage in order to administer the punishment.

For the past week, the Soldier has exhibited no disobedience whatsoever, and Lukin has taken this as a sign that his behavior has successfully been conditioned. I informed him that this is likely not the case, but Lukin does not agree with my assessment and has given me permission to move forward with the surgery in two weeks’ time, provided the Soldier remains obedient during this window. I hope that Lukin is actually correct in his estimation of the Soldier’s training, as the consequences of having a behaviorally dysregulated asset with such a fearsome weapon at his disposal could be devastating. I hope that my suspicions of this being a calculated move on the Soldier’s part are incorrect. However, I remain quietly doubtful of Lukin and still cynically assured of my position. The Soldier has proven himself very clever in the past, and I believe this is yet another guileful plot to destabilize us.

I am uncertain if I will be able to stay on with the project after I have performed my role in the surgery and recovery. I’m afraid that Lukin and I may be irreconcilably different in our opinions regarding the Soldier and his treatment, and I am not inclined to follow the direction of a man whose willful ignorance is liable to result in grave injury or death of either us or the Soldier himself. Dr. Baum also feels similarly, so it seems that my longsuffering protégé may accompany me when I depart. I will remain professional and expressive of my opinions in the meantime, as I begin final preparations for the procedure.

Hail Hydra

May 19, 1944

Summary Log: Erik Baum, M.D., Ph.D.

This will be the final summary log for the Winter Soldier Program, effective immediately. Five days ago, Dr. Sokolov was killed by Codename: Winter Soldier when he awoke from surgery. The cause of death was acute strangulation by the very apparatus Dr. Sokolov had implanted that same day. I’m beside myself with grief over the loss of my mentor, and I submitted my resignation to the organization yesterday. My resignation was not accepted, but I was offered a transfer to another team within Department X. I’m fine with this, because at least I won’t be under the direction of
Lukin, who has proven to be a negligent fool whose arrogance is the direct cause of Dr. Sokolov’s death.

Looking back on Dr. Sokolov’s logs, it’s almost as if he predicted his own demise, based on his accurate assessment of Lukin’s idiocy. I find that I can’t even blame Barnes for this; he’s always made it clear that he doesn’t want to be in our custody, and he took advantage of a prime window of opportunity to reiterate his hatred of us. I’ve recommended that he be released from the program entirely, but Lukin has insisted that he be put in cryostasis until he’s able to find some way to manage him psychologically.

He was successfully placed into cryostasis, and his body has been maintained at 17°C for the past several days. His heart continues to beat at a rate of one beat per minute. The cryonics team indicated that he should remain neurologically intact at this temperature. The frozen look of bewilderment on his face is very sad to see, a statement that shows just how sympathetic toward him I’ve become. I appear to be the only one who feels this way. Perhaps my transfer is in everyone’s best interest.

I wish Lukin luck in this fool’s errand. He’s going to need it.

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Bucky closes the folder slowly and lifts his hands from it, his right one shaking uncontrollably, his left, his awful left, the one that apparently killed Sokolov, steady as rock.

Sokolov. Light brown hair and glasses. He remembers him now. He’s long remembered being on that table, his fingers around some man’s throat, the look of shock and horror on his face as it turned red and then purple, before he blacked out from whatever they stabbed into him. He didn’t know the man had died, and as much as it should please him to know that he did, given the cold, academic heartlessness of his narratives, Bucky just feels sick again.

And Baum… Who the hell was this man who wrote his name, spoke it like a rebellion, who felt sympathy for him and disgust at the way he was treated? His was the one voice that said what Sokolov only implied but would never say directly – that he hated them, and that trying to turn him was a fool’s errand.

He had no idea. No idea. No idea that he fought so hard. That he fought them for over two months straight. That they had to put him on ice because he was so impossible to control. He had no idea. Why didn’t he remember…?

There’s a quiet knock at the door, and Steve opens it without waiting for permission. He eyes Bucky, then the files surrounding him.

“You said you weren’t gonna do this, Buck.”

“I came to get my meds.”

Steve looks at him with his brows arched high, silently calling out the massive heap of bullshit Bucky just laid at his feet.


“You’re obsessed.”

“I know.”
“Come to bed.”

Bucky slowly slides off the mattress, shuts off the lights, and follows Steve back to his room. He strips out of his pants and shirt and crawls into bed. He lies on his side, facing Steve, who’s on his back. Bucky can tell he wants to say something.

“I won’t read any more today,” Bucky says. “I promise.”

“They’re your files. You can read whatever you want. You wanna stay up all night, that’s your choice, I guess.” Steve sounds fatigued and more than a little frustrated. “I’m sorry. It’s just hard to see you like this.”

“I know. I tried to warn you.”

“I know you did,” Steve says. Bucky can faintly make out a frown on his lips in the dim light. “Still, it’s not easy.”

“It’s helping, I think. Stuff’s happening. Dislodging. It’s…”

Bucky pauses, not wanting to share too much. Not wanting Steve to worry. But in the end, only the truth comes out, working its way around the constriction in his throat.

“It’s much worse than I thought, Steve. So much worse.”

Steve rolls over toward him, frown fading, and touches his face lovingly. “I had a feeling it would be. You’re not gonna sleep tonight, are you?”

“Probably not.”

“You can put on the TV, if you want. Worked before.”

Bucky makes a face. “Nah. I’ll wear myself out eventually.”

And he does, eventually. His mind spins itself stupid, skims and trips over everything in Sokolov’s file. Nothing really settles at all, maybe because there’s just too much to take in at once. Like too many things crowded together, stuck in the funnel of a grinder. Eventually, the eye of the storm passes over him, allowing him to finally drift off just before sunrise.

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A couple of hours later, Bucky wakes abruptly to the ringing of a phone. The sound is muffled, like it’s wrapped or stuck in something, and he catches the brief flash of confusion on Steve’s face before he practically leaps out of bed and runs to his dresser. He flings open the top drawer and digs until the sound becomes clear. He then pulls out a small flip phone, the kind Bucky didn’t even know they made anymore, and puts it to his ear.

“Tony?”

Tony?

Bucky groans softly and rubs at his achingly tired eyes. He had better not be referring to Tony fucking Stark, but what other Tony would be calling some secret phone that Steve’s stashed away in his dresser?

Sure enough, as Steve draws closer and climbs back into bed, Bucky can hear the voice on the other end. That unmistakable, rushed cadence stumbles through awkward pleasantries, which Steve
mirrors with barely any more eloquence. Maybe even a little less. Steve looks frazzled, his hair mussed, his eyes moving back and forth as he takes in whatever Tony’s telling him. Bucky doesn’t know. He’s tuning out, because the sound of Tony’s voice catapults him right back to Siberia, a day he counts among the worst in recent memory. Fuck that day and everything in it, except those few glimmering moments where nothing was wrong, before everything went spectacularly wrong.

Bucky rolls out of bed and does a quick half-minded calculation – would it be worse to go out in the clothes he wore yesterday or Steve’s clothes? He decides the first is worse and grabs a pair of sweatpants and a sweatshirt from Steve’s bottom dresser drawer. He puts them on, leaves Steve and Tony behind, and pads groggily to the living room, pulling the hood over his head as he goes. The others are already there, drinking coffee and chatting, and Bucky wonders when they became the chronic late risers. He flops down on the couch, next to Sam, and curls his knees into his chest.

“Tony called,” he mumbles.

“What?” they all say in some form, followed by variations on “What did he say?”

Bucky shrugs. “I didn’t stick around to find out.”

“C’mon man, you were right there,” Clint grouches, gesturing at him in irritation. “You couldn’t’ve stuck it out a few minutes to get the gist?”

“No.”

“You’re a crappy forward observer, y’know that?”

He’s tempted to whip out at least one middle finger, but he keeps both shoved in the front pocket of Steve’s hoodie out of sheer laziness. Also, he gets exactly why Clint’s being a dick, because if Tony called, it’s because something big’s happening. Probably something that will affect all of them.

“Did he sound okay?” Wanda asks.

Bucky shrugs again. “I dunno. I don’t exactly know the guy.” He almost forgot that they’re all friends with him. Or were. Or are. He’s not sure.

Speculation runs rampant. Maybe Tony’s coming to get them. Maybe he’s negotiating something on behalf of the UN. Maybe he’s calling to warn them of some impending attack. Maybe the Accords have been dissolved and they’re all free to go. Oh, they then say, looking at Bucky, and the room goes silent.

After 20 minutes or so, Steve comes out, looking tired but less disheveled than when Bucky left him. He sits on the other side of Sam and all eyes fall on him expectantly.

“Tony called. He told me that the U.S. Attorney General’s office wants to strike a deal with us.”

“What kind of deal?” Sam asks, shifting to face Steve.

“A bad one, as far as I’m concerned. It essentially involves the promise to reduce the charges against us, effectively reducing our sentences, as long as we surrender ourselves.” Steve pauses, then he addresses the question that lingers in the air. “Everyone’s sentences except Bucky’s.”

“So, how long are these sentences?” Clint asks, setting down his empty mug on the coffee table.

Steve looks at Clint as if he can’t believe he’s asking, like he can’t believe the provision about
Bucky wasn’t enough to shut down the entire conversation. But still, he responds anyway.

“For you, Scott, Sam, and Wanda, it would be taking it down from an estimated six to two years for violating the Accords and escaping from prison. For me, it would be an estimated seven years down from fourteen for the Accord violations, the assaults against German special forces and the personnel at the Raft, and for breaking into a federal penitentiary.”

“Hell, I’d take that deal, as far as I’m concerned,” Clint replies frankly. “I’d take two years, knowing I’d get to see my family after that.

“Me, too,” Scott adds. “Two years is nothing. It’s better than staying here forever.”

Steve exhales heavily and he sags against the couch cushions. “The problem is that it’s a package deal. It’s either all of us or none of us. I asked if we could make individual deals, but Tony said that they wouldn’t accept that.”

“Why would they do that?” Sam asks.

“They want me,” Bucky says.

The tactic is patently obvious – sweetening the pot for some, enticing them to surrender him to save themselves. It’s still not a very good deal, especially not for Steve, but the immediate appeal to Clint and Scott is apparent. It’s probably also designed to create tension among them, and it seems to be succeeding in that regard.

Steve nods. “I think so, too.”

“It’s a bad deal,” Wanda decides, looking at Bucky, her expression steeled in her resolve. “We’re not going to sell you for our freedom. I won’t agree to that, anyway.”

It’s very sweet of her to say. Bucky’s not quite sure when she became so devoted to him. But then, she really doesn’t seem to have much to lose by staying here. She doesn’t have kids whose birthdays she’s missing. She doesn’t have parents and siblings who want her home. She probably misses the other Avengers, but it’s really not the same, is it?

The energy in the room grows heavy. Clint crosses his arms and shakes his head. Scott slumps back, defeated, but he makes sure to give Bucky a thin smile of solidarity. Sam looks into his coffee.

“Sorry,” Bucky says. It sounds so flimsy and inadequate that he almost wishes he hadn’t said it at all.

“Don’t be sorry,” Steve says. “We’ll figure it out.”

“Figure out what? The conclusion to this is pretty obvious, isn’t it?” Bucky drawls, rising to his feet.

He crosses the living room and past the kitchen, back to Steve’s room. Behind him, in his auditory periphery, he makes out Steve saying something like “No, it’s not obvious, they’re gonna have to do better than that…” Some declaration directed at him that he’s leaving in his dust like a petulant child. He stops by his room on the way and downs a few of his old trazodones before burying himself in Steve’s bed, where he silently berates himself for taking the easy way out of feeling all of this.

But what the fuck ever. He’s done for today. He’s done for this weekend. He’s just done. And the
last thought he has before sleep drags him under is that he wishes that fucking corpse had just been left in the snow to rot.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Bucky learns the truth.

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year, everyone!! Here's a hearty helping of terribleness.

Bucky stays in the eye of the storm for the next four days. Bard would probably call it avoidance, and Bucky wouldn’t disagree. He’s blown through the rest of the files from 1944-1950, the overwhelming majority of which turned out to be technical schematics and nearly identical vitals readouts from when he was in cryo.

It’s all stuck. Completely jammed up. There was movement, feeling, disgust and disbelief, and then there was nothing. He’s filled the stuck space with hours of paging through those boring schematics. And sex. Lots of sex. And Bucky feels like a complete shitbag for it, because he’s pretty sure he’s just using it to keep himself from being sucked into that looming tempest.

He’s not even sure how much he’s enjoying it. He just wants it for the way it hijacks his brain and takes him from himself. It has a flavor of old times, before the war, with none of the emotional intimacy of Valentine’s Day or any of the other times they’ve been physical. But despite all that, Steve’s still been there with him, still initiating when he feels like it, still responding, still moaning his name. God, Bucky hopes he doesn’t feel used. He doesn’t have the balls to ask him, because he’s afraid of what the answer might be. He’s holding out some hope that Steve perceives what’s happening and is consciously choosing to give him what he needs right now, which is oblivion, pure and simple.

But he can’t get close. Not to himself. Not to Steve. Not to anyone. He just can’t. He’s so shut down and numbed thefuck out that he can barely feel anything at all. When he sits down with Bard, he tells him everything, his tone flat and colorless.

“Number one,” Bard says, “I can’t believe you thought I’d be disappointed in you for looking through your files. I would have recommended it myself, if I knew you were ready for that.”

Well, turns out his terrible reasoning was just as terrible as he thought it was. Bard then gives him a mini-lecture about how he wouldn’t ever be disappointed in him for anything, because the only thing he wants for Bucky is to get better, and sometimes that means missing a session and developing obsessive fixations and shutting down emotionally out of sheer terror.

“So you felt some things, and then you shut down,” Bard summarizes.

“And why do you think you shut down like that?”

How can he summarize it? How can he take that tempest, which is knocking so violently at his shutters, threatening to demolish him, and turn it into words? How can he capture that terror, a terror so fierce that his heart and mind disconnect from his body every time he even goes near it?

“Because it’s so fucked up I can barely even stand to think about it, let alone feel it,” Bucky grits out.

Bard nods seriously. “I told you, didn’t I? But what else is it?”

Bucky clenches and unclenches his fists repeatedly. “I don’t know.”

“Yeah you do. What’s the thing you’ve been avoiding the most?”

If he throws a dart at the spinning wheel of emotions most liable to sink him, it’s likely to hit only one thing at this point.

“It’s sad.”

“It’s extremely sad,” Bard emphasizes. “Think about what happened to you. What they did to you.”

He can appreciate that Bard’s trying to push him to where he needs to go, but at the moment, it’s about as effective as throwing an egg against a brick wall.

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because…” Bucky feels something in the back of his throat, a choking, gagging sensation. “I can’t. I can’t go there.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

Damn that question. Damn it, because it forces him to acknowledge that the answer is obviously “won’t.”

“You’re so close.” Bard holds his thumb and index finger half an inch apart. “It’s just right there. All you have to do is let go.”

Bucky shakes his head. “I can’t. I don’t know how to.”

“Then maybe you need a little nudge to get you over the edge.”

Right. Send him tumbling straight over the edge and into a bottomless pit of rage and grief and sadness.

“And why do I want to do that again?” Bucky asks, scratching at his stubbled jawline.

Bard holds out his hand toward Bucky. “You tell me. You tell me why we’re here, doing all this.”

If he tries, he can cut through the cynical, exhausted cloud around him and touch those reasons, those tiny gems of hope that somehow keep him slogging through all this day in and day out.

“I want to get better. I want my life back. I want to be free from this.”
“There you go. You’re gonna need to cheerlead yourself a lot this week, but I know you can do it.” Bard smiles warmly. “If you need some nudging, check the files from 1959. The ones about the sensory deprivation protocols. There’s a reason you think you chose your actions and chose Hydra. You’ll find that reason there. Also, if you don’t know what gaslighting is, look that up.”

Bucky can’t even begin to imagine what all that means, but if that’s what’ll shake things loose, hell, he’ll go there right after today’s session. He’s been chasing the possibility that there might be something outside of his control that led him to be loyal to Hydra, and, so far, that possibility has eluded him like chimera. But maybe it’s not a chimera after all. Maybe it’s real. Maybe he just didn’t know where to look.

“Can we just do a quick check-in or something next Friday?” Bucky asks, deliberately changing the subject.

Bard tilts his head slightly. “Why?”

“It’s my birthday, and they’re supposedly gonna to do something for me, so I don’t want to start off my day getting into all this shit.”

Bard chuckles, probably at the implication that he’s the bringer of ‘all this shit.’ “Sure. We’ll just touch bases. How old?”

“100. Technically. Fucked if I know how old actually. 32? 33? 34? I don’t even fucking know.”

“Well, I’ll try not to wreck your day too much.” Bard is quiet for a few moments, letting them rest in the silence, his bright gaze meeting Bucky’s dull one. “Now, I know you’re really not feeling it today, but I think we should keep going with the CPT. There are only two sessions left in the protocol. Plus, you didn’t do your homework this week, so we’ll have to do it in session today, too.”

Bucky’s nose scrunches up. “Only two? And I still feel this awful? Aren’t I supposed to be better by the end of this?”

“Think of it this way – how long did it take you to get like this?”

“Years. Decades.”

“So we can’t expect you to be magically cured with one 12-week protocol, can we?”

No, he supposes not. In fact, when Bard puts it that way, it sounds downright ridiculous.

“I like to think of CPT as a starting point. And even though we’ve only been working together for a few months, think about how far you’ve come,” Bard tells him. “I’m blown away by how awesome you’re doing – ”

“But I started off really, really fucked up, so I’ve still got a ways to go, right?” Bucky interrupts.

Bard shrugs lightly, as if he doesn’t want to agree exactly with the words but probably agrees with the overall point.

“If you’re still stuck,” he says, “one thing that can help is to think about it in third person, like you’re telling someone else’s story or seeing it from someone else’s perspective. It seems counterintuitive, because I’m trying to get you to sink into it, but sometimes that can be the way in.”
One corner of Bucky’s mouth drifts upward. “I know. There’s this picture of me when I was dead, and I can barely say it’s me, but when I thought of all those things happening to that guy, that was when things started to shift for me.”

“There you go. If that’s what it takes, that’s what it takes. Do what you gotta do.”

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Just like Bard suggested, Bucky plans to dig out the boxes from 1959. But contrary to his initial impulse, he gives himself the weekend to enjoy what might be his last two days in that calm, mental wasteland. Well, it’s mostly a wasteland. He has thoughts, mostly in the darkest hours of the night, about contacting the Attorney General. How he would do it. What he would say. Whether he’d be able to negotiate something to get the others off the hook. What that would mean. What would happen to him. It’s just a thought experiment at this point, and he’s not sure if it’ll become anything more than that.

He and Steve stay in bed most of the day on Saturday, dozing and watching movies. Later that evening, Bucky levels with Steve. He apologizes for being distant and checked out. And then, with great shame, he tells Steve that he just wants to not feel terrible and that sex is pretty much the only thing that’s helping him feel even close to not terrible right now. Steve assures him that he gets it, that he knows it won’t be like this forever, and that he doesn’t feel used. And as a token of understanding, he spends the next two hours destroying Bucky with his hands and mouth, razing him to ashes.

Sunday they all spend together, cooking a giant brunch, eating ’til they’re stuffed, and lazing about in the common area. It’s better than last week, and even Clint’s bitterness has mellowed to the point where he’s insulted that the Attorney General could even think they’re that fucking petty and stupid to take such an obviously terrible deal.

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On Monday, Bucky finally retrieves the boxes from 1959 and spends all day looking through them. There are four in all, each split up by category: medical, engineering, and two designated as “conditioning.” He glances through the medical and engineering, finding a small ream’s worth of software code and calibration tests for his arm, as well as the schematics for The Chair.

From those boxes, he reads about being woken from cryo, how disoriented he was, how weak he was, how long it took him to remember anything from right before he was frozen. How he saw Lukin and “growled.” He sees reports of more lashing out, throwing techs and punching assistants and ripping their shockers from their hands and either crushing them in his metal fist or turning them on their users. He reads about their early experimentation with The Chair, first as a punishment and then afterward, when he couldn’t even remember his crime, their speculation about its other uses.

It’s the conditioning box that he lingers over, the one that he stares at the longest before opening it. Fortunately, all files from this year are in Russian, so he barely needs his computer for any of it. He thumbs through Lukin’s notes, which are often pointed and terse, with little of the flowing eloquence of Sokolov or Baum.

He spends a long time reading about what Lukin described as the “marvelous” invention of the sensory deprivation system, researched, designed, and refined over 15 years specifically to break him. It was a system consisting of a large headpiece and wraps for his hands and arms, which blinded, deafened, and removed nearly all tactile sensation from him.
In a rare moment of poeticism, Lukin summarized the intent of the system perfectly:

*The human mind can only tolerate isolation and deprivation of stimulation and sensation for so long before it begins to unravel, and in that unraveling, it begs to be rebuilt. By breaking down the Soldier’s mind, stripping it bare, we can tether him to a new reality, one of our making, where his loyalties are to us and where our cause is his own.*

Bucky reads with building disgust and angry embarrassment about how they tended to all his basic functions while he was kept that way, feeding him (“the blandest foods and liquids only”), cleaning him, and “tending to his toileting,” essentially rendering him not only completely helpless but, eventually, completely detached from reality. He tries to imagine himself in such a contraption but finds that he can’t.

He then grinds his teeth and curls his fingers around the paper as they described his descent into psychosis. His hallucinations. His deluded mutterings “to his ‘ma,’ to someone named ‘Becca,’ and to ‘Steve,’ presumably the deceased Steven Rogers/Captain America.” Then more mutterings, which eventually were directed at nobody, until they became indecipherable even as language.

And then, he reads about when they finally removed the devices from him after twelve weeks straight, when they gave him back his sight, hearing, and touch. Bucky reads about how he collapsed to the floor, completely overwhelmed by the light, the color, the feeling and the sound of the world. How he babbled incoherently. How he reacted when he first heard a human voice, Lukin’s. How he sobbed himself hysterical and clutched at Lukin’s pant leg like a child. And then how Lukin knelt, laid his hands on his shoulders, and spoke to him, soothing him until he stopped crying. Soothed him and told him that he’s home now. That he’s all right now. That he’s safe.

By this time, Bucky’s almost completely detached again, save for a carefully controlled swell of pity. What a poor, pathetic creature. What a poor, poor wretch. That scene plays in the background of his mind for hours and hours, the poor wretch and his master, painted in dull grays, like chiaroscuro left out in the sun to fade.

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On Tuesday, Bucky finds a small magnetic tape case shoved deep in one of the conditioning folders. It’s labeled “Reconditioning: Session 1.” With that discovery, his tenacious numbness explodes into anxiety, seizing his spine sharp and fast. And with it, he feels a flood of exhilaration. He rifles through all the boxes in his room, blindly hoping against all logic for a reel-to-reel recorder. When he doesn’t find one, he rushes to the closet, grabs his boots, fumbles them on, and beelines it back to the hangar. He flips open lids like a lunatic, boxes and boxes and boxes until the summer of 1966, when he finally finds one.

Of course, it’s a European style power plug that won’t fit into any outlet he can find, so he rushes back inside and trolls around the executive ward until he finds someone who knows if they might have an adapter somewhere. Poor woman. He must look bat shit crazy, especially when he blazes up a wild smile when she actually rustles up one for him. There’s no headphone jack, so he makes the snap decision to go back to the hangar to listen to it. Using the adapter, Bucky tests it in the nearest outlet he can find and, lo and behold, the damn thing actually works. He finds another outlet in the corner, near the door, far from the boxes and The Chair. He plops down cross-legged, plugs the recorder in, and sets it down in front of him.

It’s then that everything slows down again, when his adrenaline drains out of him like a reverse torrent, leaving a brief vacuum that fills quickly with dread. He has no idea what he’ll hear when he presses play, so he doesn’t even know how to brace himself. After waffling for about ten minutes, he finally reaches out a shaking finger and turns on the playback.
The ambient background noise is loud, and it plays so long without anything accompanying it that Bucky begins to wonder if there’s anything on the tape at all. But then he hears footsteps, slow and steady, and then the creaks and groans of a chair being moved and sat in.

**Voice 1:** Do you know who I am?

Bucky’s mouth falls open and his eyes widen with panic. That gagging sensation from his session with Bard is back again, worse than before. He recognizes the voice immediately, even though he hasn’t heard it in over 35 years.

**Voice 1:** I am Aleksander Lukin. I am part of Department X, which is where you are being cared for. Do you know who you are?

The only sound is the thick rustle of static – and his own rapid breathing, which he uses every ounce of his energy to keep from galloping into hyperventilation.

**Lukin:** You are one of our operatives, codenamed The Winter Soldier. You have been an agent in our organization for almost two decades.

**Voice 2:** I don’t remember that.

Oh, God. His voice. It’s hoarse and barely audible, like he hasn’t used it in years, or like he’s nearly screamed himself mute.

**Lukin:** You were injured on your last assignment and lost your memory, as well as your arm.

**Barnes:** How?

His response time is slow, and Bucky wonders why. There could be so many reasons behind it, almost all equally probable. Maybe he’s confused. Maybe it’s physically difficult for him to talk. Maybe he’s in pain. Maybe he’s drugged. It upsets him that he doesn’t remember.

**Lukin:** You were embedded with the Allies and fell from a great height during one of your missions.

**Barnes:** I’m American.

This he appears sure of, and it’s the first time in this conversation that his voice doesn’t break. He might not know who he is or what happened, but he seems to know this one fact deep in his bones.

**Lukin:** No, I’m afraid not. You are a Russian citizen. You were born in Leningrad in 1917.

**Barnes:** No, I wasn’t.

**Lukin:** And where is it that you believe you were born?

**Barnes:** I don’t know. If I’m Russian, why am I speaking English? Why don’t I know Russian?

Oh, but here’s the shift. Long beats of hesitation. An opening to the possibility that maybe Lukin’s right. Bucky can imagine his knitted brows, the tilt of his head, the functionless yawing of his jaw, as he tries to string together these discordant facts into something that makes sense.

**Lukin:** You submitted to intensive retraining and conditioning before your mission to ensure that your cover was not broken, had you been found out. That is why you are confused about your identity. Your last cover was an American.

Bucky shakes his head in disbelief. That motherfucker. That fucking brilliant, manipulative piece...
of shit. The premise is absolutely ingenious, because it explains away any memories or sense of self that this poor, pathetic creature might have.

Barnes: What’s my name?

Lukin: When you joined our organization, you voluntarily relinquished your former identity, including your name. You have had many covers over the years, but you are known to us as The Winter Soldier.

Absolutely brilliant.

Lukin: I know you are confused and that this may be frightening for you. We are going to help you regain some of your memories. I’m afraid you may not remember much of anything from your life before us, but we will help you re-learn the skills you have forgotten.

There’s only static. Static and the silence of a man who’s just learned that he has no name and no real identity of his own, and that this was somehow his own choice.

Lukin: We are so glad to have you back, Soldier. Your work has been a gift to mankind and will continue to be for years to come.

Bucky’s managed to keep a thin buffer between himself and the recording until this point, where his disgust and anger have flitted and flared, never getting much deeper than his skin.

But when he hears his next words, the naked fear, faltering determination, and pitiful sadness in his voice, his buffer falls away. For that moment, he becomes the man on that tape.

Barnes: I need to go home.

Lukin: Oh, but you are home, my boy. You are home.

Their conversation seems to end there. He lets the recording continue to play, lets the static and sounds of rustling and muffled unintelligible Russian fill the hangar like noxious gas. Bucky floats in and out of emotion, in and out of that nascent kindling of devastation, the one he knows will probably wreck him in the days to come.

Eventually, Bucky wanders back to his room, and because he’s still got a bit of daylight to burn and can’t bear to sit with the things he’s starting to feel, he turns back into Lukin’s logs. Picking up where the recording left off, they go on and on to describe his arduous reprogramming. They describe how the Winter Soldier grew more comfortable, more confident that he really was Russian and that his American identity was just a cover. They describe how Lukin taught him about Hydra and about his role in building a better world. And they describe how he grew to believe it. Grew to repeat Lukin’s words verbatim, like a fucking robot, until Lukin knew that he was theirs. Until he knew that they had finally broken him.

The Soldier sits before me today, clear-eyed and certain, steady and resolved, ready and eager to assume his role as the Fist of Hydra. As he prepares for his first unaccompanied mission, I feel proud, like a father would be of his own child. I cannot even begin to imagine the limits of his potential. Of our potential. Today is a wonderful day.

Bucky closes the folder slowly. He doesn’t mark where he left off, because he knows what happens next. At some point, he steps out of line. At some point, they implement his priming protocol. At some point, they learn that his mind is an unruly thing. They learn that he needs to be wiped and managed and monitored, and wiped again and again and again. Eventually they learn that he’s not theirs after all. That he’s only on loan to them from a woman named Winnie Barnes.
Jesus Christ, his ma… his poor ma… what did they do to her son? What would it do to her to hear all this, to see his corpse, to know his shame, the obliteration of every last shred of dignity and humanity he possessed, to know how he crumpled and broke and begged and wept…

“God damn it,” Bucky whispers as his vision blurs.

He doesn’t blink, because if he does, he knows what will happen. So he sits there, frozen, his face a mask of suffering, until those tears evaporate into nothing.

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Bucky sleeps that night, fitfully. He sleeps until sometime after sunrise, when he awakens to the sound of that tape running through his head. It plays, and he hears his voice, and he remembers what Lukin told him. He then he remembers what he read yesterday, and the day before, and the week before.

And oh, for some reason, today he knows. He knows that it all happened to him, not to some corpse or to some poor pathetic wretch, but to him. He knows it like he knows that he’s lying in a bed right now. He knows it like he knows the churning roil of nausea that lances through him.

He has to run to the bathroom, slamming the door behind him, where he vomits bile and acid, his stomach long empty from skipping dinner the night before. And when there’s nothing left for him to throw up, he drapes himself over the toilet and gags and gags as images and words and Lukin’s voice and his own rasping voice assault him. Steve knocks on the door, asking if he’s all right, and Bucky gruffly tells him that he’ll be out soon.

But he’s not out soon, because it just keeps going, like the mother of all psychosomatic blitzkriegs. He eventually curls up on the bathroom floor, sweating, shaking, choking back more acid, and God damn it, he tries not to think of any of it. He tries to check out. But his numbing protocols seem to have been completely disassembled, and the more he tries to separate himself and push the images away, the greater the backlash. After trying to fight for over an hour, he finally realizes that all he can do is lie there while it annihilates him.

Steve later lets himself in, holding a small plate and a mug of something steaming. Bucky looks up and sees a look of pained concern on his face, like one might wear when happening upon a dog that’s been hit by a car. Steve kneels beside him and sets down the plate and cup.

“Wanda made some ginger tea, and I thought maybe some crackers would help,” Steve says.

Bucky can feel himself grimace with disgust, because the last thing he wants to do is eat or drink anything. But he slowly, so very slowly, pushes himself upright until he’s sitting.

“Let me get you something more to put on,” Steve says.

He gets up and fetches him a t-shirt and a pair of comfy pants. Yes, he supposes he must look particularly pathetic on bathroom floor in only his underwear. With that same lethargy, Bucky slides the shirt over his head and gracelessly pulls on the pants.

“Maybe you ate something bad.”

Bucky exhales heavily and rests back against the wall. “It’s not that.”

Steve nods once in understanding and picks up the mug to hand it to him. “Here. You don’t wanna
get dehydrated."

Bucky takes the warm mug in his unsteady hands and stares into it for a few moments before taking a sip. It’s only ginger and honey, and it seems to go down okay. After drinking about half of it, he chances a couple of crackers.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Steve asks.

Bucky shakes his head. “Thanks.”

That pained look is back on Steve’s face, now mixed with helplessness. “Do you wanna talk about it?”

“No.”

How could he even begin to describe what’s happening to him? How all the disgust that’s been slowly accumulating since he started rifling through those boxes has distilled down to a super dense core of agony that’s settled right in his stomach? And on that note, what would Bard say, knowing that he’d apparently prefer to transform his feelings into vomit rather than shed a single goddamn tear? How fucking pathetic.

Pathetic. He’s pathetic. Now. Then. Especially then.

God, the nausea is back with a vengeance now. Bucky puts down the half-eaten cracker he has in his hand, as well as the mug. He feels the saliva begin to pool in his mouth.

“Can you leave?” Bucky asks tensely.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Now.” The last thing he wants is for Steve to see him hurling, which he’s sure he’s about to do in the next few seconds.

Steve rises and leaves quietly, closing the door behind him. Bucky gets back on his knees and pukes up everything he just consumed until he’s empty again and the worst of it has passed. Then he’s back on the floor, tucked in the fetal position, while his mind runs amok.

This cycle continues throughout the day and into the night. Steve comes in to check on him frequently, bringing him things or taking things away. Bucky alternates between shivering on the floor and heaving, sometimes productively, sometimes unproductively. He’s absolutely miserable, his throat scraped raw, parched and lightheaded from not being able to keep anything down.

Through the wall he can hear Steve in his room, probably taking a shower in his bathroom. Bucky feels a weak twinge of worry that he might look at some of the files, but he tells himself that Steve’s learned his lesson about shit like that. Not that he can read Russian anyway. At least, Bucky doesn’t think he can.

After his shower, Steve comes back to see him. He’s dressed in his sleep clothes.

“Can I sit with you for a while?”

Bucky thinks it’s interesting that it’s not Would you like me to sit with you for a while. He wonders why on earth Steve would want to even be in the same room with him when he’s like this.

“Okay,” he acquiesces.
Steve sits next to his head, his legs stretched out in front of him. The bathroom is almost as big as their old apartment in Brooklyn, with a shower and a full bath and enough room for two full-grown men to camp out on the floor with ample space to spare.

Bucky lies where he is for a minute or two, while something in him begins wanting. Touch. Comfort. He’s pushed Steve away all day, but now he just wants to know he’s not alone, that it’s not just him and his rampaging mind and horrific memories and traitorous body. That he’s not just some broken, discarded science experiment that’s self-destructing in a heap on the bathroom floor.

He reaches up and lays his hand on Steve’s thigh. Immediately, as if he was waiting for it, Bucky feels Steve’s hand cover his own, then move to coax his head up. Steve then slides closer and encourages Bucky to lay his head on his lap. Steve’s arm then comes around his shoulder, and the fingers of his other hand run through his sweat-damp hair with such gentleness that it’s almost painful.

“How are you feeling?” Steve asks.

“Like dog shit warmed over.”

“Do you want me to bring you anything?”

“Just stay here with me. Please.”

“Sure. As long as you want.”

Bucky looks down at his hand, at the way it’s gripping the fabric of Steve’s pants. He hears himself pleading. He thinks about grabbing Lukin’s pant leg. He thinks of himself degraded and dehumanized, stripped down to nobody. Humiliation sinks into the pit of his stomach, supplanting some of that disgust.

The feelings are very distinct. He’s disgusted with Hydra, with what they did to him. But he’s humiliated by what they made him do. Cry. Beg. Believe egregious, sickening lies. The indignities upon indignities.

He rests on Steve’s lap in silence for he’s not sure how long. Maybe an hour or two. And during that time, a deep shame fills him slowly, like poison working its way through his body. He knows now that he didn’t do anything to earn what happened. He knows now that he tried to fight, to save himself, over and over and over again.

But it doesn’t erase any of it. If anything, relinquishing the illusion of control he had over everything makes him feel more ruined than he’s ever felt in his life. And as that poisonous shame fills him, he begins to feel so fucking filthy and weak that he lifts his head and hand from Steve’s leg.

“Are you going to be sick again?” Steve asks.

Bucky nods. He’s not completely sure if he is, but right now he’ll say and do anything to get Steve out of his sight. He leaves quickly, but clearly with great reluctance. Once he’s gone, Bucky assumes the position and waits to see if anything happens. Sure enough, the dry heaving comes and then goes.

Later, Steve brings him a pillow and a blanket, after Bucky insists that he doesn’t want to try to sleep in the bed. Before he leaves, Steve leans down and kisses Bucky’s cheek. Bucky recoils.

He’s not sure when he finally falls asleep, but at some point, the nausea abates enough to allow
him to do so. Sometime the next morning, Steve opens the door to check on him. When Steve sees Bucky sitting upright, with an empty glass of water in his hand, he smiles cautiously.

“Feeling better?”

Physically, yes. Yes. His body is no longer revolting against him. But that’s only because that sickness shifted some time in the night from his stomach to his heart. And now that it’s begun to settle there, Bucky would sooner spend the rest of his life bent over the toilet than feel even a minute of this.

God, his dad was right. Right about the price of having a heart. Right to drink himself numb every day. Because coming from a life of pain upon pain, as Bucky has, this pain is by far the worst kind.

He tries to reply to Steve, but he can’t. He just can’t. Instead, he stares vacantly at the tile while he withers. As the devastation claims him cell by cell.

“Buck?”

When he still doesn’t reply, Steve sets down a small pile of folded clothes “in case you want a shower.” He then stands there for a few more moments, biting his lower lip, until he seems to resign hope for a response and leaves again.

Eventually, Bucky rises, his body stiff and heavy. He strips slowly while the water warms. In the shower, he stands, swaying, as the water runs over him. He can’t comb out one emotion from another. They’re all there, equally powerful, attached to a single fulcrum – anger, sadness, shame, hopelessness, fear, despair. Just like a Hydra, he thinks darkly. A real Hydra. The type he learned about in school. How the organization turned it into some fucking skull-headed octopus, he’ll never know. It’s yet another abomination, another bastardization of the truth, another thing plucked from time and mutilated for their own purposes. Just like him.

He washes and gets dressed. Brushes his teeth until his gums are sore. He finally opens the door, and Steve’s standing there like he’s been on standby for this very moment. Bucky takes a step back, because Steve’s expression when he lays eyes on him is achingly forlorn.

Bucky turns away, back towards the sink, and sees in the mirror what Steve must see. His face is raw anguish. It’s something he’s never seen before.

“Say something,” Steve says uneasily. “Please.”

Bucky says the first thing that comes to his mind.

“I wish they’d never found me in the snow.” He clenches his jaw hard. “I wish you’d never come to Romania.”

“You…” Steve falters, as if he can’t even bear to say the words. “You’d be dead.”

Bucky looks down again, into the sink, bracing himself on the counter. His cheeks and forehead fill with pressure, and his eyes well until they’re brimming, until a solitary, fat tear forms on his eyelashes. It suspends there, briefly, before finally sliding down his face. It’s followed by another, and then one on the other side.

“So what?” Bucky replies, voice brittle to the point of cracking. “So fucking what?”

When looks back in the mirror and sees himself, he wipes those tears away harshly with the heels of his hands, as if to grind them down into atoms.
And then, like the flip of a coin, fury rears its vicious head. Fury over what happened to him. Fury over crying. Fury over being denied death over and over. Fury over being alive to feel all of this. The anguish in his face twists into rage, and he blows past Steve, checking him hard in the shoulder, as he barrels back to his room.

There, he becomes a passenger in his own body. He watches himself swipe the folders off his bed, scattering their contents on the floor. He watches himself kick over all the boxes, screaming. He watches as he throws his right fist through the drywall once, then twice. He hears himself yell at Steve and Sam and everyone else standing outside his room to fuck off and get the fuck out of his face.

He sees rooms and rooms flash by, until everything goes blank.

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The next thing Bucky is conscious of is the sky. Gray and brooding, dropping heavy beads of rain on the glass above him. Is it glass? Probably not. Probably some futuristic polymer invented by Wakandan botanist-engineer-geniouses to optimize UV filtration and photosynthesis. But it looks like glass. It really does.

He moves his fingers and feels coolness beneath them. Strands of coolness. Grass. His blue eyes travel, taking in the green of the leaves, the fuchsia blooms, the yellow of ripe mangos. In this moment, this fragile moment, he feels completely empty, flayed open to the universe, gutted of his misery.

It’s beautiful. It’s pure freedom.

He rests in this freedom for as long as he can, until his mind starts chirping again. Reminding him of what he just did, what he said, and his reasons for doing it. He starts to fill in the pieces, but he still doesn’t know how he got to the arboretum or how long he’s been lying on its floor.

Oh God, what he did... Trashing his room. Punching holes in the wall like a deranged maniac. Screaming at the people who care about him, who have had to witness him in various stages of falling apart again and again and again.

Jesus Christ. Jesus fucking Christ. How can he possibly face them? How can he possibly ask for their forgiveness when he’s so utterly undeserving of it?

But face them he must. Ask he must. Because he can’t lie here forever, even if he’d like to. And he reasons that he might as well seize this state of temporary emotional burnout so that he has a chance of actually keeping his composure for once.

After giving himself another few minutes to enjoy some brief peace before the reckoning that lies before him, he rises to his feet and brushes the grass off his clothes. He notices then that he’s not even wearing shoes or socks.

He heads back to their living quarters with the dragging steps of a man walking to his execution. He takes the back way, avoiding the common area, so he can stop by his room and try to clean up the place before he tracks down everyone to apologize. He tries to picture what his room must look like now, but his memories of those few crazed minutes are spotty.

Bucky moves down the hallway as quietly as he can. Every bedroom he passes is empty. When he reaches his own and looks inside, he freezes in stunned silence.

Everything’s been cleaned up. The boxes are stacked again, all their spilled folders replaced. All
the papers he scattered from the folders on his bed have been re-housed, and the folders have been piled neatly next to the boxes. His bed has been freshly made. There’s a woven tapestry hanging on the wall over where he put his fist.

He presses his hand to his mouth to muffle the sound he makes, which is something between a whimper and a pained groan. He closes his eyes tight against that horrible pressure that threatens to erupt and bear itself to the world.

As soon as he’s able to, he gathers himself and makes his way to the common area. There, Bucky finds everyone sitting on the couches, talking quietly. The conversation stops abruptly when they catch sight of him. Sam and Clint stop first, then Steve and Scott, and finally Wanda, who has to turn completely around to see him.

Bucky stands there, his fingers curling and uncurling anxiously, his eyes darting back and forth, his brain scrambling to find any words that he could glue together to form an apology. But he’s completely speechless.

Steve stands and walks toward him, not stopping until he’s wrapped his arms tight around him. Then Wanda stands and walks up behind him, pressing her cheek to his shoulder, her arms coming around him and Steve. Soon Sam is there at his left side, then Scott at his right, then Clint, who gathers as many people as he can in his wide reach.

They surround him, embracing him and each other. Bucky’s aching heart, already cracked from where Steve broke into it, feels like its bursting open. Tears begin to stream down his face, and he trembles from the effort required to keep from completely breaking down. He manages it, but just barely.

Eventually, holds begin to loosen, and they slowly drift apart. Bucky wipes his face with his hands and sleeve while Steve looks upon him with tender affection. The others do him the courtesy of averting their gaze while he tries to put himself back together.

“Didn’t know PTSD was such a group sport,” Scott says, and Bucky catches a glimpse of Scott’s fingers passing quickly below his both of his eyes.

The next thing Bucky knows, he’s laughing. Laughing so hard that tears are coming out of him again, like it’s the most hilarious thing he’s ever heard. In fact, it might be, especially now that his humor is darker than death itself. The others start in too, once they realize that he’s laughing and not sobbing.

Bucky buries his face in his hands as his laughter fades, taking a few deep, hitching breaths to calm himself down. He then lowers his hands and looks at everyone.

“Thank you,” he says soberly. “I’m so sorry. For everything. I’m sorry you have to see me like this. I’m sorry.” He shakes his head. “I can’t say it enough.”

They all acknowledge him, smiling compassionately, nodding, seeming to understand that “it’s okay” is an inadequate response. Maybe because they don’t think he needs to be forgiven. Maybe because it’s not okay, and that it’s okay that it’s not okay.

“We tried to put things back, but I doubt everything made it back into the right folders,” Wanda says.

Bucky frowns sourly. “Fuck it. Fuck all of it. It doesn’t matter. I don’t need to see any more of it. I’m done.”
Maybe it’s just because he’s painfully exhausted, but he finds that he doesn’t even care what they saw in those files. It’s not as if they haven’t already seen him split open and bare, crying and screaming, raging and suffering, ever since he awoke from cryo.

“Want us to take everything back to the hangar?” Sam asks.

“No. I’ll take it,” Bucky says. “I need to do it myself.”

He needs to be the one to do it. He needs to be the one to put it all back in its place. Back in the past, where it belongs.

“Maybe after we eat,” Bucky continues as he registers a sharp gnaw of hunger in his stomach. “I’m starving.”

“Oh, shit! Tonight’s my night. I completely forgot,” Steve says, his eyes going wide with alarm.

“Don’t worry,” Bucky says softly, laying his hand on Steve’s shoulder. “I’ll help.”

“Me too,” Sam says.

“Me too,” Wanda adds, echoed by Scott.

Clint raises his finger to volunteer. “Dessert.”

Bucky beams when Steve smiles at him. At all of them. His friends. His Avengers. And they all head to the kitchen to get to work.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Bucky turns 100. Steve gives him what he needs.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Happy birthday,” Bard says, smiling, when Bucky takes his seat for their brief check-in session on Friday morning. “How’s everything been?”

“Absolutely awful,” Bucky states, his tone a firm line of factuality.

Bard tilts his bald head. “In a bad way or a good way? Given your goals.”

“Well, I think I got myself unstuck.”

“Oh yeah? What was that like?”

Bucky looks down at his lap, where his fingers are fidgeting. “Puked for a whole day. Trashed my room. Punched a couple holes in the wall. Blacked out and woke up in the arboretum. Cried in front of everybody.”

“You cried?” Bard says, leaning forward in his seat.

Of course, of litany of incidents he listed, Bard latched onto the crying as if the other events of that day were mere items on a grocery list.

“Kind of. Not crying crying, just…. tears, just….” he hooks his hand into a ‘U’ shape and gestures down his face, “coming out of me. Like I sprang a leak.”

“Did you get checked out by the king’s doctor for the vomiting part? I mean, it could be psychosomatic, and I’ve known it to happen to other folks, but you should probably get it checked out in case.”

Bucky assures him that he’s going there right after this, because that’s what Steve unequivocally told him he was doing. Steve had apparently been working behind the scenes the whole time he was sick, fretting to the doc, filling him in, giving regular updates. Bucky rolled his eyes when he heard this, because the whole thing felt so entirely psychological, like a visceral manifestation of his mental revulsion, or maybe his body’s misguided attempt to purge out all the terribleness of those files via his stomach.

“Not sure about the blacking out, though,” Bucky adds.

“Sounds like a form of dissociation, like how you used to check out all the time, but more severe. The mind can do that when something becomes too overwhelming. Your brain basically takes a hike while your body keeps going through the motions,” Bard explains.

After their little group hug, Clint told him that they followed him on the security cameras and
caught him wandering around the arboretum, as if he was just taking a stroll. When Bucky asked about waking up in the grass, Clint shrugged with a tight smirk. Probably didn’t seem all that strange to them, given his long track record of odd and unpredictable behavior.

“But going back to the crying thing,” Bard continues, “that’s really a big deal. Especially for you.”

Bucky shifts uncomfortably in his chair. He understands the therapeutic accomplishment, but all that comes to mind now when he remembers himself crying is that he’s a weak fucking pussy. A little sissy faggot. It’s not his voice, and he’s not even sure he believes it. But those old tracks are deep and worn and as bitterly stubborn as the man who laid them so many years ago.

“Never met anyone who got such a thrill over a grown man crying,” Bucky says.

“You, one of my veteran patients used to say that I live off the tears of infantrymen.” Bard smiles wide and lets out a hearty chuckle. “But I don’t. I’m just happy for what it means. It means that you’re letting yourself feel the pain you’ve been suppressing. When it comes to PTSD treatment, that’s huge.”


He imagines there have been worst times. Hell, from reading his files, he knows there have been worse times. But those painful memories are housed in thick gossamer. By contrast, everything that’s unfolded over the past two weeks has been disturbingly specific, vivid and highly textured. In his mind, he turns over the question of what’s more painful: what actually happened to him or the process of discovering and understanding what happened.

“And you will feel terrible,” Bard confirms. “For a while. But if you let yourself feel it, it will get better. It absolutely will.”

“I think I crushed that stuck point about being a victim.” Bucky’s heart begins to race as he recalls his conversation with Lukin. “Before, I had no idea how they did that. Made me believe in Hydra. Now I know.”

“The sensory deprivation? The gaslighting?”

Bucky nods slowly. “Yeah. That’s some sick, brilliant shit. Really.”

“Most people who experience sensory deprivation start to lose their minds in a few days. You were deprived for, what, ten weeks?”

“Twelve.”

“Unbelievable. And look at you now.” Bard shakes his head, his flowing beard following each movement.

Bucky makes a small, incredulous sound. “I know that’s supposed to be a compliment, but I feel pretty fuckin’ Looney Tunes right now.”

“Well, maybe your last CPT assignment will help put things in perspective.”

Bard instructs him to re-write his impact statement based on what he’s learned throughout the course of therapy and explains the rationale behind it. Bucky nods absently as Bard talks, already trawling through his mind for what he might write.

“I’ll have you bring in your original impact statement and read it, and we can see the difference
between the two,” Bard says.

The last time Bucky thought about his impact statement was when he saw Steve reading it that day. When he threw it across the floor and yelled and folded and betrayed himself. He pushes the memory away with well-practiced success.

Bard puts down his portfolio on the table between them, signaling the end of therapy talk. “So what’s the plan for your birthday?”

“Dinner. Then we’re gonna watch a movie.”

Last night, Bucky told Steve that he didn’t want to do anything for his birthday, not even a special meal. Said he just wanted to wallow in his exhaustion and gag and feel emotions and let this all take its course so that he can get to the other side of it as soon as humanly possible. But Steve insisted, strongly, rebuffing him with a stern finger thrust in his face.

“Oh, no. Here’s how this is gonna go – you’re gonna tell me what you want us to make you for dinner, we’re gonna watch your favorite movie, and you’re gonna open presents. And that’s final. So don’t try to weasel out of it, ‘cause you can’t. We’ll do the whole thing in the bathroom, if we have to. God knows it’s big enough in there.”

Steve did, however, concede to pushing the celebration to tomorrow night, a mercy Bucky is deeply grateful for. He’s not a combustible mess of agony like yesterday or the day before. But just below his tenuous containment, he’s irrecoverably off-balance, tumbling headlong into a slow motion free-fall. He knows there’s at least one more layer of suffering to crash through before passing into the next phase of what he supposes is recovery. He’s not sure anymore. He knows recovery isn’t supposed to feel good, but he wasn’t prepared for it to be quite this awful.

“What movie?” Bard asks.

“Wizard of Oz. Wanda’s never even seen it.”

Bard grins approvingly. “Great choice. I hope you enjoy yourself, even if it’s just for a few hours.”

Bucky finds himself smiling back, thinly, because he cautiously hopes for that, too.

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After getting a clean bill of physical health from T’Challa’s tepidly friendly doc, Bucky goes back to their room and collapses in bed. When he wakes up in the exact same position he fell asleep in several hours prior, a pitch-dark frozen corpse reference gets a few seconds of airtime in his head. Steve, settled in what Sam has taken to calling his “grandpa chair,” even confesses to silently approaching the bedside on two separate occasions to ensure he wasn’t dead. Bucky hears the morbid undertone poorly disguised in Steve’s voice, one that harkens back to the days when his favorite pastime was to prepare to spray his brains upon the wall.

They grab lunch and eat with Sam, then return to their room. Bucky’s thoughts settle heavily on all the ways that his perpetual dysfunction has shaped Steve’s daily life, contributing to the already staggering imbalance in their relationship. Steve tails him physically and emotionally, like a psychological concierge standing by to temper potential meltdowns and siphon off any little bit of suffering he can with a smile or a touch. Although obviously coming from a place of concern and compassion, to Bucky, it’s starting to feel vaguelyemasculating. And maybe that’s a good thing, because it suggests that there’s some sense of masculinity – possibly even an essence of pride – that’s being threatened. At any rate, it’s yet another injection of motivation to keep going, to keep
letting the fickle winds of this process carry him where they will.

When they return to their room, Bucky settles back on the bed, resting against the headboard. He watches as Steve dallies by the door, shutting it slowly and with great attention, as if he needs to manually control the flexion and extension of each muscle and joint involved. He then takes a few steps toward the bed and pauses awkwardly in the middle of the room. His blue eyes meet Bucky’s and then dart to the floor. He crosses and uncrosses his arms, then settles on crossing them again.

“I have something for you for your birthday,” Steve says, breaking the silence, “but I’m not sure how you’ll feel about it.”

“What kind of something?”

Steve’s lips thin, and he takes an audible breath. “I made something for you.”

Bucky feels a light thrill in his chest. If he’s tracking correctly, Steve’s talking about art, and it’s been too close to a century since he’s seen any of his work. Steve’s art is so good that it has curious effect of pissing Bucky off. Probably because he’s so fucking talented, always has been, and Bucky almost can’t stand the idea of him wasting it on hobby work because of his Captain America bullshit. He gauges Steve’s wavering and rigidity, and he feels a sly smile creep onto his lips.

“Is it a naughty drawing?” he suggests with the slow rise of one eyebrow.

Steve laughs in a way that somehow magnifies the tension, cheeks flushing light pink, and shakes his head. “Um, no. It’d be much less nerve-wracking to show you that.”

Bucky’s arched brow slumps with his disappointment, because he actually would have liked to see that.

“Steve, just show it to me. The suspense isn’t helping.”

Steve sighs deeply and turns to the third drawer in his dresser. He pulls out a 9x12 spiral-bound sketchpad and walks it slowly to the bed. He takes a seat next to Bucky and puts the entire pad in his hands.

After a moment of hesitation, Bucky opens to the first page, which has two drawings on it separated by a line drawn horizontally in the middle of the page. The top picture is a pencil drawing of a child, a boy, with dark hair, a smudge of dirt on his face, and a wide, mischievous grin missing two teeth. It’s not at all difficult to see from the quality of the picture that the boy is supposed to be him. Below the drawing are the following words:

There once was a boy. He was warm and gentle in his heart, even when some people didn’t want him to be. He had a smile so bright that he lit up every room he walked into.

The drawing on the lower half of the page is a boy crouched down in what appears to be an alley, surrounded by three cats. The alley has an unusual cleanliness to it imbued by artistic license.

He’d always stop to pet all the stray cats, even when his ma told him not to.

Bucky’s brow furrows. “What is this?”

“When you were in cryo…” The word hangs orphaned in the air for a few moments. “I missed you. We didn’t even really get to talk before you went under. That was hard for me. I kept thinking about you. Your life. Everything that you’ve been through. And you know me, I had to sketch it out. Just little sketches of various things.” Steve pauses again, his hand moving cautiously across
his lap, stopping just short of Bucky’s left thigh. “But then when we talked about you seeing
yourself the way I see you, I thought maybe I could show you. So I got serious about it and made
this.”

The crease between Bucky’s eyebrows grows even deeper as he takes in the triple emotional
assault of the stunningly beautiful art, Steve’s heartfelt reasoning behind the gift, and his own
impinging dread. There’s only one direction this story line goes in, one that arcs toward terror and
pain. His heart skips into an anxious rhythm.

“There’s more, y’know,” Steve says, fingerling the bottom corner of the pad.

Bucky turns the page and sees two more panels.

The first is a pencil drawing of him sitting at their small table in a light button-down shirt that’s
been unbuttoned, revealing his undershirt beneath. His sleeves are rolled up his forearms and he’s
resting his chin in his hand, looking straight ahead at the unseen artist with soft eyes and a half-
smile.

_The boy grew to be a man, and he became even more beautiful._

“I think you might have taken a couple liberties here,” Bucky says, his voice distant.

Steve snorts. “Hardly. My memory of you is completely intact.”

The implication is _and yours is not._ Fair enough. But surely he never looked like that. Never that
young. Never that handsome. Never that unburdened.

The second panel is a picture of him, his arm wrapped around some girl with long, dark hair who’s
facing away. But he’s looking back over his shoulder, away from his faceless girl, straight at the
artist, with a dazzling smile.

_He was so splendid that everyone wanted to be near him._

“Is that you?” Bucky asks, looking over at Steve, who’s busy not-so-subtly chewing up the inside
of his lower lip.

“Who?”

“The one I’m looking at in these two pictures.”

Steve doesn’t make eye contact, but he nods shallowly, as if a more solid response would betray
the hurt he’s guarding. The hurt of lost opportunities, lost time between them that they can never,
ever reclaim.

Bucky turns the page again and sees an exquisitely precise pencil drawing of him in his service
uniform in the first panel, his official Army picture. Jesus, he can’t believe he smiled for that. He
looks like a fool, a blessedly ignorant child who had no idea of the horror that was going to befall
him in just a few short months.

_He answered his country’s call to fight._

_And when his unit fell, he was taken into darkness._

Conspicuously missing is any visual representation of his time in Kreischberg. Not even anything
from the day Steve found him, swooping down like God’s handpicked Adonis to scrape him off
the table he was babbling on.

The next panel is another pencil drawing of him in the ratty, green, cold weather shirt one of Zola’s goons gave him after they took his disgusting uniform and probably incinerated once, then twice for good measure. He wore that thing every day until he died, even underneath the new uniform the SSR made for him, watching it grow more threadbare every time he sent it to be washed. He wishes he still had it. Hell, he’d be wearing it right now, he could.

He appears especially tattered next to Steve, who’s drawn nearly as handsome as he actually is in his Captain America regalia. Bucky recognizes the scene from the Smithsonian exhibit. They seem to be caught in the middle of some joke, their eyes scrunched with laughter. He’s looking off-center, but Steve’s attention is locked solidly on him. The look captures so much of their relationship before Hydra, one enthralled by the other, the other looking away, never quite in sync.

*But he survived the darkness, stronger than ever. And he took up his weapon to destroy the evil that took him.*

The first panel on next page is the simplest but perhaps the most poignant. Bucky can feel Steve’s eyes on him as he takes in the drawing of two hands, one bare, one gloved, desperately reaching for each other. Here, the hands are much closer to touching than they were in real life.

*And then he fell.*

The lower panel is a pencil drawing of Steve, dressed again as Captain America. But his face has been scratched black with hard, deep pen strokes. Bucky lightly touches his fingertips to that blackness, to what lies beneath it.

“I couldn’t draw it,” Steve says. “I don’t know how to draw the way I felt.”

*And the man who loved him cried until he was sick, his heart completely broken. He didn’t even care when he died on the ice, too. In fact, he welcomed it.*

“Oh, Steve…” Bucky whispers, feeling that ominous tightness in his face and chin, his fingers passing over that grief-blackened face again. Bucky thinks he might know some of that pain, a pain so deep that can’t be drawn. Can’t be explained. Because it’s also his own.

Bucky doesn’t know what’s worse – staying on this page or turning it. Because he knows what comes next. His hand twitches in time with his indecision – turn, don’t, turn, don’t. Next to him, Steve fidgets with his watchband, audibly swallowing his unease.

Bard’s words come to mind: the only way out is through.

Despite the horror, the torture and abuse and dehumanization, the Winter Soldier is indelibly part of him, seared into him like a brand. He happened. He was made into that, and to deny this is to fail to honor the truth, as well as all of his efforts to grow out of that horror. And here, despite the heavy gravity well in the bottom of his stomach, he also chooses to honor what Steve has created and his purpose behind it. So pulls up some courage from deep in those heavy guts and flips the sheet over.

There, in a full page of stunning black and gray, is the Winter Soldier. He’s facing away, his head turned slightly to the left, his masked profile just barely visible. His terrible left arm hangs, its red star the only gash of color in the piece, and in his bent right arm is a large rifle pointed above.

*But he survived, only to be stolen by monsters who dragged him through the snow.*

*They treated him like a machine, and they even made him believe that he was one. They made him*
loyal to them and stole his will. And every time he remembered the beautiful man he was, they forced him to forget.

Bucky lingers here, his breath tightly held, entranced by the creature who still lingers with him like a shadow. He’s never really seen the Soldier through anyone else’s lens but his own, certainly not someone who pined for the mold the Soldier was cast in. The stark strokes of the charcoal convey coldness and violence, the violence done to him and that which he did to the world. It somehow says as much as a whole box of files, and his awe at Steve’s craft is commingled with the sour tang of disgust.

Steve’s body palpably relaxes when Bucky flips to another full-page drawing, this one done in thick, dark pencil. Judging from his tactical clothes, long hair, and near-beard, it appears to be around the time when the Avengers fought. He’s standing, his shoulders rounded, his mouth frowning, eyebrows drawn together pensively. He’s looking down at the ground at what appears to be absolutely nothing at all.

The choice is striking, because Steve could have selected any moment from that time. There were other moments. Lighter ones. Darker ones. Why this one?

*Through his incredible strength, he escaped the monsters and returned to the world. But he was different. His shoulders were burdened by the dark weight he still carried, and the light that used to be inside of him had burned out.*

Bucky winces at Steve’s words. They so astutely capture that same thing he had his finger on before, when he and Bard tried to figure out who Bucky Barnes is now and what version 3.0 is missing relative to the original. Something light. Something pure and good.

The next page is split in two again. The first drawing is of him in his Wakandan cryochamber. He’s single-armed and dressed all in white, having crawled back into the one place he could stand to be after watching Howard and Maria die again, after their son tried and failed to exact the price of their death from him and from Steve.

*The burden was so heavy that he put himself back in the ice.*

He knew. Somehow, Steve knew why he really went back under. What else does he know? Steve said with great conviction on multiple occasions that he felt shut out, that he didn’t understand. But maybe he did. Maybe he actually understood all along, and maybe it was just too fucking awful to believe.

At the bottom of the same page is a pencil drawing of him, done in light strokes, like he’s about to fade away. His hair is still long and covering the profile of his face. He’s sitting on the edge of the bed, bent over, his right hand holding – no, clenching – his head.

*And when he awoke from the ice, his hate for himself was so strong and his sadness was so great that he wanted to erase himself from the Earth. Because he remembered that he wasn’t always this way. Because he could see how he’d been taken. How his light had been taken.*

The tension Bucky’s hands slack, and the pad drifts down to settle flat on his lap. His eyes dull then gloss over as he mentally trails over each picture, a collage of a life misshapen by tragedy. It’s the story of how a boy became a man, how a man became a monster, and how a monster became a different kind of man, one brittle as rust, frayed along every seam, aching for love and goodness.

It would have been better, Bucky thinks, if he’d never been light and beautiful. Never been kind. Never been good. Never been someone who was adored. Because being those things and then
having them stripped away is the opposite of what they say about love. It’s worse. So much worse.

He closes his eyes as he tries to remember the man he was, before he was taken and then taken again, stripped and emptied and refilled with darkness. He tries to remember what it was to be normal. To wake up on the couch at 5:00 am, gripe groggily to himself about the time, even though he wakes at the same time every weekday. To eat not quite enough for how much work he’s about to do. To try to get Steve out of bed before leaving. To use those precious few moments before waking him to look. To just look at him as he sleeps. To freeze his ears and nose and fingers on the walk to work. To bend and lift until his back is sore and his joints ache, until he can sink into their too-small tub at night and pretend the water is actually hot instead of lukewarm. To eat dinner at their tiny table and smile and joke and bicker and talk animatedly in half-seriousness about getting out of Brooklyn, maybe take a train to California, breathe in the Pacific, get the hell away from the smell of poverty and stuffiness that clings to both of them. To start the whole mundane cycle over again the next day. Back when his greatest burden was paying the rent and the worst things he did were not going to Mass and sleeping around too much and loving another man and denying that love to both of them.

It was normal. It was so fantastically, beautifully normal. He had no idea what he had then, before he died physically and psychologically while trying to avenge the destruction of that man he used to be before Kreischberg.

He didn’t deserve any of it. Not one second of it. And the tragedy and injustice of it, the robbing of innocence and normalcy and youth and hope and light… it’s… God…

God... It’s happening... He feels his eyes open wide against the cascade of sorrow radiating from his core, filling his chest, crawling up his neck and into his face, as unstoppable as a bullet twisting out of its chamber. That sense of falling is back, but no longer in slow motion. Just tumbling, tumbling breathlessly, with nothing to hold onto except air.

Bucky presses his hands to his face, covering himself, hiding that sorrow and the glistening of his eyes for the last few seconds he’ll be able to. His breath quickens as his tenuous control evaporates, burned away in the wreckage of his loss.

And when Bucky feels Steve’s hand on his leg, when he hears his name in a voice so tender it hurts, it draws a sharp and hitching gasp from him. And when that gasp swings back like a pendulum, he’s sobbing.

Steve embraces him, pulling him in, anchoring him down as waves and waves of grief course through him. Grief for who he was. For everything he lost. For the future that man will never have. For the life he’ll never know.

He lets himself fall apart in Steve’s arms, to the sound of his own muffled weeping and Steve’s choked assurances of I love you. I love you so much. So much. And when he can barely catch his breath, swift panic sets in, telling him that he might never stop. That he might cry himself to death. That Steve’s hand gently stroking his head might be the last thing he feels.

But he doesn’t die. Not again. Not today.

Instead, his breathing eventually slows, until that terrifying breathlessness becomes a small, nagging catch. Eventually, his face starts to relax out of whatever anguished shape it must have taken behind his hands, those dutiful hands, metal and flesh both wet with tears. He lets them finally rest, half on his lap and half on Steve’s, as he sniffs and sighs and follows his attention to the steady beat of Steve’s heart beneath his left ear. He stays like that for a long time, blinking heavily, sniffing, listening, his body settling bonelessly as the tide of sorrow drains out of him.
“There are two more pages,” Steve says. “Probably the best ones.”

Bucky’s tired eyes drift toward the pad, now lying at his side. He slowly rights himself, but not quite all the way. He leans into Steve, into the arm that comes around his shoulders. He grabs the pad and tilts it upright, turning over the page.

The page is split in two again. The first drawing is one of him from behind, discernible by his still-long hair and dangling, useless left arm. He appears to be pushing open a door, the one that leads to Bard’s office. The lines are all sketched and the graphite dark, conveying heaviness and uncertainty.

*But then he decided that he’d had enough of the monsters and the darkness. He decided he was going to take himself back from them. Even though the road was terrifying, he chose to walk it anyway.*

The drawing at the bottom of the page is finer in detail, precisely capturing the contours of the muscles of two bodies. The two of them, covers pulled to their hips, naked from the waist up, holding each other, kissing.

*He even opened up his heart, which had been cold and wounded.*

Bucky’s smile is both exhausted and earnest. “I really like this one.”

“I figured you would.”

“You should do more like this. Except more… you know.”

“All right, all right,” Steve says, and Bucky can practically feel the heat coming off of him. “Maybe one. Later. Maybe.” He points down at the pad. “Now pull your head out of the gutter, ‘cause the last one’s the most important.”

Bucky snorts and turns to the last page, which is taken up almost entirely by a breathtakingly realistic pencil drawing of him from the torso up. He’s sitting like he was earlier, in their bed, his head and back resting against the headboard. His head is turned to look over at the artist presumably sitting next to him, his hair the way it is now, his eyes soft, with a smile curving one corner of his mouth. A long-dormant echo of that man he used to be.

*Every day he fights harder than any man on any battlefield, because he’s fighting to reclaim his life and the things he thought were gone forever. And the man who loves him watches with awe, because he’s watching the bravest thing he’s ever seen. And not a day goes by where he doesn’t love him even more. Because he’s beautiful. Because he’s light itself.*

Jesus, those fucking tears again. That ache again. Not the ache of sorrow but the ache of love, of that burst-open heart. Bucky shakes his head and his jaw tightens against it, because he doesn’t know how much more raw he can get before there’s nothing left of him to be scraped down.

“This is how I see you,” Steve says, the fingers of his free hand trailing down the edge of the page. “Just like this.”

The brimming in Bucky’s eyes gives way, spilling over on both sides. How can a story, a simple story, be so devastating? How can a thread of connection to the past be so meaningful? How can one man’s gift, his love, be so powerful that it can rip a gaping hole in decades of certainty?

“You’re wrecking me,” Bucky says under his breath, lifting a trembling hand to the bridge of his nose. “You’re just…”
He glances over to see a streak of fear flash across Steve’s face. Bucky scrambles for the rest of his thought.


Steve lifts both hands and wipes at Bucky’s wet cheeks with his thumbs. “I’m sorry,” he murmurs still, despite the reassurances.

“I love you, Steven Grant. I always have.”

“I love you, too. Though you might not know it, from the way I make you cry.” He smiles hesitantly.

Bucky glances at the pad still in his hands. At that picture. At those words. At every sign that Steve knows him, that he’s always known him, even when Bucky was sure he was something else entirely. He closes the pad with slow reverence and looks back over at Steve.

“You do know that you’ve ruined birthday gifts for the both of us for the rest of our lives, right? There’s no way to top this.”

Steve gives a brisk laugh. “Well, there is that one commission you requested…”

“C’mon, you’re gonna make me wait a year for that?” Bucky complains.

“Well, maybe if I’m particularly inspired before then,” he shrugs coyly, “we’ll see.”

Bucky grasps Steve’s chin with his thumb and forefinger, leaning in. “That sounds like a challenge.”

“Maybe.”

Bucky closes the distance between them and they kiss. They’ve kissed so much in the few weeks since they started, but this time, it’s entirely different. The few remaining functional parts of his brain try to name the difference but fail spectacularly.

Whatever it is, it’s beautiful. It might even be light itself.

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On Saturday evening, they all gather in the dining room to celebrate Bucky’s birthday. They eat lasagna made by Sam and Steve and drink red wine, both at Bucky’s request. They razz him over his demand for “something that costs at least 20 dollars a bottle,” a totally arbitrary number he pulled out of his ass, and one they inform him is actually not expensive at all for wine.

Afterward, Wanda and Scott clean up the dishes as the rest of them drink more and chat about nothing even close to serious. It’s calm and comfortable, and being in such a lulled state, Bucky nearly has a small heart attack when several of the lights go out. He is absolutely certain for a few terrified seconds that someone cut the power and is coming to take them away. He panics like this until he sees Wanda and Scott come out from the kitchen holding a cake, starting the first notes of the Happy Birthday song.

And holy shit, what a cake. Every inch of its rectangular, chocolate frosted surface is blazing with candles. They walk slowly, trying to keep them all lit, as the song swells to a crescendo once everyone joins in. Bucky can feel himself smiling, a smile he couldn’t stop if his life depended on
They set down the cake in front of him and finish the song. There’s so much flame, 100 candles’ worth, that he can’t even read what they wrote below it in that same colored icing they once used to write *Happy Brain Surgery!* Bucky then looks up from the glory of his cake, at the circle of people around him, all leaning forward expectantly. And smiling. They’re all smiling. At him. When he was with Hydra, and after, when he was in Romania, and when he first came here, he never imagined…

During those times, he never, ever thought he would feel happiness again. That he would have friends. That he would be loved. He couldn’t even fathom it, and he foreclosed all of those possibilities with grim resolution. But now, sitting here with everyone, his friends and the man he loves, he sees how wrong he was. Beyond all logic, beyond everything he’s learned about justice and karma, he has all of these things now.

And for the first time, he thinks that maybe it’s okay to have them. Maybe, just maybe, there’s a possibility that he might deserve these things as much as anyone else. It’s such a foreign concept that his mind fumbles over it. But it doesn’t matter, because he feels it. He feels the kindness in their eyes, their fondness for him, and something warm blooms in his chest. Something so big that it almost overwhelms him.

Bucky grips the arms of his chair and almost gets up to leave, to save himself from even more emotional embarrassment. As if the past 72 hours haven’t been saturated with it. As if he isn’t already just a sore, gaping wound for the entire world to see.

But he doesn’t leave, and he doesn’t follow his impulse to apologize. Instead, he lets himself sit with all the bittersweetness he’s feeling. The joy. The pain and grief still resonating in him. The fragile hope.

“Thank you.”

Everyone around the table replies with nods and broadening smiles, and then Clint makes an important observation:

“Hate to spoil the moment, but unless you like the taste of wax, I suggest you blow out the candles here pretty soon.”

And he’s right. The candles on the left side of the cake are already markedly smaller than the ones on the right, dripping their wax onto the frosting below.

“All right,” Bucky says, surveying the cake like a target, “let’s see if I can do this.”

He sucks in a deep breath.

“Wait!” Sam exclaims. “You gotta make a wish first!”

Bucky holds that breath as he hastily thinks of what he might wish for. At first pass, nothing comes to mind – not one thing that would make his life better than it is right at this moment. But then, just before he exhales, he throws a wildly implausible but gravely serious wish that, somehow, everything works out with the Accords and the Attorney General and that they all get to live the rest of their lives in peace.

He purses his lips and blows, and everyone begins to egg him on as he gets closer to extinguishing all 100. Maybe it’s the cheerleading, or maybe he just really wants to show off, but he blows them all out in one fell swoop, inciting a raucous burst of whooping and clapping.
“Hope you wished for something good,” Steve says over all the noise.

Bucky looks at him, then at everyone around the table. The cheering dies down. Tightness chokes his stomach but swiftly dissolves, leaving behind a wash of solid calm. He squares his shoulders, and his lips press into a tight line.

From all the chaos roiling inside of him, he finally distills one absolute truth: This isn’t gonna end with him walking away in handcuffs. Not him or anyone else. Whatever the alternative is, well, that’s a revelation for another day.

“Damn right I did.”

Damn right.

Chapter End Notes

Wizard of Oz is a shout-out to Lasgalendil’s lovely short fic See, which can be found here: http://archiveofourown.org/works/8591215
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Bucky finishes CPT. Bucky and Steve take things to the next level. Bucky gets an offer he can’t refuse.

Chapter Notes

Wow, I’m overwhelmed by the outpouring of lovely comments and kudos from the last chapter. Thank you so much for all of the support!

Friday

When I first came to therapy, I thought I knew exactly who I was and how I got to be that way. I was a monster. I was a murderer. I was someone who liked killing. And I became those things because it was my true nature. All I needed was a push from Hydra. I thought that because I didn’t run, because I didn't disobey, I had to be responsible for everything that happened when I was the Winter Soldier.

But I wasn’t responsible. I did disobey. I fought. I fought so much that they had to put me in cryo for over a decade and invent new technology just to get me to obey. And even then, I still found ways to defy them. Because my real true nature was to fight them whenever I could. And for all those times I couldn’t fight them, it was because they used torture and manipulation to make me believe their lies. I didn’t have a choice. I know that now.

Throughout this process, I’ve learned that there are still dangerous things in the world and dangerous people. The government is calling for my head on international TV as we speak. So yeah, there’s real danger for me out there. But in my daily life, I’m objectively pretty safe. Nobody’s come to kill me so far. It’s still very hard to get out of the habit of expecting the worst, and I still have issues with mentally over preparing for worst-case scenarios. But something new is that I’m hoping maybe I can do something with my life to keep other people safe. That was the one thing I enjoyed about the war – I knew my actions were helping others. Maybe I can do that again.

I used to not trust myself, and I used to think I was too dangerous to get close to anyone. But I’m not dangerous. Not inherently. I can be dangerous if I want to be, but I make my own choices now about when I hurt others. I can’t be programmed anymore. I can’t be used by anyone anymore. I may be out of control sometimes, but I haven’t hurt anyone I care about. Just the wall. And if I didn’t hurt anyone that day, or any other day since I’ve been doing this shitty work, I think I can justify trusting myself a little more. In terms of trusting others, that’s changed for me. I think maybe I trusted too much. Maybe in the wrong way. In a way where I didn’t respect my own boundaries and my right to privacy. I didn’t think I was worth having boundaries or privacy. I never had any when I was captive. Now I know that I can ask for privacy and have boundaries but still have relationships with others.

Bucky glances up from his notebook. Bard is smiling and making a victorious fist. Bucky can’t
help but mirror his facial expression before returning to his compact writing.

I still struggle with power and control. I want to be in control of my environment. I still automatically calculate egress plans for the rooms I walk into, even though I’ve walked into them a thousand times. And I often imagine various scenarios where I might have to run or fight. What would I do if I was fighting in this room? What weapons would I use? How many guys could I take out with x, y, or z? I still struggle with controlling my emotions – or wanting to control them. Part of me still thinks it’s weak to cry and show sadness, even though it’s obviously been helpful. I still don’t like feeling out of control, but I’ve learned that it’s not going to kill me. I’ve learned that emotions don’t last forever, even the worst ones. I don’t need to have control all the time, even if I want it.

I had so much trouble with intimacy before. I couldn’t be close to myself or to anyone else because I felt so awful about who I was. I was convinced that I didn’t deserve friends or love. But then, I decided that I wanted to try to have both. I tried to pretend that it was okay, just to see what would happen. And guess what? I have friends now. Good friends. I also have a real relationship, maybe the first real relationship I’ve ever had, even though I don’t think it’s a very fair one. It’s easier for me now to be close physically, and I’ve let myself be very vulnerable emotionally. But I still have trouble being physically and emotionally close at the same time. There’s still a block, and I don’t like it. I feel cheap and one-dimensional and afraid. But I’m trying. We’ll see. I’m really trying.

I don’t hate myself anymore. I certainly don’t love myself, but I’ve never loved myself, so maybe that’ll take more time. I think it’s okay for me to love others, and I’ve made an agreement with myself to be open to the love that others give me. I wrote before that whatever I am, it’s not good, and it could never be good. I don’t know if that’s true anymore. I still have to live with what I did, even though I didn’t choose to do it. I still remember every mission. I still see the faces of all the people I killed and the ones who were left in the aftermath. I still feel humiliated and ashamed and guilty. I’m still reeling in and out of sadness and grief. I hope that these feelings will continue to weaken over time.

I want to redeem myself. I want to do good. I want to help people. I want the families of the people I killed to know that I didn't want to do it. I want them to know who's really to blame. I don't want them to see me as a monster. Because I'm not. I was a victim, just like all those people who died. (This is hard to write, and I'm still struggling to believe it completely.) I'm not going to pay for what happened to me, not any more than I already have. I've already paid enough.

I don't know exactly where to go from here, but I know I want to go forward. I want to live. I want to be happy. I want to have purpose. I want to learn to like myself and maybe even love myself. And somehow, amazingly, I can now see a future where those things are possible.

Bucky lingers on the last sentence for a few moments before slowly closing his notebook. He smooths over the ridge where the cover once bent in his rage.

“Wow. Quite a difference between your first impact statement and this one.” Bard steeps his fingers over his mouth. “What are your thoughts?”

“Sounds like they were written by two different people.”

“Yeah, what do you make of that?”

Bucky tilts his head. “In a way, they were. The first guy was mistaken. He didn’t understand.”

“And this guy today?” Bard asks.
“He sees clearly. He sees the truth. And it’s ugly and sad, but it’s not who he is.”

That’s perhaps the biggest difference of all. Before, he scaffolded his entire personhood on the things Hydra made him do. He was the things they made him do. But now, he’s excavated a self from all this mess, something immutable, something transcendent, something that can survive any act of evil in the world.

Bard nods in acknowledgment. Bucky doesn’t doubt that he’s already concluded the same thing and more. The man’s always at least a thousand steps ahead of every realization he’s ever had, no matter how subtle or blindingly obvious.

“So, now that we’re officially done with CPT, this is a good time to reassess your goals for therapy. First, do you even want to still be in therapy?” Bard asks.

Bucky can’t get a read on whether Bard thinks it would be a good idea to keep going. His expression and tone are both carefully neutral.

“Yeah. But maybe we can scale it back.”

“Sure. Maybe we can start with every other week, if you want, and see how that goes.”

“I wanna get off my meds. The antidepressants, at least. See where my baseline is now.” Bucky chews on his next words before saying them, working them around like taffy. “I’m sick of hard-on roulette,” he finally adds, his face growing warm. “I never know when I’m gonna be able to get it up and keep it up. I hate it.”

He doesn’t tell Bard that at least a third of his sexual encounters with Steve have been one-sided, and not intentionally. Steve tries valiantly to navigate his embarrassment with tact, kissing him and saying that they’ll just have to make up for it later. Steve’s intentions are kind and loving, but Bucky only grows more anxious every time it happens, because now he’s got ‘later’ to deliver on, too.

Bard’s mouth twitches in tandem with the pinching of his left eye, a half-wince of solidarity. “That’s a very common side effect of SSRIs, I’m afraid. I’ll have Dr. L give you a call and you can work out a plan with her.” He jots a note in his portfolio then looks back up at Bucky expectantly. “What else do you want to work on?”

Bucky glances out the window into the murky distance, where the lush jungle canopy fades into a heavy blanket of fog. “I feel like I need to do something to balance things out. On a broad scale. I don’t know what that means or what that would look like, though.” He looks back at Bard. “Does that make sense?”

Bard nods. “It does. I got a clear sense of that from your impact statement. I think it’s great you can acknowledge that even though you weren’t responsible, you still carry some of the burden of what they made you do. And yeah, part of your recovery may involve some sort of real world action.”

As gratifying as it is to finally be able to reach into the future and touch something positive, so much remains unsettled within Bucky. When he wakes up in the morning, he never knows if he’s going to be furious, depressed, numb, sad, or just fucking fine. He often cycles through several of these emotions during the course of any given day, sometimes in a perplexing and illogical succession.

“I imagine a lot of this is just going to settle with time,” Bucky says.

“Absolutely. You ever see the Japanese game Pachinko?”
Bucky shakes his head. Bard tries animatedly to explain it, fingers flitting down like rain. He chuckles and shakes his head at his failed analogy, telling Bucky to look it up later. Bard then leans forward suddenly in his chair.

“Hey, wanna see something?”

Before waiting for Bucky to respond, he gets up and walks over to his desk. From his portfolio, he pulls out the PTSD symptom assessment Bucky completed at the start of session and types something on his computer.

“Okay, c’mere,” Bard says, motioning for Bucky to join him. When Bucky sides up to him behind his desk, Bard points to a jagged graph spread wide across his monitor. “These are your PTSD scores over time, starting from our first session of CPT. Here’s where you started. 72 out of 80.” He traces his finger up and then down, up, down, down, up, down and down over the weeks. “And here’s where you are now.”

Bucky bends over to get a closer look, bracing his right arm on the back of Bard’s chair.

“You still technically meet criteria for PTSD,” Bard tells him, “but I very rarely see scores drop this far this fast.”

Bucky rights himself and makes a small hm sound, one that belies the magnitude of his disbelief. Certainly he feels all of the progress he’s made. The difference between now and then is stark, especially after reading both impact statements today. But there’s a lingering part of him, the restless cynic, that still balks at every proof of growth.

Bard looks up and regards him for a few seconds. “I just wanna say, I’m so proud of you. I mean, I didn’t really do much, but I still feel that way.”

Bucky frowns. “Bullshit you didn’t do much. I’d be dead if it wasn’t for you.” He pauses, then repeats it for emphasis. “I would be dead.”

“I don’t know about that.”

Bucky waves his metal hand at the graph on the screen. “None of this would have been possible without you. You gave me my freedom back. You helped me change my fucked up beliefs. You dealt with all my bullshit. My attitude, my stubbornness, everything.” His grip on Bard’s chair tightens. “You gave me my life back.”

“The truth is,” Bard replies, “you did all that yourself. I just gave you some of the tools to do it. That’s all. That’s all a therapist really does. The decent ones, anyway. I may have been the Sherpa, but you made the climb all on your own.”

Bucky releases the chair and lays his hand on Bard’s shoulder. Maybe he shouldn’t touch him, maybe it’s against therapy rules, but it seems right.

“I’ll never forget this,” Bucky says, his voice low and solemn.

He knows this isn’t their last session, but something feels like it’s coming to an end. A phase of their work together. The bitterest leg of his long slog toward recovery. Bard feels like a brother in arms, their trust and bond forged in the dark pits of horror, thicker than all the mud in Azzano.

Bard accepts his hand with a wide, warm smile that scrunches the corners of both eyes. It’s an expression that’s unfailingly, quintessentially Bard.
“Neither will I.”

Monday

Of all the damnable, thankless chores, shopping for clothes must be close to the worst. Bucky scowls and releases a frustrated expletive into the empty living room. The peer pressure’s finally gotten to him, eased right along by T’Challa’s birthday gift of a $500 gift card “to be used on clothes and only clothes. You really need clothes.” Sam declared it a public service to all of them, and nobody disagreed.

He wishes he gave a shit. Even half a shit. He spent more brainpower cooking up his shopping pseudonym than he’s spent over two hours of aimless browsing.

He perks up at the sound of padding feet across the wood floor. Steve’s, obviously, from the heaviness and cadence of stride. He approaches from behind, leaning over the back of the couch, peering over Bucky’s shoulder.

“How’s it going?”

“Poorly.”

Steve snorts softly. “It’s not that hard.”

“It is if you hate shopping and don’t know what looks good.”

Steve presses his cheek against Bucky’s temple. He reaches out toward the laptop screen and points to several pictures of men in casual combinations of jeans, cotton knit shirts, and light sweaters. “You’d look good in that. Or this. Or this. Definitely this.”

Bucky tenses momentarily when Steve’s reaching hand drops down to rest on his abdomen.

“Maybe you should shop for me.”

“Well, I’m biased,” Steve says, lips brushing the shell of his ear. “I think you’d look good in anything.”

Bucky inhales deeply, and his stomach flutters under Steve’s hand. He tilts his head up, pressing his nose to the underside of Steve’s jaw. “Are you wearing cologne?”

Since when does Steve wear cologne? Since never. At least, he doesn’t think so…

Steve makes a sound of confirmation, and his fingers come alive, drawing slowly down to the waistband of Bucky’s jeans.

“You know you don’t need to work that hard to get me interested, right?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I do,” Steve says, tone sucked dry of any levity, as his other hand drifts across Bucky’s chest.

Ouch.

It’s fair, though. Their physical relationship has been hijacked by the high emotional drama of the past couple of weeks, save for Bucky’s brief spell of avoidant insatiability. But even that was only marginally satisfying for both of them, heavy as it was with ulterior motive.

Bucky leans his head to the side, welcoming Steve’s mouth as it trails down to his collarbone. He reaches up and buries his fingers in Steve’s hair, and he squirms when Steve’s hand finally dips into his pants, sliding beneath his underwear. Steve palms his cock, which, thank God, is hardening at his touch.

“What have you been doing all morning?” Bucky asks, voice wavering. Steve was supposed to be working on something for T’Challa, but Bucky thinks he might know what he was actually doing during that time.

“What about you.” Steve grazes Bucky’s left nipple with his fingertip, which is now taut beneath the fabric of his shirt. He then makes a firm fist around Bucky’s growing length. “Wanting you.”

Bucky exhales sharply and pushes his laptop to the side. “Okay, you’re not – ” He grabs the wrist of the hand down his pants tightly. “All right. Jesus. Let’s go.”

Steve pulls away on both fronts, but not before a parting squeeze and a sharp nip at his earlobe.

Holy shit.

Bucky sags on the cushions, blinking, his hands ghosting over the tight, throbbing places Steve vacated. His brain grinds between gears. When Steve comes around and offers him a lift up, Bucky takes in the dark craving in his eyes, the blush of his face and neck, and the bold stiffness jutting beneath his slacks. Again and again, Bucky continues to be surprised by what lies beneath that veneer of composure, when it cracks open and spills out a man touched by fire, hot and wanting.

He likes it. No, he loves it. He loves Steve like this. He wants to meet Steve like this, because it’s been way too long since he has. Bucky jerks his head, shaking away the cobwebs, the worries, and the mundaneness of his entire day thus far. And when Steve pulls him to his feet, Bucky follows the momentum forward, capturing Steve’s mouth with his own and pressing his body close. They make out, slowly first, then with increasing abandon as Bucky’s mind starts to clear, giving way to a backlog of desire he didn’t even realize he’d been collecting. They take uneven, careless steps in the general direction of their room all the while, bumping against the coffee table and then the ottoman, making pitifully little headway the entire time.

Dishes clang in the nearby kitchen, and they pull apart, still gripping each other. They come to the silent, mutual decision to try to get back to their room as quickly and inconspicuously as possible. They don’t even dare to see who’s in the kitchen when they pass it. Bucky cycles silently and repeatedly through a clumsy prayer that nobody sees them trying to be inconspicuous in spite of very conspicuous evidence of what they’ve been doing. He entertains a horrifying scenario of Wanda seeing them, though, shit, she’s already seen him with no pants on, clearly in the middle of screwing around, so she’d probably live through it just fine.

They finally make it, and they exchange reckless smiles once the door closes. Steve locks it and they both strip quickly out of their own clothes, pausing briefly between shirts and pants to kiss again. Steve pushes Bucky back against the bed, and he lays himself down on it. An old, obsolete alarm sounds, as it always does when he enters that window of physical uncertainty with Steve – especially the type of uncertainty that has him flat on his back.

It’s okay. It’s fine. It’s been fine. It’s okay. It’s good.

Steve follows on his hands and knees, but he doesn’t move to get in between his legs. Instead,
Steve straddles him, knees framing his hips, planting his hands on either side of his head. Bucky’s eyes rake down the length of the powerful torso hovering above him, the fullness of Steve’s straining cock, then back up to his face, his fantastic, sensual mouth, pink already spreading around it from kissing the roughness of his stubble for so long. Bucky brushes his thumb lightly below Steve’s swollen lower lip.

“I should have shaved,” he says, voice heavy with unspoken apology.

“Don’t you dare.”

Bucky cups Steve’s face with both hands, focusing his energy and presence into his touch. He tries to open up, to tap into that beautiful bloom, to marry the parts of himself that he’s always kept separate. His body and heart. He tries. Because there’s no gain in that anymore, those old patterns, that old way of relating. They all belong in the trash, along with all the lies and all the self-hate. Like with letting go and feeling his sadness, he doesn’t quite know how to do it. But he still tries.

Steve reaches up and takes Bucky’s right hand. He guides it down his body, over his chest. His abs. His cock. But he doesn’t stop there. He pulls it down more, until Bucky’s palm brushes against his balls. Steve moves and flexes his hand until Bucky’s middle and index fingers curve up, until he takes a shuddering breath when they make the lightest contact with his entrance.

Bucky smiles and moves beneath Steve’s grip, relishing the way his eyelashes flutter at his touch. “Want me to finger you?”

Steve answers by releasing Bucky’s hand, reaching over to his nightstand, and pressing the bottle of massage-oil-slash-lube into Bucky’s grip. If Steve’s feeling any trepidation, he’s definitely not showing it, watching Bucky’s every move intently.

Bucky frowns as he squeezes out some of the liquid and spreads it onto his index finger. He runs his thumb up and down it, appraising its viscosity.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s pretty thin.”

Steve reaches over again and fumbles through the drawer. He pulls out a different bottle and hands it to him.

“How about this?”

“You bought two kinds?” Bucky’s smiling again as he squeezes out a dollop of the new stuff, slicking it over the first coat. It’s thick, almost like Vaseline. He puts on as much as he can get to stick. “Good thing.”

Steve grasps Bucky’s wrist firmly, pulling it back down to where he wants it. But Bucky stops him, countering that strength with his own.

“Hey, slow down,” he says, caressing Steve’s jaw with his metal fingers. “Just slow down. It’s not a race.”

“I’m sorry,” Steve murmurs. “I’m just… I don’t know.”

“Horny?” Bucky offers.

“I don’t know why.”
“Don’t be sorry. It’s great. But this isn’t something you rush.”

Bucky lifts his head and touches his lips to Steve’s, softly, sweetly, and he moves his hand slowly back down his body, grazing his smooth skin with his knuckles as he goes. Bucky wouldn’t have chosen this position on his own, but it works perfectly. It’s the ideal vantage point for watching Steve’s reaction as he slowly circles, laying down a coat of lube in preparation.

“Let me know when.”

Steve swallows thickly and stares down at him, blue eyes unguarded and searching Bucky’s own. There’s such striking openness there, such trust, and Bucky’s chest fills with a heady weightlessness, the kind that confirms for him that he’s wanted, that he’s not only not dangerous but, in fact, worthy of the deep closeness they both crave from each other.

“Ready.”

As carefully as he can manage for such an invasive gesture, Bucky starts to push his finger inside. It’s hot in every conceivable way, and blood surges to his groin. He’s watching Steve’s face closely, and he freezes when a small grimace of discomfort starts to displace his anticipation.

“Feel weird?” Bucky asks, guessing.

“Yeah.”

“Want me to stop?”

“No.”

He continues pushing in, taking his time, until he’s as deep as he can go. He rests there while Steve hovers, and Bucky observes with his full attention as Steve’s expression gradually changes, shifting out of that lull of discomfort as he relaxes. Steve bends down to kiss him, and Bucky’s finger slides. Steve whimpered into his mouth, and when he breaks from their kiss, that veil of lust begins clouding over him again.

Bucky keeps his hand still, thoroughly appreciating the play of curiosity and fledgling enjoyment on Steve’s face as he slowly begins to move. And when Bucky hooks his finger inward, feeling for that tender spot that he’s only read about, Steve gasps and rocks against him.

Bucky presses his finger to that spot, gently rubbing it to the sound of Steve’s shallow breathing, and a heavy drop of precum falls from Steve’s dick onto his stomach. With it, Bucky has the delirious realization that every fantasy he’s ever had about sex with Steve, no matter how exciting and nasty, always falls pathetically short of how incredible the reality is. And Bucky always somehow underestimates how bad he’s going to want Steve, how crazy and unhinged he’s going to feel when they throw lighter fluid on that blue pilot flame that’s constantly burning between them. It rivals the intensity of all the other emotions that have devastated him for the past month. It’s the ecstatic twin of loss.

“Want another one?” Bucky asks.

He doesn’t expect Steve to shake his head. For several long moments, Steve looks down at him, mouth gaping as if he’s forgotten all the words in the English language. Bucky startles when Steve’s assertive grip lands on his cock.

“I want this,” Steve says, voice thick. “I want you.”
Bucky’s eyes go wide. No, no, no, no, no. This isn’t how it’s supposed to go. This isn’t how he planned it. He had a plan for their first time. He was going to get off his meds. He was going to visualize and practice and train himself to last forever. At the very, very least, he was going to rub one out beforehand to take some of the edge off. But none of those things have happened. Not by a long shot.

Steve releases him and leans in close, bracing himself on both forearms. He drops his head and nuzzles Bucky’s cheek. “I want you,” he whispers. “Please.”

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. This isn’t how it’s supposed to go. Not at all.

But oh, how Bucky still wants it. When he shoves past all his control and plans and cuts deep into his marrow, Jesus Christ, he wants it so bad. He wants to push himself into Steve’s magnificent body, lose himself in heat and sweat, make Steve writhe and come so hard that he never forgets it.

So when Steve lifts his head, his face as pleading as his words, Bucky knows there’s nothing on this earth that could stop him from agreeing.

“Okay.”

Bucky carefully removes his finger and wipes the extra lube onto whoever’s thrown undershirt is lying next to him. Then it’s his turn to reach over to the nightstand, his nightstand, and he pulls out hand sanitizer and the small box of condoms he optimistically ordered three weeks ago. He fumbles with the unopened box, his right hand shaking. Steve takes it from him, rescuing him from the task so he can finish cleaning up.

Steve then sits back, resting on Bucky’s upper thighs. He somehow makes easy work of opening the box, even though his hands don’t seem that much steadier. He pulls out the accordioned stack and tears off one square packet, tossing the remainder and the box to the side. He glances up and suddenly sober out of his excitement.

“Are you sure?” Steve asks seriously.

Bucky nods, hoping that Steve mistakes the uptick in his respiration rate for eagerness alone.

Steve turns his attention to opening the condom in his hands, which now represents the single hope Bucky has for lasting more than 30 seconds. Thank God. Thank fucking God he ordered them.

He lets Steve take control, forcing himself to let him, beating back the chattering of his mind as it tries to feed him questions and worries and doubts. He pushes himself up on his elbows and tries to focus on Steve’s hands as they roll the latex over his cock, as they spread thick lube over him. He’s about to ask Steve how he wants it, but he feels him shift his weight, repositioning himself.

Oh. Oh, God. He’s going to ride him. Just like Bucky imagined when Steve lived in a smaller body. Just like what he’d pretend sometimes, eyes closed, while some girl was on top of him. Just like he’d jerk off to if he was drunk enough. Of course, in his young imagination, Bucky was always blazing with confidence, strong and skilled enough to perform as long as he needed to. But in his imagination now, all he can see is his embarrassing failure.

Bucky lets himself fall back on the mattress. He presses the heels of his palms to his eyes and takes the deepest breath he can manage.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he hears Steve ask.

“Yeah,” he lies, dropping his hands to Steve’s thighs. “Just go slow.”
“Don’t think I have much of a choice. This is a little bit bigger than your finger.” Steve’s tone is light, but behind that is a dark shadow of apprehension. It feels like the first time they’ve been on the same page all day.

It seems to take forever, truly forever, for Steve to fully lower himself onto him. Bucky tries his best to be there, touching him, encouraging him, checking in with him. But behind his front of support, he’s scrambling frantically to hold himself together. It’s tighter and hotter than any mouth or hand could ever be, and Bucky finds that he can’t even watch the process, because just the sight of his dick disappearing into Steve is almost enough to push him over. Bucky exhales his relief when Steve settles, when he stops, when he slumps and presses his hands to Bucky’s chest to bear some of his quivering weight.

“You okay?” Bucky asks.

“Yeah. You?”

Bucky nods. “Yeah.”

Yeah. Yeah, he actually is okay. He slides his hands up Steve’s gold dusted thighs, and he feels those muscles flex as Steve sits up and starts to move, lifting himself with excruciating slowness. And when he lowers himself again, Steve catches his lip between those perfect white teeth and groans.

Dear God, if Bucky’s ever seen or heard anything sexier than that, he’s completely forgotten it. And when Steve rises and falls again, and then again and again, the room fills with the sounds of their panting and moaning. Bucky puts his hands everywhere, greedily, frantically, sliding them down Steve’s broad chest, holding his waist, his hips, clutching his ass with his left hand as he strokes his hardness with his right, trying to push Steve to that same edge he’s careening toward uncontrollably.

Steve grinds down once more, hard, and pauses. He tilts his head back, exposing the long column of his throat, and sighs. His hand drifts down to Bucky’s, which is still working him over, and he stops him. When Steve’s head lolls forward again, he looks down, eyelids heavy.

“Wanna fuck me?”

Bucky’s Adam’s apple bobs. “What do you think?”

A smirk plays across Steve’s lips, and he once more braces himself on Bucky’s chest, lifting himself off with a shudder. For Bucky, the loss of contact, the loss of that clutching pressure, is both unpleasant and welcome. He’s achingly hard and desperate for release, but he takes advantage of the transition to draw some much-needed energy into his stamina reserves.

Steve lays himself at Bucky’s side and runs his fingertips lightly over his chest. The gentleness of that touch brings Bucky back to earth, tearing him out of his sideshow of self-doubt. Bucky catches those fingers in his own and joins their hands together. He glances over at Steve, who looks remarkably placid and patient for a guy who just asked to be plowed. Steve rolls onto his back, pulling Bucky’s hand, encouraging him to follow.

Bucky sits up and crawls between Steve’s legs, which are bent at the knees and waiting to receive him. He tries to be equivocal about positions and who’s on top, he really does, but in truth, there’s no way he wants it more than this. He craves the closeness. The control. Even despite the added pressure that comes with it.
“I’ve wanted this, like this,” Steve tells him, looking as if he’s both excited and embarrassed to admit it. His right leg circles around Bucky, drawing him in.

Bucky pushes out the breath he realizes he’s holding and dips his head. He’s been wanting this, too. For so long. But he wishes –

No. No. He doesn’t wish anything. This is okay. Whatever happens, it’s going to be okay.

“Hey.”

He feels Steve’s hand on his chin, coaxing him to look up. As if he’s somehow reached into his mind, into the roiling core of his anxieties, Steve says:

“It won’t take much. Don’t worry.”

Bucky smiles into Steve’s palm. How he got so lucky, so incomprehensively, undeservedly lucky, he’ll never know.

Bucky pulls back just enough to guide himself, and as soon as he starts sliding in, he lets himself be pulled into Steve’s arms. He sinks in slowly, until he can’t sink anymore, eyes threatening to roll back in his head from the friction, from the sensation of being sucked in, dissolved, absorbed.

He checks in with Steve, who breathlessly asks him to move. And he does, as much as he can for being so powerfully embraced, all four of Steve’s limbs wrapped around him. It keeps him grounded, keeps him from going too fast and too hard. Steve’s strong hands roam his back, his upper arms, his ass. It’s the best kind of overwhelming, and the only response Bucky can manage aside from his steady thrusting is to gracelessly kiss and lick Steve’s neck as he drowns in his scent, his escalating moans, his heat.

Steve was right – it doesn’t take much. He comes, crying out, clenching around Bucky and spilling between them. Bucky mutters his gratitude, then buries himself as deeply as he can with his own rough cry against Steve’s right shoulder. His cock pulses with the waves of his climax and – God – it feels so, so fucking good.

Moments later, when he regains a small amount of composure, Bucky opens his eyes, not even realizing that he’d closed them. He lifts his head from the crook of Steve’s neck and touches his trembling fingers to his flushed face, his bitten lower lip, the angles of his cheekbones and jaw.

He’s beautiful. So breathtakingly beautiful. Every single part of him.

Steve’s hand curves up his face, and Bucky leans into his touch. It’s so tender, so loving, and when that hand slides into his hair, Bucky drops his head again. Steve stretches out his legs but continues to hold him close. Bucky lets down his weight, resting completely save for the small tension he keeps in his hips. He should probably pull out, but he doesn’t.

In Steve’s arms, Bucky wonders what it would feel like to forget the entire rest of his life, all the suffering, all the horror, all the potential for the entire future, and live in this single moment forever. And he wonders if finally, finally, those disparate parts of himself, his body and heart, have fused together. He wonders if this is what that feels like. And if this is what that is, he wonders how he possibly went so long without ever feeling this way. He wonders how he ever joined his body to someone else’s without feeling love. No wonder a part of him was so dead before, so empty, even before the war.

He can’t say with certainty how long they stay like this. It seems like hours, but practically speaking, it’s probably much less than that. Hell, the others probably haven’t even eaten lunch yet.
Time seems to have unusual rules in the haze of the afterglow.

It’s Steve who finally breaks the silence.

“Hey.”

“Hmm?”

“You know I love you, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.” Steve pauses. “But I really have to pee, so...”

Bucky lifts his head and smiles. “So you’re saying that having 300 pounds of weight on top of you is not helping.”

“Not at all.”

Steve releases him slowly, and Bucky pushes himself up. He finally pulls out, sucking in a breath between his teeth, wincing at his sensitivity, and he rolls onto his back to let Steve out from under him. While Steve’s in the bathroom, Bucky wipes off his chest and stomach with that poor abused undershirt and carefully pulls off the condom. He holds it up, swinging it a little, and marvels.

Steve returns, catching him in the midst of his marveling. “Jesus, Buck, how long you been saving all that?”

“This should give you a small sense of how hard I had to work to not blow my load before you.” Bucky ties it off and drops it into the small trashcan next to the bed. “You kinda caught me off guard today. Several times.”

Steve settles on his side next to Bucky and lays his hand flat against his chest. “Wouldn’t have known it. You were great,” he says sincerely.

Bucky touches his hand to Steve’s, fingertips skimming over the warm, raised veins on the back of his hand. “You too.”

“Was that there when we walked in?” Steve asks, jerking his head back toward the door.

“What?”

“That envelope down there.”

Bucky lifts his torso and looks over Steve’s shoulder. Sure enough, there’s a letter-sized envelope in the middle of the floor, in a place where neither of them would have missed it before, no matter how blind they were with lust.

“Nope,” Bucky says, falling back on the bed. “Guess someone slid it under the door while we were doin’ it.”

Steve groans and covers his eyes with his hand. “I hope it wasn’t T’Challa.”

Bucky can’t help but laugh. “Hate to tell ya, sweetheart, but I’m pretty sure everyone heard us. T’Challa included. And that’s without dropping off any envelope.”

Steve peeks at him through his fingers. A big, dopey smile blossoms on lips.
“What?” Bucky asks.

Steve smiles even wider.

“What?”

Bucky holds the envelope in his hands, its edges lightly creased from being turned and turned. Next to him, Steve stares, as he’s been doing for the past few minutes.

“Y’know, I think there might be something inside,” Steve says. He raises his eyebrows.

Steve already aired his concerns that the thing inside could be dangerous. Could be anthrax. Could be ricin. Bucky glibly balked at the notion that the anthrax would even make him sick, let alone kill him. Plus wouldn’t he have to eat the ricin? He laughed. He may be dense as lead, but he’s not a total idiot.

“Gimme a minute, will ya? This is my first piece of mail in 73 years.”

It’s hand addressed to James Buchanan Barnes in stuttered, slanted blue ink. The return address is 242 1st Street, New York, New York. He wets his lower lip with his tongue and slides his finger underneath the flap, tearing it open.

He pulls out a single college ruled piece of paper, which has a business card stapled to the top left corner.

I want to tell your story. Look me up.
–Gretchen

“That’s it?” Steve says.

Bucky touches his fingertip to the crisp corner of the attached card. Gretchen M. Stilwell, Senior Writer, New York Times. Her phone number and email address lay in the lower right hand corner. He reads those two sentences, that name, and everything on the card again. Then again.

Bucky rolls onto his stomach and reaches over the side of the bed, where he finds Steve’s laptop. His own laptop is still in the living room, still opened to that daunting spread of menswear.

“You’re not actually going to look her up, are you?”

“Of course I am.” He hands the laptop to Steve to put in his password. “How could I not?”

“Because this is so sketchy that I can’t believe you’re actually considering it.”

Despite his objections, Steve unlocks the computer and hands it back.

Bucky types her name into Google, fingers hitting the keys defiantly. The effect is diminished somewhat by a cascade of inevitable mistakes as his left fingers slip clumsily over the plastic keys. He finds her biography on the Times website, which is accompanied by a black and white picture of a middle aged woman with dark, waving hair and dark, sharp eyes. She might have been gorgeous once. Maybe in college.

Bucky scrolls down the list of selected articles she’s written and reads the subject of each out loud:

“I think it’s where soldiers burned their garbage in Iraq and Afghanistan,” Steve says.

Bucky glances over at him. The skepticism on Steve’s face has been replaced by a quirk of curiosity. Maybe he’s reading over the part where she won both a Pulitzer Prize and a Peabody Award for her reporting on the Hydra data dump.

“Sounds pretty legit to me,” Bucky says.

Steve shifts his weight to his side and props his head on his hand. “You’re really serious about this.”

Bucky shrugs. “Maybe.”

“What do you get out of it?”

What, indeed. What is it about contacting her that incites a mixed quake of eagerness and dread in him?

“Maybe I don’t wanna be the bad guy anymore,” Bucky trails his finger absently over the middle row of keys. The idea that he’s anything other than the bad guy is still fresh, but it’s powerful and real. “Maybe I want people to know what I really am.”

“But can you trust that she’ll do that for you? Can you trust that she’ll advocate for you and not just do whatever she needs to snag some prize?”

“Only one way to find out.”

Steve lifts his hand to Bucky’s shoulder and runs it slowly down the naked slope of his back.

“I don’t want her to do wrong by you,” Steve says quietly.

“Can’t do much wronger than what’s already been done, right? I mean, really, what do I have to lose? And what could I gain?” Bucky stares at Stilwell’s picture, at the intensity of her eyes, the ferocity and hunger there. “Maybe this takes some of the heat off me. Off all of us.”

“Maybe.” Steve’s voice is distant.

Bucky closes the laptop. “If it doesn’t feel right, I’ll just tell her to fuck off, and that’ll be that.”

“If you don’t, I will.”

“I don’t need a guard dog,” Bucky says, even as he beams with appreciation of Steve’s protectiveness.

Steve smiles and gives him a soft pair of affectionate slaps on his right ass cheek. “No, I suppose you don’t.”

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At two the next morning, while Steve is deep in sleep, Bucky grabs his phone from off his nightstand. He doesn’t really know why he’s waited so long. He rationalized earlier that night that he should wait until she gets off work, as if reporters keep regular business hours. It’s just nerves,
of course, begging him to bail out now before he breaks a seal that can’t be replaced.

Good, he counters. Break that seal. Tear it off and let the whole fucking truth explode into the world like shrapnel. Let it rip through the hard stream of lies that’s circulated through every major news source at least a hundred times, unchallenged by everyone except the contrarians, who argue just for argument’s sake and couldn’t give a single fuck about him or the facts.

Bucky’s already programmed her number into his phone. He opts for a text, because he doesn’t trust himself not to start babbling or clamming up or making any number of awkward gaffes he’s imagined.

* Ok I’ll bite –JB *

It takes him another ten minutes to press send. The response is almost instantaneous.

* I can be in Wakanda in 4 days *

His fingers shake as he types his reply, but when he checks in with himself to gauge what’s behind it, he finds only anticipation and the rapturous lightness of hope.

* See you then *
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Bucky meets Gretchen Stilwell. Steve gets a call.

Chapter Notes

Some of you may have observed that I switched the final chapter count from 25 to 24. I want you to know that I’m not making any changes to the story itself; I’m just tightening up the remaining chapters and cutting some unnecessary fluff (not the good kind – the kind that messes up pacing and flow).

“Will you cut it out? You’re gonna wear a trench into the floor.”

Bucky stops pacing and looks over at Sam, who’s eyeballing him from the couch. “Sorry.”

“Where’s Steve, anyway?”

Bucky scowls at the implication that Steve should be here to manage his anxiety. That he should be here handling him.

“He wanted to be part of the welcoming committee,” Scott tells Sam.

“Oh, I bet he did. She’s gonna wish she never showed up,” Clint says, shooting Bucky a knowing look.

Bucky rolls his eyes. He and Steve got into it earlier this morning regarding his level of involvement today, trading a handful of harsh un-pleasantries that further soured the already acerbic mood Steve woke up in. He knows it’s just Steve’s own anxiety emerging, and Bucky’s observed over nearly three decades that Steve only really knows how to manage discomfort through action. But still, it’s driving Bucky bat shit bonkers. Telling Steve to chill the fuck out and take some deep breaths went over poorly, so Bucky settled for taking his own advice instead.

Bucky turns toward the sound of approaching footsteps, which he knows belong to the sourpuss himself.

“You ready?” Steve asks. His lips form a flat smile, one that seems to be entirely forced.

Bucky nods and starts following him to the executive wing, leaving behind a lackluster swell of good lucks.

“That bad, huh?” Bucky says as they walk.

Steve stops and grabs Bucky’s forearm. He makes apologetic eye contact.

“It’s not bad,” he admits. “She actually seems okay.”
“Glad you think so.”

Steve’s grip loosens, and he rubs Bucky’s arm slowly. “I’m sorry.”

“Sure you don’t need to be apologizing to her instead?” Bucky says, jerking his head in the direction of the conference room where Stilwell awaits.

“I don’t care about her. Let her think what she wants.”

“Oh, I’m sure she’s gonna be thinking all sorts of things, now.”

There’s a moment of recognition between them. There are rumors, of course. There’ve always been rumors, ever since the war. Rumors that are now entirely true and, in fact, have probably surpassed even the most salacious imaginings.

“Just tell me you didn’t scare her away,” Bucky says, taking a step forward and touching Steve’s fingertips with his own.

Steve’s smile is genuine this time. “Not a chance with that one.”

Steve drops him off outside the conference room door, and Bucky watches him as he makes his way back, shooing him with the wave of his hand when he turns around and mouths Sorry. Bucky closes his eyes and takes a series of five-by-five-count breaths, then enters the room.

Gretchen M. Stilwell looks like the frazzled spinster aunt of the woman in the picture on the New York Times website. She’s short and plump, and her dark, waving hair is scraped through with grey. Her eyes are the same, though, dark and strikingly incisive. She smiles lopsidedly as she approaches him, and the hand she holds out is weak when they shake.

“The picture’s old. I should change it so people aren’t so horrified when they finally meet me.” Her voice is incongruously high and resonant, like she stole it from a younger woman. “Gretchen.”

“James.”

“Huh.” Her demi-smile curls higher. “All right.”

She settles awkwardly into one of the ten high-backed executive chairs situated around the rectangular table. She falls heavily, letting gravity do all the work. Bucky takes a seat across from her, joining his hands together on top of the table.

“I thought he’d be friendlier,” Gretchen says.

“Who?”

“Steve Rogers. The glare I got when I walked in…” She fans her face with her left hand. “Whew! Not sure what I did to earn it, but I think I’m flattered.”

Bucky schools his expression to one of cold detachment, and Gretchen doesn’t seem at all fazed by it. In fact, she conveys the opposite, laying her hands on the arms of the chair, opening her posture, softening her eyes.

“What questions do you have for me?” she asks. “I imagine this is strange for you.”

“Why did you contact me?”

“As the letter said, I want to tell your story.”
“Why?”

She glances up and to the right, pursing her lips. “Do you know who Edward Snowden is?”

“You want me to be your Edward Snowden?” One of Bucky’s eyebrows rises.

“No. I bring him up because he reached out to a reporter named Glenn Greenwald when he wanted his story to be told. He chose Glenn because Glenn was already an advocate for civil liberties and a lawyer who knew constitutional law. He knew that Glenn would place his story in the context he wanted.”

“I don’t need all that,” Bucky says bluntly. “I just want people to know the facts.”

Gretchen holds up her right hand and extends her index finger unsteadily, pointing it at him as she speaks. “But a fact is a living thing. If you take one fact and put it in three different contexts, you have three different truths. And let’s be crystal clear, I’m not asking you to be my Snowden. I don’t need a Snowden. But you might need a Glenn Greenwald.”

Bucky leans back in his chair. What he knows about Snowden is that his situation was a hot mess, and now he’s stuck living somewhere in Bumfuck, Russia for the rest of his natural life. That alone makes it an uninspiring analogy.

“Listen,” she continues, “just like Glenn knew law and civil liberties, I know Hydra, and I know war. Before my body shit the bed, I was an embedded reporter with the Army. I lived in Iraq for almost four years, when you combine all my assignments. Then the data dump happened, and that became my new life. Now people come to me for information about Hydra, people in very high places, because I know more about it than any other journalist. I maybe more than anyone who’s never been part of it.”

What the hell kind of woman immerses herself in Hydra for three years, enough to allegedly become an expert in it? What kind of woman digs through terabytes and terabytes of highly encrypted data, just to try to wrap her mind around endless terror, mayhem, and atrocity?

“I don’t know your story. Not yet,” she says, hope edging into her voice. “But I know the context in which it occurred. And between the two of us, that’s where the truth will emerge.”

Bucky works his jaw to one side, then the other. “What do you get out of this? Personally.”

Gretchen leans forward hard, crushing her body against the edge of the table. Her brown eyes flash with intensity.

“I want to know how a second generation, blue collar American kid from Brooklyn goes from being a war hero to being the most terrifying and prolific assassin of the 20th century – for the same organization that captured him in 1943 and tortured him for months. How does this man supposedly die in 1944 and not only survive something un-survivable, but stay virtually the same age for 70 years?”

The answers are so plain to Bucky – they’ve always been – that he very rarely thinks about how inexplicable his life must seem to others. More than that, Gretchen genuinely doesn’t seem to have an answer to any of these questions. Maybe not even a good guess.

“And you didn’t find any of that in the data?”

“There’s not much there on you, to be honest.” Her body slumps back in the chair, as if her energy has been suddenly sucked out through her spine. But her attention stays firmly locked on him. “No
more than what Helmut Zemo found, and he only found a shadow of you. All those murder charges from the Attorney General came from some tech who said he worked with you.”

Zemo. He hasn’t thought of him, hasn’t heard his astute words echoing in his head, for months. In his mind, Bucky clearly sees his face, the deadness in his eyes, the rolling show of brilliant terribleness he orchestrated. But it doesn’t stab him through the guts. Not as hard as it used to, anyway. And now he also feels something akin to pity for everyone that day.

“So this is to satisfy your curiosity,” Bucky says.

“I’d be lying if I said that wasn’t part of it. But I’d like to think I know something about people, after 35 years of reporting on them. And I know nice-guys-turned-war-heroes don’t become cold-blooded murderers without something truly awful happening to them.” Gretchen momentarily lowers her gaze, and her mouth dips into a tight frown. “I suspect that you were treated very badly, and I hate the thought of a good man being thrown under the bus by the most reprehensible and, frankly, bizarre organization in modern history.”

Bucky smiles mirthlessly and touches the tip of his tongue to the sharp point of his canine. “And what makes you think I was such a nice guy? That I’m a good man?”

Gretchen shrugs, her left shoulder climbing higher than her right.

“Well, you could take it on faith that Captain America’s lifelong best friend was a decent person. Or you can look closer, at the words of people who knew you. There’s an extensive oral history collection at the Library of Congress about the 107th and the Howling Commandos. I’ve been through all of it. You were beloved. Deeply.” She presses her hand to the tabletop, hard enough to whiten her fingernails. “And I’ve been around soldiers enough to know that when an NCO is beloved, it’s because he’s a good man. And good men don’t ever really stop being good. Not if it’s their nature.”

Bucky shakes his head. What an odd way at looking at things. At goodness. Surely in war she’s seen good men fall apart. Do the unthinkable. Become their own worst nightmare. God knows he’s seen it.

“The public seems pretty sold on me being a monster,” he says.

Gretchen breathes a low laugh. “The public loves a good villain, no doubt about that. They love their Osama bin Ladins and Adolf Hitlers. But the real reason the media keeps talking about you, despite very little new information, is because people can’t fully accept you as the villain. It doesn’t ring true. It doesn’t make sense. You don’t make sense. And journalists, we don’t know what to make of you, either.”

Bucky doesn’t reject what she’s telling him, not one bit of it, but only because his brain seems to be actively resisting the percolation of her words. Their ways of perceiving the world and his play in the media are diametrically opposed, even more radically than he anticipated.

Rather than continue to spin his wheels, Bucky sights another target, one that’s much more tangible to him.

“What about the Attorney General?” he asks. “He’s hell bent on bringing me to trial.”

Gretchen practically seethes as she delivers her response, her expression hardening with a combative toughness he imagines she’s used countless times to wither her adversaries.

“His campaign to bring you in couldn’t have anything less to do with you. Do you think he just
loves justice so much that he can’t rest until he prosecutes you?” She snorts loudly. “No. Briggs loves his job and the power that goes with it, and his extracurricular activities have put him at odds with his job security.”

Being not at all politically minded, Bucky didn’t even consider that the Attorney General’s fervor could be motivated by anything except wanting to bring him to justice. He never imagined that all of this gut-wrenching drama, something that’s been eating away at all of them for almost two months, could simply be some hook to distract from a handful of noisy infidelities. His teeth grind together audibly as Gretchen continues.

“The real court you need to worry about is the court of public opinion. If we turn the public and they see you as someone who was deeply wronged, Briggs doesn’t look so good anymore. He’ll find another shiny object to chase after.” She looks at his left hand. “No pun intended.”

Bucky stares her down, taking in her sureness, her fiery determination, and the complete absence of opacity. He knows raw, because it’s too often his natural state. And this is raw. She is raw. She is real.

“I have conditions,” he states.

“As you should.”

“Stay out of my personal life.”

Gretchen tilts her head as a perplexed look settles on her face. “You say that as if this isn't the most personal thing imaginable.”

Bucky drives his metal finger hard into the surface of the table. “If it's not about me, and I mean me alone, you're out of bounds.”

“So you're a lone island, unattached and unaffected by anyone.”

“Obviously that's not the case.” He hates how weak his voice sounds.

“Obviously.”

Bucky’s eyes narrow. “What do you know?”

“I don't know anything. But I have two eyes and two ears and a mostly functioning brain between them.” Gretchen takes a deep breath, her body relaxing again, like a wave flowing back into the sea. “Listen, I’m not going to publish anything you don’t want me to.”

“That’s not a very journalistic thing to do, is it?”

“Actually, it is. I’m very protective of my sources, particularly those who are vulnerable.” She leans forward again, but her expression is warm now, her eyes wide and earnest. “I’m not going to screw you over. I have a feeling you’ve been screwed over enough for one or two lifetimes. But I’m also assuming that you plan to share information with me, both about what happened to you and about who you are as a person. If you don’t plan to do that, let’s not waste each other’s time.”

Bucky leans back in his chair again, rocking slowly, his mind occupied with the hard cascade of new information, the question of whether to take her offer, confusion about where to even start if he did, and concerns about the repercussions.

“I need a few days to think about this,” he tells her.
“Of course. I’ll be staying in the city. Let’s plan to touch bases again on Tuesday, if not before.”

“Okay.”

Bucky rises to his feet, drawing himself to his full height, towering over her. He’s intimidated countless men, hard men, strong and dreadful men. But this small woman just smiles up at him, as if he’s only a boy pretending to be grown.

“Bottom line,” she says, “I have a lot of clout. A lot. When I say something, people listen. If you let me tell your story, people will hear it. And they’ll hear it the right way. They’ll hear the truth.”

Bucky nods shallowly and heads toward the door. She calls after him.

“And these Accords, they’re going south fast. Lotta bad happening out there, and a lotta tied hands.”

He glances over his shoulder at her, just briefly, and then heads back to the guest quarters.

--

“Hey! How was it?” Steve asks when he enters the living room, twisting around in his narrow chair to get a good look at him. It’s something a kid would do, someone in a smaller body. He wonders if Steve forgets his largeness sometimes, like maybe part of his muscle memory still lives back in the ‘30s.

“Okay,” Bucky replies. “She’s all right. Real firecracker.”

“Are you gonna go forward with it?” Sam asks.

“Maybe. We’re both gonna stew for a few days.”

After a few more minutes of filling them in on Stilwell, Bucky excuses himself to their room. There, he sits on the edge of the bed and lets himself fall back with a hefty sigh. He squints as the sun hits him in the face, and he drapes his arm over his brow to block out the light. He’s beat, body and eyelids heavy from a sleepless night of excitement and worry. It would have been a good night for trazodone. He forgets most of the time that he still has a half-full script back in his room, which he supposes isn’t even really his room anymore.

What to do? What the hell to do? He asks and asks again, trying multiple points of entry, but his brain is an unresponsive pile of Pablum.

A blaring sound blasts through the stillness, and Bucky startles, torso righting like he’s spring-loaded. He whips his head around toward the direction of the noise, a ringing sound, which is coming from Steve’s dresser. He freezes, then ratchets back into motion once he realizes what it is. He flings open the drawer and grabs the phone, that small, cheap little nuisance that’s hotwired to the real world. He holds it as he panics, as it keeps ringing, as he makes a frenzied calculation about whether he can run to the living room in time and throw it in Steve’s general direction before it stops.

Nope. Nope. No way. Shitshitshitshit

Without another thought, he flips it open and clears his throat.

“Hello?”
There’s a long pause on the line. Then, finally, “Barnes?”

Bucky exhales loudly, profoundly relieved that it’s not Tony’s voice on the other end.

“Romanoff?” he ventures.

“Yes, yeah.” Her voice is bow-tight. “How are you?”

“Fine.”

“Is Steve there?”

“Yeah. Hold on.”

Bucky keeps the phone to his ear as he walks toward the living room. His eyes dart back and forth as he thinks of what he should say. He should say something. He should. He wants to. But what does he say to someone who’s only ever seen him at his worst, whose one-on-one interactions – all three of them – have consisted of him trying to murder her? They haven’t exchanged one civil word until now.

When he gets to the threshold of the living room, he stops. His mental filters clear out, and he says the truest things that come to mind. He says them quietly and in Russian, the language coming back to him like an old melody he’s known since birth:

“Thank you for your help. The translation. Helping Clint with his accent. You didn’t have to. I don’t know why you did it, after everything.”

“I wanted to help. I’m glad you’re okay.”

By now, everyone’s eyes are locked onto him, and there’s a shimmer of concern reflected in many of them. Maybe at the flip phone. Maybe at the Russian. He’s not sure. He approaches Steve and holds the phone out to him.

“Romanoff.”

“Nat?” Clint injects loudly.

Steve’s face lights up, brighter than Bucky’s ever seen outside of the privacy of their relationship, and he grabs the phone eagerly.

It’s tough to glean the nature of the conversation, based on the sparseness of words from Steve. They rely mostly on his expression, which travels from happy to concerned, then intrigued, and finally back to something resembling gladness. The call is brief, less than five minutes.

When Steve flips the phone closed, the silence erupts into questions from all directions, which he halts with the upturn of his palm.

“Okay, calm down. All she said is that something’s cooking. She didn’t want to get into any of the details over the phone, but she said she’s coming here next Friday.”


“Not bad,” Steve clarifies, the tranquil timbre of his voice radiating through the room. “She specifically said it’s not bad. She would have prepared us if it was.”
“But she’s coming here,” Clint confirms. “Like, here-here?”

“Yep. Right here.”

“Wait, that means she got your number from Tony,” Wanda says.

“I know,” Steve replies. “I was surprised. Apparently he gave it to her.”

Tony is many things, but naïve is not one of them. He must have given it to her knowing she would use it however she damn well pleased, whether that use was aligned with his interests or not. After she let them go in Leipzig, and after helping him with his deprogramming, surely things between them aren’t exactly copacetic. But Tony knows that. He must. And he gave it to her anyway.

“Is she doing okay?” Clint asks, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees.

Steve nods. “She seemed good, in the four minutes I had her on the line.”

Clint turns to Bucky, who’s still standing next to Steve’s chair. “Hey, I heard my name earlier. She say something about me?”

“Nope.”

His face drops. “Oh.”

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After the excitement of Romanoff’s call wears him down, Bucky wanders to the hallway off the west side of the living quarters, until he finds himself standing in front of Bard’s door. He presses his ear to it, hoping against rationality that maybe he came in on their usual day, even though they have no appointment scheduled. When he doesn’t hear anything, he knocks.

Nothing.

Bucky sinks down in the chair in the hall, in his little one-man waiting space, and he remembers what it felt like to first sit here. How uncomfortable he was. How bitter and lifeless. How cynical and scared. How he didn’t even stay the first two times he sat down and how he very nearly bolted on the third. Thank God he was so stubborn. Or apathetic. He doesn’t remember which one it was that kept him here.

As abruptly as he sat, Bucky rises and tries the doorknob, which is unlocked. It doesn’t feel intrusive when he enters, though he wonders if maybe it should. It’s not exactly Bard’s personal office, and when he’s not in it, it barely contains any sign of him, save for a few books on the shelf. His laptop is gone. The picture of him with his partner and daughters is gone, which means that he’s been bringing it with him every time he works here, which is just… Christ. How adorable.

Bucky walks over to his accustomed chair, his anxiety chair, where he can keep his eyes on the door from which nothing remotely threatening has ever emerged. He pulls out his phone and sits. He shouldn’t call Bard. He really shouldn’t. He should troubleshoot this on his own. Use his own mind. Use his skills. Or talk all this Stilwell shit through with someone else.

But Steve’s so goddamn biased, and his resistance doesn’t even seem to be clearly motivated. It’s vague, symptomatic of something bigger in their relationship. Maybe that’s the real conversation he should be having with Bard. How to shift out of this pattern with Steve. Because now that he’s getting better –
He flinches at a knock at the door, which he apparently didn’t close all the way.

“Yeah?”

The door pushes open, and Steve pops his head in. He glances around the room, then settles his gaze on Bucky.

“You okay?” he asks.

“Yeah.”

Steve approaches the chair Bard usually sits in and lays his hand on it. “Mind if I sit?”

Bucky shakes his head curtly. “You can’t sit there.”

Bucky cranes his head toward the couch against the back wall, the one with the phenomenal line of sight straight into the jungle. He walks over to it and takes a seat on one end, back against the armrest, and motions for Steve to join him on the opposite side.

“Exciting day,” Steve says, smiling softly. He stretches his legs, fitting them together with Bucky’s on the middle section of the couch.

“Exciting week,” Bucky corrects. “Ten months just sitting here and now things are cooking. Whatever that means. Stilwell said the Accords aren’t cutting the mustard. Wonder if that has anything to do with it.”

Steve inhales sharply. “Look, about this morning – ”

“Yeah, we need to talk.”

Steve’s eyes widen as his brow creases. “Okay.”

Bucky steels himself and tries to find the right combination of words that won’t make him sound like an ungrateful asshole. “I’ve needed a lot of support in the past six months. From you, from Bard, my other docs, everyone else. I needed all that to get better. I couldn’t have gotten better without it.” He lays his hand on Steve’s shin. “I couldn’t have gotten here without you. And I mean that.”

“Okay.”

“But now, I don’t know how it looks from your end, but I feel like I’ve turned a corner. Everything’s not all fine. I know that. I still have issues. But I can handle them. I really can. I feel like I’m on the glide path now.”

He pauses. The next part is the trickiest, the part he’s worst at. He’s never been good at this, at bending difficult things to the right or left. He’s always been a straight talker or a not-talker, with sporadic anxiety-induced interludes of hapless blithering. As it comes out, it’s a bit straighter than he wants.

“The thing is, you’re not on the glide path with me. And it makes sense. Almost the whole time I’ve been out of cryo, I’ve been messed up. And you’ve taken a certain role in that. You’ve been taking care of me and, like I said, I needed that.”

Bucky squeezes Steve’s leg, hoping that it’s reassuring, even when the look on Steve’s face suggests that it’s not.
“But I don’t need a caregiver anymore. I need space. Like with Stilwell. Maybe it’ll be fine. Maybe I get fucked over. But I need that to be my choice. And I don’t need you circling around me like a medevac just waiting for me to crash and burn.”

“You can’t just expect me to not have an opinion about what happens to you and the choices you make,” Steve says, folding his arms over his chest.

“Of course. I know that. But I feel like you’re always looming. Your…” Bucky fumbles the word and then makes a gesture with both hands, spreading his fingers wide and pulsing them a few times. “Your energy is always there. You’re always locked onto me. And not in an ‘I can’t get enough of you’ type way. It’s like an ‘Oh shit, gotta make sure you don’t lose it’ type way.”

“To be fair, you have a history of losing it,” Steve reminds him.

Bucky nods. “I do. That’s fair. But I’m pretty okay now. And I don’t want this dynamic between us where you’re just waiting for me to blow up or break down so you can scoop me back up. It’s not good for either of us. I’m not your patient. I’m your – ” He stops.

“My what?”

“I don’t know.”

Steve grins. “My boyfriend?”

Bucky feels heat crawl into his smirking face. “I dunno. I guess.”

Steve is silent for a few moments. His expression flits between happiness and earnestness.

“I get it,” he says. “You’re right. And you’re right that it’s stressful for me, too. It’s just hard, because I want you get better and stay better. But I guess you can’t do that if I’m smothering you.”

“Oh, you can smother me,” Bucky says, pressing his foot lightly against Steve’s crotch. “Just don’t mother me. Unless I really need it. Then you can mother me.”

“Sure. That’s not at all confusing.”

“You know what I mean.”

Steve grins again, this time with a touch of devil-may-care around the eyes. It looks great on him. Fantastic.

“You got it.” He grabs Bucky’s roaming foot and sets it on his thigh, then proceeds to dig his thumbs into the ball of it with a circular motion.

Bucky groans and lets his head fall back. “Oh, you missed your calling, Steve. That’s twice now.”

“If this thing with Nat all turns out to be nothing, maybe I’ll set up shop here.”

“Nuh-uh,” Bucky says, shaking his head. “I don’t want you rubbing anyone else.”

“You just you?”

“If you’re gonna set up any shop, it should be a studio.” There’s a whimsical glimmer in Bucky’s voice, and he gestures with his hands to demonstrate the arrangement of the setup. “You can have a drafting table, right by the window, something facing the north, so you get good light all day. And an easel. And you can get all the supplies, all the paints, the pencils, the brushes and canvases, all
the shit we could never afford before. Whatever you want. And you can have a little gallery on the side where you can sell your work.”

A bittersweet shadow falls on Steve’s face, and his words are distant. “I’d like that.”

“Hey,” Bucky says, shaking Steve’s leg for emphasis. “You can do it, y’know. If you want to.”

“And what are you gonna do while I make art all day?” Steve asks.

“I dunno.” Suddenly, this game’s not so fun anymore. Where he sees limitless possibilities for Steve, he sees virtually none for himself. Not the way things are now. There is one thing he does want, and it’s probably the most impossible thing of all impossible things. “I wanna go home.”

“Me, too.”

Bucky squirms as Steve drags his knuckle over the arch of his foot. “Maybe I should take Stilwell up on her offer.”

He can tell that Steve’s measuring his responses carefully from the way his mouth works – the little twists, the little nip at the inside of his lower lip. “What does your gut tell you?”

His gut. His gut has been a fair-weather friend to him over the years. It kept him out of a lot of rough spots back home. It kept his head intact on countless missions, both as a soldier and as The Soldier. But it’s also played havoc with him plenty since he got his memory back. Telling him he’s about to die when he’s not. Telling him he’s a worthless piece of shit when he’s not. But was that his gut, or was that just his mind impersonating his gut? Maybe he’s forgotten how to listen to it through all the interference. Maybe he should try to listen again and trust what he hears.

“It feels like I can trust her. It feels like it’s the right thing to do.”

“Well, there’s your answer then, right?”

Bucky smiles. At Steve. At his gut. At the juncture where tenuous hope seems to be changing something else. Something solid. Something actionable. Something real.

“Yeah. I guess so.”
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Bucky and Gretchen go on a field trip. Natasha arrives in Wakanda. Bucky has doubts.

Chapter Notes

Just to give you all a heads-up, chapters 23 and 24 will be posted together. Chapter 23 is the last chapter in the actual storyline, and 24 is a bonus that I think you might enjoy. Because I’m doubling up, my final update will take longer than usual.

SPOILERS: This chapter contains minor spoilers from Agents of SHIELD. See end notes if you want to know the nature of these spoilers. If you haven’t seen Agents of SHIELD yet, I really don’t think there’s anything here that will wreck the show for you or prevent you from understanding the content of this chapter.

Thank you so much for the kudos and feedback! I hope you enjoy this super long update.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Shit. I don’t think there’s an elevator.”

Bucky and Gretchen stare, grim-faced, at the sheer number of stairs before them. He doesn’t remember there being so many. But then, his body works like a miracle, so why would he give a second thought to how many stairs lead down to the hangar?

“Maybe we can go around the building. There’s a sidewalk that leads down to it. I think.” He actually doesn’t know, perpetual shut-in that he is.

“I can do stairs. Slowly,” Gretchen says, reaching down to grasp the railing on the right side of the stairwell.

Bucky mentally cards through solutions. “I can carry you.”

“Oh, no. No, you will not.”

“It’d be easy for me.”

“I’m sure it would. But I’d like to preserve what little dignity I have left, so I think I’ll pass. You’re just gonna have to be patient.”

He looks at the long flight, the narrowness of the stairwell, and then back at her. “At least take my arm or something.”

“That I’ll do.” Gretchen switches sides, grasping onto the railing with her good hand and wrapping her weak arm around Bucky’s left. He stoops down awkwardly so they can link at the elbows,
“Sturdy,” she remarks, squeezing his arm with hers. “When’d you get it?”

“The first was in ’44. This one’s new.”

“God, those fuckers were brilliant, much as I hate to admit it.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” Bucky says under his breath.

She really has no idea what she’s about to see. She was delighted at the prospect of seeing original documents, but he’s been extremely vague about the scope and depth of what they’ve collected. He wants to see how it hits her. How she holds up to the horror.

“You still got a little Brooklyn in you.” Gretchen looks up at him. “A touch in the vowels. Some missing R’s.”

“Probably picking it back up from you. You from Long Island?”

“Born and raised.”

Bucky tries to make small talk as she hobbles down each step, each of which resembles a barely controlled fall more than anything. He’s wildly out of practice at chitchat, but Stilwell’s a gabber, so she does most of the heavy lifting. Before he knows it, she’s commandeered the conversation and set her own treacherous course.

“A bit unusual for a 26-year-old man in the mid-1940s to not be married, or even engaged, isn’t it? Especially someone like you,” Gretchen says.

“What do you mean?”

“Sounds like you were quite a catch.”

Bucky snorts. “I don’t know about that. But no, it’s not unheard of.

“But it’s not typical.”

“I guess not.”

He knows not. Aside from Steve, he can only think of a small handful of guys his age who weren’t engaged or married, or in a serious long-term relationship that was heading in that direction.

“Someone breaks up with you. What’s the reason?” she asks.

Bucky’s brows draw together. “What?”

“Hypothetically, you’re in a relationship and your significant other breaks up with you.” Gretchen lets out a huff of breath, as if the particular stair she’s on is twice as high as the others. “Why do they break up with you?”

He thinks back to the girls, the many girls, and then to the ones with which he had something that might pass for a relationship. Then to the ones who broke it off with him. The fights. The pleas. The serious talks. The tears.

“Too distant,” he says.
“Huh.” There’s a note of surprise in her voice. “Physically or emotionally?”

“The latter. And I thought we had an agreement.”

“These are valid questions about you as a person and how other people see you. That’s what we’re aiming for, isn’t it?”

Bucky lets her question float off, deeming it rhetorical, only partially sold on the supposed validity of it all. He doesn’t like the reflection of himself in his answers, because all sees are his cowardice and the cold functionality of his dithering. He can see it now in stunning Technicolor, how each new conquest was a double-edged blade that he sliced into himself and into Steve. Did he even know he was doing it? Was his fear so cunning that it passed itself off as righteousness?

When they finally reach the bottom of the stairs, Gretchen releases Bucky’s arm and starts shuffling toward the hangar. Her right leg is stiff, and the toes of her right foot make a small half-circle in the ground with every step. She walks with her right arm tucked in tight, bent at the elbow, her hand curled into a fist around her thumb. Bucky stays close to her side as they approach, watching for bumps in the path that her swirling foot could hit.

They stop outside the door. Bucky rubs his hands together, but it’s all wrong. Seventy-odd years with this fucking thing, and still he finds new ways in which it’s inferior to the one his ma gave him. The one she made out of food while he was growing inside of her. He misses her. Misses her hard. He doesn’t know why it’s been so bad lately.

Bucky presses his flesh hand to the biometric pad, and the magnetic lock releases. He holds out his arm and offers Gretchen the lead. She shuffles in as the lights bang on and stops cold when she catches sight of The Chair. Her purse starts to slide down her shoulder, but she catches it and resumes her course. Bucky holds fast, back against the wall, and watches her. She approaches it in the same fashion one might approach a beached whale, measured and cautious, pulled along by morbid curiosity. She reaches out to it, running her fingers along the worn leather of the armrest.

“What is this?” Her voice is quiet, half-swallowed, barely audible from where he’s standing.

He tells her. It’s the first time he’s ever explained it. Bard knew it from reading his files, and he did him the favor of telling everyone else. He explains it like he’d explain the process of changing a tire, because when he gets too close to it, it still coats the back of his throat and tugs up on his stomach. Even after all those trials. Even after all those trips with the boxes.

“Jesus Christ,” Gretchen murmurs.

“That’s nothin’ compared to everything over there.” Bucky jerks his chin toward the boxes that lay beyond The Chair. “You sure you’re gonna be able to handle all this?”

She turns around. Her soft, weak body is a solid wall of granite. Her half-drooping face is tempered steel. “Just because I’m disgusted by it doesn’t mean I can’t handle it. Disgust is the appropriate response to this. You know that, right?”

“I do now.”

He almost can’t believe that he didn’t know that before. That it took Steve sitting himself in that chair to even make a dent in his citadel of self-protective denial.

“Let’s bookmark that for later,” Gretchen says briskly. “Now c’mere and show me all this other stuff.”
Bucky leads her to the boxes, which he painstakingly re-arranged in preparation for her arrival. Not that she can probably read them. Shit.

“What foreign languages do you know?” he asks.

“Spanish and Modern Standard Arabic."

“I can get you translated copies of all this in digital format. There are also a few hard drives with data from more recent missions, including everything from the week SHIELD fell.”

Gretchen nods slowly. “Sure. I still wanna look through the files by hand, even if I can’t read them. And I’m gonna ask you to pick out some documents from a few of these boxes so I can get them dated and authenticated.” She quickly adds, “Because you know someone’s gonna ask for proof.”

She lets her purse slide down her right arm, deliberately this time, and shoves her other hand into it. The bag crinkles and ticks as she rummages through, and she lets out a small yelp of joy when she finds what she’s looking for.

She pulls out a pack of Marlboro Reds and puts one between her lips, then shakes out the lighter from the half-empty pack.

“Want one?” she mutters around her cigarette, holding the pack out to Bucky.

He takes one without thinking, not realizing until this moment how desperately he wants a smoke after seven decades. She blazes up her BIC and holds it out, and he stoops to catch the flame. He sucks in a deep drag, his head going dizzy and light.

Gretchen surveys the rows of evidence before her. “Is there anything here you don’t want me to see?”

Good question, one he thinks carefully about. He observes an impulse to say yes, to gather up everything from 1959 and shove it somewhere she could never find it. Throw it in the Quinjet. Bury it in the jungle. Lift her BIC and set the whole fucking pile of awfulness ablaze. But it’s just an impulse, and he’s pretty sure it’s the wrong one.

“No,” he decides. “But there’s stuff in there that’s really…” A slew of adjectives rush up to meet him. “Humiliating. I trust you’ll be sensitive to that in your reporting.”

“Of course.” She blows out a fast plume of smoke. “People don’t need to know every detail. What they really need to know is that this wasn’t your choice and that you’re not morally or legally culpable for those deaths. Assuming the documentation supports that.”

“It will. They were very detailed. They documented every mission, including wiping and activation protocols. But I didn’t kill Renata Escobedo, so you won’t find anything about that here.”

He doesn’t know of a single shred of proof linking him to her murder, and he wonders how he even got pegged with it in the first place. But it doesn’t take much imagination to piece together a scenario where one of Hydra’s chief architects pins an unplanned murder on the resident assassin.

“It was Pierce,” Bucky states.

“How do you know?”

“I watched him do it.”
“Ah,” she says simply. “All right. Not our fish to fry, then. Not now, anyway.”

Gretchen’s nodding again, her eyes narrowed as if they’re locked onto something far in the distance. Her cigarette burns, ignored, between her fingers.

“So, I’m thinking there’ll be two tracks here,” she says. “The first will be specifically addressing the charges you’re facing, including all of this.” She gestures to the boxes and The Chair. “The second track will be who you are as a person more holistically. The first track is what we’ll run in the Times. For the more personal track, I was thinking of doing a longer piece for the New Yorker or New York Magazine.”

“Whatever you think is best.” Bucky flicks his smoke, and ashes float to the hangar floor. He glances to the side, to Gretchen’s curled right hand, and she catches him looking.

“Stroke,” she tells him. “This work is literally killing me.”

Bucky holds up his cigarette. “These might not help.”

“No, they do not.”

Gretchen falls quiet again. She takes a slow, long drag on her cigarette, the cherry creeping up to the filter. She does an unsteady turn, looking around the hangar, before dropping the butt to the cement floor and crushing it with the toe of her sneaker. When she speaks again, her voice is low and serious.

“This is the first thing I think about when I wake up in the morning and the last thing I think about before I fall asleep. If I sleep. For three years.”

Jesus. Three fucking years. Bucky finishes his smoke and puts it out with the sole of his boot. He makes a mental note to pick up the butts later. The taste in his mouth is foul, but he can already see himself bumming another one off of her later.

Gretchen digs through her purse again and pulls out a small box of mints. She pops one in her mouth and offers one to Bucky, which he gladly takes.

“My daughter said that if I worked during her wedding, she wasn’t going to speak to me anymore.” She smiles, and the mint clicks around in her mouth. “Damned if I still didn’t camp out in a bathroom stall for twenty minutes so I could read some Roxxon subsidiary’s internal memos detailing their offshore tax evasion strategy. She never found out. Thought I had indigestion or something.”

“That’s sad,” Bucky replies, and he means it. He’s worked so hard for Hydra not to be his life. And despite all of his work and all of his will, it still lingers, its tentacle still encircling his neck. It’s looser now. He can breathe again. But it’s always there. Every time he looks in the mirror. Every time he looks down at his hands. Every time he closes his eyes, it’s there, like a fleeting shadow in his periphery.

“It’s important,” Gretchen states bluntly. “This is important. What happened to you is important.”

She looks up at him, and she’s soft again. Her zeal is oddly comforting. It’s his first external confirmation of everything he’s been told by Bard and by Steve, whose affinity for him makes them less reliable. Here’s an outsider telling him that, yes, this was terrible. This was cruel. This was unfair. He didn’t deserve this. She’s a mirror of the world beyond his little social sanctuary, and he feels the first solid indicator, a calm in his chest, telling him that he’s in good hands.
Gretchen laughs, and the sound bounces up the walls and off the high ceiling. “Plus, I’d be a little disappointed if I didn’t work myself to death. They always say you’ll never be on your deathbed wishing you’d worked harder, but whoever said that never met me.” She grins and claps him on the back. “Don’t worry, I’ll save the dying for after we’ve got you good and exonerated.”

“Do you think that could actually happen?”

She flashes him a roguish smile. “I’m counting on it.”

Friday catapults toward them, throwing waves of nervous excitement ahead of it. The team scrambles, mostly mentally, but there’s some hasty practical preparation as well. Bucky chokes down the last flecks of his resistance and cleans out his room, moving everything to Steve’s – now theirs – so that Natasha can have a place to stay. If she stays at all. A shameful wisp of doubt curls itself around Bucky’s mind. What if something goes wrong with Steve? Where will he sleep? Where will he put his things? He lets it curl and curl until it dissipates.

Bucky meets with Bard Friday morning, seeking solace as the guest quarters erupts with anxious expectancy, and he brings him up to speed on Stilwell. Bucky’s assurance of his path calcifies even further when Bard gushes about her work on the burn pits and offers his enthusiastic support for what they’re doing. By the time their session is over, Bucky feels like he’s gathered enough energy and serenity in his reserves to tolerate just about anything that the day has to throw at him.

At 2:45, the team assembles at the landing pad adjacent to the hangar. T’Challa joins them unexpectedly when some meeting or another ends early. Clint, Steve, and Sam are pulsing with energy, beaming and talking animatedly, and it dawns on Bucky that he really doesn’t know the first thing about Avenger dynamics, certainly not once other members start getting thrown into the mix. He stands next to Wanda, feeding off her stillness. Scott stands on her other side, looking like Bucky feels – like the kid whose invitation to the birthday party was clearly perfunctory.

In the near distance, the incoming jet screams its presence. It grows louder as Bucky hears the motors rotate for vertical descent. They all search the sky, hands shielding their faces, confusion clouding their anticipation when they can’t find the source of the sound. Steve spots it first, pointing at a glimmer, a waving distortion of blue and white, like a descending heat wave. Steve looks over at Bucky, smiling and jabbing his finger upward. Steve then claps his hands over his ears, and very suddenly, the sound is too loud for Bucky as well. The others follow suit when they reach their tolerance, moving back as the jet wash whips their hair and clothes.

As soon as it lands, the illusion breaks like a switch, revealing the matte black of the jet. The cloak doesn’t appear to be the only upgrade. The design is sleeker, probably for a fuller stealth effect. The engines whine low as they spool down, and only when they stop does the back ramp lower.

Clint lets out an “Oh God” while the rest of them gawk in confusion as two children, a boy and a girl, run down the ramp and barrel toward him. Clint kneels down and pulls them in, his eyes closing tight as he hugs them. The girl starts crying quietly and, like a contagion, the boy does, too. The yelping of a toddler pulls all attention to it and to the woman holding him. Clint’s wife and third child, presumably. They rush to him and pile in, arms grabbing, hands grasping.

Scott, expression hopeful, locks his gaze on the ramp, and the light in his eyes dims when Natasha is the next to disembark. She body saunters, kicking her mane of red hair behind her, but her face is open and soft. Her lips press into a smile when she walks past the Barton pile, and that smile brightens when she lays eyes on Steve. He glides forward to meet her and they hug hard, her feet leaving the ground as he lifts her. Bucky relaxes his mouth, intercepting the frown he feels
forming, but he doesn’t check his glaring eyes until he feels Wanda’s elbow jab into his side. He looks down, and she shakes her head slightly.

Steve lowers Natasha back down, and she nods warmly at Scott, Wanda, T’Challa, and Bucky, who reminds himself that he’s an adult and supplies a scorn-free nod in return. Natasha and Sam embrace with the same intensity as she and Steve did, and Bucky feels like a grade-A premium asshole.

Next in the parade of unknowns is a man Bucky doesn’t recognize holding a thing he definitely does recognize: Steve’s shield. He looks over at Steve, whose smile has dropped into a slacking gape. Bucky’s not sure which one appears to surprise him more – the man or the shield. For his part, the man is clearly trying to tamp down something that, if unchecked, would probably resemble glee. He carries the shield the way Steve would, hooked to his left arm, centered on his chest.

“Agent Coulson?” Steve exclaims. He jerks his head around to look at Clint, who’s standing now, holding his wife with one arm and his baby with the other. The older two kids cling to his waist as if they plan to take up permanent residence there. He shrugs mildly, looking at Coulson and back at Steve, clearly relegating this latest reveal to the least notable of the day.

Coulson smiles, showing his teeth, then glances over to Bucky. He seems to lose a bit of color, a bit of composure, when their eyes lock. He quickly reclaims his losses and focuses back on Steve.

“You’re– you– are alive,” Steve sputters. It comes out more like a question than a statement.

“Guess I’m the newest member of the living dead men’s club.” Coulson’s gaze, now rock-steady, drifts between Bucky and Steve.

“But how –”

“It’s a long story. Maybe for some other time. Thought you might want this back,” Coulson says, unhooking his arm and holding out the shield to Steve.

All sets of eyes, even the red and bleary Barton eyes, lock on Steve and Coulson as the shield changes hands. A series of emotions compete for real estate on Steve’s face. Longing. Happiness. Disappointment. Resolve. And when Steve looks up, it’s directly at Bucky, who raises his eyebrows and smiles thinly.

There’s real happiness mixed in with Bucky’s weary resignation. Steve is Captain America. He just is. He’s never going to be some freelance artist working out of a studio in Williamsburg or Bushwick or whatever obscenely gentrified neighborhood people are making art in these days. He’s never going to stop. Because this is Steve’s way of making the world right, and making himself right with it. And just as Bucky craves for himself, he has to afford Steve the same freedom to choose his own path.

“It’s not from me, obviously. I just really wanted to hold it on the way over,” Coulson admits.

Steve turns to Natasha. “Tony?”

Natasha’s response is carefully imprecise, but there’s a thin quirk in the left corner of her mouth, which quietly suggests Tony’s knowledge of the transaction.

Steve frowns with the sorrowful dip of his head. Natasha lays her hand on his upper arm, a comforting gesture Bucky chides himself for not thinking of first.
“Coulson has something he wants to talk about with all of us,” Natasha says, silently acknowledging everyone on the landing pad.

“We can go to the conference room,” T’Challa offers.

T’Challa leads the group inside, and Bucky can hear a series of introductions fade into the distance. He lags behind, and Steve with him, to check on Scott, who’s still staring at the ramp of the jet, his face fallen and forlorn.

“Guess she’s not in there, huh?” Scott says

“Sorry.” Bucky doesn’t know what else to say.

“Stupid.” Scott shakes his head. “Her mom would never let her come here.”

“It’s not stupid,” Bucky says.

“You miss her,” Steve adds.

Scott looks at them and smiles sadly. “Guess we should go inside, huh?”

“They’re not gonna start without Steve,” Bucky points out. “No rush.”

“Yeah. Maybe just...” He sighs. “One more minute.”

Bucky and Steve look down, away, at each other, at whatever is not Scott, and his eyes finally settle on the shield. He remembers the first time he held it, their first week back in London after escaping the Kreischberg facility. He’d spent four entire days being interrogated and palpated and photographed and poked by the SSR docs. Christ knows how many questions they asked, how much blood and piss they managed to drain from him. He lost count of the pints. He rented a hotel room on the last day, because he sure as shit wasn’t gonna spend his first free night on some cot in some de facto bunker. Steve had scarcely left his side since Austria, except to debrief and later consult with Howard, and he didn’t pass up the chance to join him. Bucky lay on the bed in his ratty green shirt, unable to part with it even to wash it, and Steve lay next to him in his Army service uniform, minus the jacket, which he unceremoniously tossed over a chair. They lay there for long, heavy stretches of silence, and Bucky eventually asked Steve if he could see it. The shield. The new one Howard gave him. The one of unpainted vibranium. The one that seemed to sing when Steve touched it. Steve laid it in his hands, and Bucky held it up over his body, eclipsing the overhead light with it, before bringing it down to rest on his chest. The weight settled him, calmed his heart, which was still flying into wild tachycardic spins whenever a flash of memory stormed him. And Steve lay on his side, looking at him, his face shadowed with poorly masked pain –

“Okay,” Scott says, tearing Bucky out of his reminiscence. “Let’s go see what this guy wants.”

They make their way back to the complex and head to the executive wing. They take their time so Steve can brief both of them on Coulson, though the description is filled with gaps and uncertainties. When they reach the conference room, everyone’s standing around waiting for them. There’s no razzing, no jabs. Those who know Scott well know what he’s experiencing, and those who don’t have the respect to keep their mouths shut. Clint slips in quietly once they’ve all taken their seats and stands against the back wall, looking not at all pleased to be conducting business right now and set to bolt as soon as the opportunity presents itself.

Coulson sits at the head of the table as he briefs them. He exudes coolness and competence.
“I’m not sure how much you’ve heard,” he begins, “but the Accords have been something of a mixed bag from a strategic perspective. SHIELD has a contingent of Inhumans we’ve been using to run approved operations. So far, aside from the backlash from the Watchdogs, things have been running pretty smoothly stateside.”

As Bucky listens, it’s clear that the seeds of his willful ignorance of the outside world have firmly taken root. Everyone else around the table seems to be tracking what Coulson’s saying, or at least putting on a damn good show of it. But Bucky draws mental blanks around virtually every key noun. The Inhumans. The Watchdogs. This new-and-purportedly-uncorrupt SHIELD.

“But there’ve been emerging problems internationally where SHIELD can’t intervene and still be in compliance with the Accords. And the UN’s Accord oversight council has been bogged down with jurisdiction and personnel issues. Some countries, like America, China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia, only want their own enhanced citizens to intervene, even if those people aren’t stable or qualified. So, in short, things have gotten pretty messy, and in the meantime, there are real threats going unchecked.”

Coulson goes on to talk briefly about a handful of these unchecked threats. AIM. Roxxon. Latveria. The old usual suspects that have been causing trouble since Bucky was aiding them in doing so. Coulson also alludes to some lingering Hydra cells that are in the process of realigning and rebranding.

“In short,” Coulson concludes, “we need some talent to very discretely address some of these threats before they become completely unmanageable.”

Two hard lines form between Steve’s eyebrows. “Who’s ‘we’?”

Coulson directs his full attention to Steve. “Officially, nobody. But unofficially, there are a small group of concerned individuals who want you to do what needs to be done. We want you to lead a team, just like before. Except much, much quieter. You’d have select logistical support from SHIELD. Tech. Intel. Safe houses. Again, all very quiet. All very off-book. Director Mace doesn’t know about it and can’t know about it.”

“Small group of concerned individuals, huh? Like a world security council?” Bucky says. He doesn’t intend to. It flies from his mouth of its own volition and hurls itself at Coulson like a javelin.

“I should clarify,” Coulson says, his voice wavering by the barest of measures. “Those individuals would include me, Fury, Hill, and, presumably, yourselves.”

Bucky’s confusion reaches new, previously untapped depths when Nick Fury’s name is evoked in the third person present tense, because that was a solidly confirmed kill if there ever was one.

“What about Tony and the others?” Wanda asks.

“Tony won’t be bothering us,” Natasha says. “Neither will the others. They’re worried about this, too. They’re just not in a position to do anything about it.”

“So, basically, you want the Avengers,” Clint states. “You want us to do what we were doing before. Except quieter.”

Coulson nods. “Yeah. Basically.”

“There’s a hell of a risk involved,” Steve says. “We’re all still fugitives. And if we get caught – ”
“We’d be forced to deny any SHIELD involvement.”

“And there’s risk for you, personally,” Steve adds.

Coulson shrugs, his smile nonchalant. “What’s new?”

There are more questions, a seemingly endless succession of questions. Then disagreements about risk tolerance. Then reiterations of the pointlessness of their continued inaction. Nothing gets resolved, but a crackling energy has supplanted the doldrums of the past year. A hum of excitement and possibility. Coulson agrees to give them all a week to decide.

At the end of the meeting, people break off into clumps to chat. Coulson approaches Bucky and Steve, and Natasha drifts in with him, sliding in between Steve and Coulson.

“I’ve been wanting to meet you,” Coulson says to Bucky. There’s a small tick at the corner of his mouth. “I’m a little nervous.”

“What?”

“You’re Bucky Barnes,” Coulson states, as if that’s an explanation for anything.

Bucky frowns. “I know.”

“Phil is what you could call a Howling Command-dork,” Natasha interjects, smirking at the confirmatory glimmer in Coulson’s eyes. “He probably brought his cards.”

“Oh!” Coulson feels around his pockets. “I can’t believe I almost forgot.” He procures a stack of trading cards from inside his jacket and begins shuffling through them.

“I thought those were ruined,” Steve says.

“I found another set on eBay. These are in even better condition. Let’s see… Ah!” Coulson holds up a card level with Bucky’s head. “Wow. Will you look at that.”

“Same grumpy face,” Steve says, smiling.

Natasha touches her finger to her chin, mock-appraising the similarity like an art critic, and nods thoughtfully.

Bucky snatches the card from Coulson’s hand and glares at it. On the front is a picture of him in his Commandos uniform, looking very serious indeed. On the back is his biographical information, most of which is correct.

“I was grumpy because we had to shoot this crap right after coming back from five days in the field,” Bucky states, thrusting the card toward Coulson. “That’s five days with no bathing, freezing our balls off, and eating canned slaughterhouse castoffs. You’d be grumpy, too.”

Coulson doesn’t take the card from him. Instead, he goes fishing in his pockets again and pulls out a Sharpie.

“Would you?” He holds out the pen and glances at the card Bucky’s still holding.

Bucky’s expression sours further. “You’re not serious.”

“He’s dead serious,” Steve tells him. He sifts through the cards until he finds one in particular, which he holds up for Coulson. “Was it this one you wanted me to sign?”
“Oh, yeah,” Coulson confirms. “That’d be great. I mean, sign as many as you want. If you, y’know.” He tries to shrug off his obvious excitement. “If you want.”

Steve bends down and signs several cards on the conference table, looking both happy and a tinge self-conscious. Bucky takes the pen when Steve offers it, but only reluctantly, and with a loud sigh. Bucky scrawls his name on his card, his hand barely remembering how to make the strokes. When he gives it back to Coulson, the look that settles on his face could only be described as elation.

“Can I shake your hand?” Coulson asks.

Bucky grudgingly extends his hand, which is already sweatier than he’d like. It turns out that Coulson’s is even worse, and Bucky upper lip curls at the moistness.

“Sorry,” Coulson apologizes, wiping his hand on his pants. “Like I said, I’m nervous.”


Bucky gets a respite from socializing as Natasha, Steve and Coulson talk SHIELD things past and present, and Bucky observes with crushing envy the glass-smooth dynamic between Natasha and Steve. The easy give and take, the subtle expressions, the inside jokes. Even Steve’s exchange with Coulson, who has apparently been dead to him for several years, seems effortless and enjoyable. Steve tries to include Bucky, tries to share a look or a laugh, but they’re like two parallel lines with no hope of intersecting.

Bucky takes a deep, frustrated breath and looks around the room. With the exception of Clint, who split the moment the meeting was over, everyone is talking and smiling. They’re doing so with grace and skill that’s probably not at all deliberate. It’s natural for them. It’s normal.

He’s been so insulted here, so sheltered, so comfortably situated in the constellation the six of them have formed over the past year. But all of that is ending now. No matter what they decide about Coulson’s proposal, things will never go back to the way they were. Clint has his family. Natasha is here now. And now more than ever, it’s clear that everyone else is one thing and Bucky is another. A foreign object in this organic system.

He catches sight of Scott, who’s putting on a gripping production of feeling just fine when he’s clearly not. Bucky purses his lips and glances over at Coulson. Might as well play on some of this unearned but sizeable Bucky Barnes capital he seems to have with this guy. He waits until Steve and Natasha are in the middle of yet another magnificent spell of synchronicity and leans in toward Coulson.

“You going back to the States tonight?” he asks.

Coulson nods. “Why?”

“Ask Scott if he wants a ride, will ya? He’s got a kid he hasn’t seen in a year.”

“Absolutely. I’ll go talk to him.”

Bucky watches Coulson approach Scott with great purpose, sent on a holy mission from the Archbishop of Cantankerousness himself. He reads Coulson’s lips as he leads in with some small talk before dropping the question. Bucky can see that moment clearly, when Scott’s face contorts through shock and gratitude and wet-eyed happiness. Coulson gestures over to Bucky, and Scott mouths a touchingly sincere Thank you.

In that instant, Bucky finds himself hoping to God that he comes back, and there’s a sharp and
entirely unexpected pang of fear at the possibility that he might not. God damn it, he’s attached to these people. Too attached. It’s an emotional liability – a wonderful, terrifying one – that he never, ever though he’d be saddled with again.

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Later that night, Bucky’s settled into Steve’s grandpa chair, freshly clean but still soggy with fatigue. Sam’s birthday gift to him, Man’s Search for Meaning, is held open with his left hand. And as he tries to read, as his eyes skim over the same two pages repeatedly, his right fingers travel absently over his chin, his cheek, through his hair. His restlessness makes an odd bedfellow with his utter exhaustion.

“Your ma!” Steve suddenly calls out in a muffled voice, completely apropos of nothing. He comes out from the bathroom, towel around his waist, toothbrush hanging out of his mouth. His words are garbled by the obstruction and the thickness of the toothpaste. But Bucky can still make out the words: “That’s who she reminds me of. Stilwell.”

Bucky tilts his head as he considers the comparison.

“When your dad wasn’t around,” Steve adds, then dips back into the bathroom to spit and rinse. Yep, that would be it. Stilwell is the louder, rougher cousin of Winnie Barnes, but only when she wasn’t treading lava or eggshells around her angry, fucked up, traumatized drunk of a husband. Bucky wonders what his mother would have become, who she could have become, if she’d been born fifty years later. God knows she deserved so much better than what life gave her.

Steve comes back again, clicking off the bathroom lights behind him. He moves in a cloud of soapy fragrance, unclothed from the waist up, with only a thin pair of sleep pants skimming over his lower body.

“You made it,” Steve says, smiling over at him. “You survived today.”

“No thanks to Coulson’s detachable hand. Why didn’t you warn me?”

“He had two regular hands when we worked with him.” Steve pauses. “At least I think he did. The look on your face, though.” He chuckles fondly. “I wish I had a camera.”

“You know your phone is also a camera, right?” Bucky hides an affectionate grin behind his book. Steve half-heartedly rolls his eyes. “Yeah, I know.”

“I don’t know if he thought it would impress me, or if he was looking for left appendage amputation solidarity, or what.” Coulson had caught on immediately that the move was a total bomb, a nervous impulse or whatever the hell it was. “You sure you wanna work for him?”

“He’s a good officer, and a good man. I trust him.”

“Well, he talks like he knows what he’s talking about, I guess.” Bucky lays his book facedown on his lap. “It was just bizarre, All of it.”

Steve walks over to the dresser, adjacent to where Bucky’s sitting, and starts rummaging through the top drawer. His pants leave nothing to the imagination, and for the second time that day, Bucky is sucked into a groundswell of nostalgia. To the very first time he saw Steve as something new and frightening, something different from a friend or a brother. An otherwise regular day at Coney Island Beach, the first summer after the men’s topless ban was finally lifted. The sun kissed their
pale, bare chests as they waded in the blue-brown waters of the Atlantic. Steve looked healthy and splendid that day, smiling, shielding his eyes from the light with his hand. His too-big bathing suit clung to his small ass, and it clung in the front, too. Bucky remembers his gaze gravitating to the outline of Steve’s dick beneath the fabric, and he can still feel the heat that climbed up his neck and into his cheeks, the way his breath caught in his throat. He walked into deeper waters, hiding himself, fingertips dancing distractedly on the shimmering surface as he stared out to sea and wondered what the hell was wrong with him...

Bucky reaches out to Steve and grabs the band of his pants, pulling it out a little and peeking underneath.

“Laundry day?”

Steve smirks down at him. “You know it’s not.”

Bucky closes his book and lays it on the ottoman, and he shifts his weight to the edge of the chair.

Steve turns away from the dresser and regards Bucky for several moments. “You don’t have to be jealous of Nat. Or anyone else. You know that, right?”

Oh, but he most certainly does have to be jealous of Natasha. He’s jealous, alarmingly jealous, because despite her harrowing past, Natasha is normal. Natasha is fun and companionable. Natasha is well. Natasha is attuned to Steve and his nuances in a way that Bucky is not. They have history. Not ancient, irreclaimable history like he and Steve have, but important, recent history. And because of that history, Steve seems to be transparent to her. She seems to know just what to do and what to say, while Bucky idles and slips as he tries to remember how to even be a person.

“I mean it.” Steve trails his fingers over Bucky’s cheek.

Bucky slides off the edge of the chair and drops to his knees at Steve’s feet. When he drops down, he has every intention of pressing his face into Steve’s crotch, to distract both of them from the gravity of Coulson’s proposal and everything inside him that’s screaming in the light of Natasha’s arrival. Because nobody else gets to suck Steve’s dick. Not fucking Romanoff, not Phil Coulson, not Sam or any of the others who are better at virtually every aspect of living than Bucky is.

But then Bucky tilts his head up, and his mind spools and sputters and is pulled into silence when he looks into Steve’s eyes. Everything falls away, like the way the ocean sucks in a breath, pulls back into itself, before the devastating crash of a tidal wave. Bucky’s chin grazes the waistband of Steve’s pants, and he reaches up his torso with his real hand. He reaches for Steve, for everything that keeps him tethered to sanity. He reaches for all the things he doesn’t have but wants so, so badly. For all the pieces that he’s missing now that he used to take for granted.

Steve takes Bucky’s searching hand and holds it to his chest, over his heart. “This is for you,” he says quietly. “Only you.”

Bucky closes his eyes against a surge of emotion, a confusing amalgamation of joy, fear, reverence, agony, and that familiar ache of love. He turns his head and presses his temple against Steve’s hip, wrapping his left arm around his waist. Steve’s free hand comes to rest on his shoulder.

After a few quiet minutes, that hand leaves him and clasps onto his metal forearm, urging him to his feet. When Bucky stands, Steve kisses him and pulls off his shirt and tugs him close, edging toward the bed. Steve lies on his back, and Bucky hooks his fingers into the band of those pants, those unreasonably thin pants he’s never seen before, pulling them down slowly, filling inside at the sight of Steve’s naked body. It’s a fullness of adoration and awe and desire that seems to
displace the hurt and the doubt. He pushes down and kicks off his own pants and underwear, and he’s kneeling again, bare and open, watching Steve cast off his control, pupils dilated, lips licked wet.

Bucky crawls forward into Steve’s arms, seizing his mouth. And Steve meets him, like he always does, thrumming and alive and hungry. Steve reaches blindly to the side, so adrift in his want that he doesn’t notice how off the mark he is. Bucky pulls away from their kiss and leans and reaches far, to Steve’s nightstand, where he grabs the good lube and the condoms.

Steve pulls him back, rough and needy, and when he breaks the kiss, it’s to snatch the condoms from Bucky’s hand.

“Do we really need these?” Steve asks, and with it, a series of unspoken questions about whether Bucky has the clap or herpes or hepatitis or God knows what else, which he’s pretty sure he doesn’t. He can’t even remember the last time he fucked anyone without a rubber.

Bucky shakes his head, and Steve tosses the condoms off the edge of the bed. Something in Bucky cracks like a chem light, and he’s blazing, and he can’t kiss Steve fiercely enough, can’t plunge his tongue deeply enough, can’t grind his cock against Steve’s hard enough. And when Steve pushes him away and rolls onto his stomach, Bucky’s eyelids flutter, and he swears under his breath.

The magnificent expanse of Steve’s body lies before him, the innate beauty of him intensified by the rapturous turbulence that quakes inside of Bucky. He gives himself a couple quick strokes and wonders if Steve has any idea how desperately he needs him. How important he is. How loved he is. Bucky’s flooded by that familiar need to show him, to use every part of himself to tell him, because his words are never good enough. They’re never timely enough. They’re never, ever enough.

Bucky presses the inside of Steve’s thighs to part them, and he pulls back and up on his hips to get him to lift them a bit. He then lies down between his legs and puts one hand on each of Steve’s ass cheeks, rubbing them slowly and then spreading them. He doesn’t really know what the hell he’s doing, but he knows he wants to do it more than he wants to wake up tomorrow morning.

Steve looks over his shoulder. “What are you – ”

His question explodes into a harsh gasp when Bucky darts out his tongue and licks him. Just a flick. Just enough to test his reaction. He does it again, and when Steve gasps once more and clenches the comforter in his fists like it’s the only thing keeping him earthbound, Bucky goes to it in earnest. He falls back on decades-old techniques, which seem to work just fine on new geography. He gets drunk on the sound of Steve’s moaning and whimpering, the feel of him squirming and pushing back against his tongue, the sight of him clutching the bedspread, unrestrained and frantic. It makes Bucky so hard it hurts.

“S-stop,” Steve tells him in between panting breaths.

Bucky lifts his head. “What’s wrong?”

“No, nothing. I just – ” He shifts his shoulders so he can look back and get a clear view of Bucky. His cheeks flush deeper. “I wanna come with you inside me.”

“Jesus, Steve.” Bucky’s cock throbs against the mattress. He pushes himself up and crawls over the glorious stretch of Steve’s back to kiss him, not even thinking that he might not want to, given where his mouth’s just been. But Steve doesn’t hesitate, doesn’t hold back, doesn’t seem to give a flying fuck. He then presses the lube into Bucky’s hand and tells him to hurry.
Bucky prepens him with one finger, then two. He doesn’t hurry as requested, because he doesn’t want it to hurt, though Steve’s already quite relaxed from Bucky’s opening number. And when Bucky finally slides into him, it’s so smooth and hot against his bare flesh that it feels like all the air has been punched out of his lungs. He pushes in slowly, drawing a low groan from Steve, who tenses, muscles rippling under his skin. Bucky lowers himself, chest flush against Steve’s back. He kisses Steve’s neck and hooks his flesh arm underneath his chest, grabbing onto his shoulder underhanded, pulling himself deeper.

Bucky waits for Steve to adjust, still kissing him, whispering to him that he’s beautiful, that he’s perfect, that he feels so good. He shudders when he feels Steve’s hand drift down his right flank, his hip, his ass, where Steve digs in his fingers and tells him to start moving. And he does, pulling out far and gliding back in, his rhythm slow and deep. The uninhibited sounds of his pleasure mingle with Steve’s, and he feels himself detach from thought and rationality, giving himself over completely to Steve’s body and everything it’s doing to him.

Steve reaches up and buries his fingers in Bucky’s hair. He pulls Bucky’s head down and turns to brush his lips against his cheek, to breathe “I love you,” and the aching rawness of those words tears through Bucky like a bullet.

And oh, with those words, that sensation of fullness quickens inside of him, so much worse now, like he’s going to fall to pieces or burst open, he doesn’t know which one. The tightness creeps up his throat, seizing him, building with every roll of his hips. And – Jesus – his vision starts blurring, and his jaw clenches as that fullness reaches his face. He closes his eyes tight, because he can’t… he can’t be…

Bucky pushes up until his upper body is hovering over Steve’s, not wanting him to hear his struggle to calm himself, to shut it down, choke it back. He keeps thrusting, but inside he’s crumbling like sandstone. And now Steve’s looking back over his shoulder, and he’s concerned, and Bucky ducks his head to stare down at the place where he’s disappearing inside of Steve, to hide, to pretend this is just two bodies fucking and nothing more.

But he can’t, because that’s not at all what this is. He tells Steve he’s fine, his voice thick and pitifully revealing. Steve asks him what’s wrong, tells him to slow down and talk to him, but he doesn’t. He can’t. Because if he stops, he’s going to break, and he lowers himself down again, as close as he can get, Steve’s back warm and sweaty against his torso. But it’s nowhere near close enough, and it’s killing him. It is fucking killing him –

He presses his forehead to Steve’s shoulder, shoves himself deep, and comes soundlessly, his mouth open in a silent cry. Silent, until he breaks anyway, until his breath starts hitching, until a small, choked sound leaves him. He vaguely registers Steve’s voice telling him to get off, his tone firm but undercut with worry. Bucky pulls out, trembling, sucking in panicked breaths like he’s drowning, his heart pounding a brutal rhythm in his chest.

When he rolls onto his back, he wipes his face with his palms, and he stares in dismay at the wetness they pick up. He stares at it like it’s blood or paint, like it’s something that doesn’t belong to him. It’s so incongruous and detached from any discernable emotion that they could very well be Wanda’s tears or Phil Coulson’s tears.

Steve lays at his side, confused and scared. He’s asking what’s wrong repeatedly, touching Bucky’s face, begging for eye contact. And all Bucky can think is how he was just talking about turning a corner, being on the glide path, and now he’s crying – crying during sex, no less, an egregious and irredeemable embarrassment. He’s crying, and he doesn’t even know why. And Steve keeps asking, and all he can say in response is “I don’t know, I don’t know,” shaking his
And then he finally makes the mistake of looking at Steve, giving him what he wants. He looks at the fear and pain on his sublimely handsome face, feels those loving hands on him, and his words rip out of him, fractured and anguished.

“I can’t lose you...”

Steve’s brows furrow. “Lose me? What are you talking about?”

There are so many ways. If they take Coulson up on his offer, Steve could be dead in a month. Yes, he’s physically hardy. He has enhanced clotting, healing, and immune factors. But he could fall. He could drown. He could take a bullet to the head or the heart or the femoral artery and die just like any other man.

But more probable is that there will be other people, just like today. People who aren’t fucked up. People who are easy and light, who aren’t medicated and in everlasting psychotherapy. Functional, sane, unburdened people. And next to these new people, Steve will be able to see clearly how inept and inadequate Bucky is, how much baggage he carries and probably will always carry.

And Steve will never mean to hurt him, never do anything intentional, but he will grow weary with time and his heart will change. And Steve will sit down with him one day and hold his hand and tell him that he loves him, that he always will, but that every relationship has its course, and this one has run it’s own fully.

Bucky’s stomach clenches so hard that he feels sick, and he covers his mouth lightly with his hand. Because on that day, he’ll break all over again, and probably for good this time. His heart will blacken and collapse. He’ll probably survive. He’s pretty good at surviving. But everything he’s worked so hard for will be lost. Everything that has unthawed and opened will fold and refreeze. Everything that’s bloomed within him will wither and die.

“I won’t make it,” Bucky whispers.

Steve presses his hand to Bucky’s chest, and not lightly. “Why do you think you’re gonna lose me? I don’t get where this is coming from.”

“This is all just a dream, isn’t it? This life we’ve been living here.” He clenches his teeth and swallows heavily, trying to dislodge the lump in his throat. “Everything’s going to change. You’re going to change. Your feelings will change. Or something will happen to you, and I’ll lose you that way.”

The muscle in Steve’s jaw ticks. “You don’t get it, do you?” His voice is tense and charged with frustration. “I don’t want anyone else. I’ve never wanted anyone else. Not like this.” He seems to slack then, his pressure on Bucky’s chest lifting with the lightening of his tone. “I promise you, I will never leave you for another person. All I want – all I’ve ever wanted – is you. Why can’t you understand that?”

God, how he would like to believe that, and the sincerity with which Steve says it almost makes believing it possible. But even still, it makes no sense. It doesn’t make a lick of goddamn sense.

“You can’t promise that,” Bucky says, deflating along with Steve, his breath slowing under the warmth of his hand, the sick feeling fading into an ambiguous ache.

“I sure as hell can. I just did.” Steve lightly grasps Bucky’s chin, running his thumb over the cleft. His eyes, his stunning, expressive eyes, grow tender. “And if something were to happen to me, you
would make it. You would live, and you would find someone else who loves you, and you would love them back. And you would grow and thrive and do all the amazing things with your life that I hope you can do with me by your side.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do know that. I know it.” Steve grabs his flesh hand and squeezes it tightly, sighing softly. “I wish you could see inside my heart. I wish I could show you.”

Bucky can feel himself tearing up again. At the thought of Steve dying. At the sweetness of the hope Steve has for him. At the way Steve always sees such strength and potential in him when he can’t. This is a problem, he realizes. A cognitive flaw. A pattern of problematic thinking. Bucky shakes his head faintly and looks at their joined hands.

“It doesn’t make sense.”

Steve smiles. “It’s love. It’s not supposed to make sense.”

They both fall quiet. Bucky uses the silence to continue calming himself. He breathes and focuses on that breath. He anchors himself to his body, to the beating of his heart, to the rise and fall of his chest, to the feel of Steve’s hand, to whatever helps draw him away from the din of his frenzied thoughts.

“I thought I was better than this.” Bucky’s voice is heavy with disappointment. “I really did.”

What an idiot he is. Jumping the gun, declaring himself better, gloating about turning some corner, telling Steve he doesn’t need him to do exactly what he’s doing right now. What a load of shit.

Steve taps his finger thoughtfully against the back of Bucky’s hand. “I’m no psychologist, but don’t you think this might be a sign that you’re doing a lot better?”

Bucky’s initial response is a tight frown, because at first pass, this makes about as much sense as Steve promising to never leave him for someone much more functional. But he wouldn’t have had such a strong reaction to the possibility of losing Steve six months ago. He was too numb. Too lifeless inside. Too insistent of his worthlessness and his inability to love and be loved. There would be no gut-wrenching fear if he had nothing to lose or no hope for the future. Maybe this terror is proof of life. Real life. The life he’s been working so hard for.

“Maybe you’re right.”

Bucky glances down, past their hands, and catches a good look at his dick, still slick with lube. It hits him hard that Steve didn’t even get off, because he was too busy crying and mindlessly fucking into him without any thought of his enjoyment. How pathetic. How selfish and inconsiderate.

“I’m so sorry,” Bucky says, flushing, his mouth twisting into a grimace. “That was probably the un-sexiest sex in history.”

Steve makes small sound of consideration. “I wouldn’t go that far. The first part was pretty amazing.”

Bucky uncouples their hands and shifts onto his side, facing Steve. He wets his lips and touches his fingertips to Steve’s chest, skimming them over his nipple, down the grooves and ridges of his abs. “Do you want me to…”
Steve grasps his wrist and halts the descent of his hand. “No, it’s okay,” he says, his expression offering no explanation of why he stopped him.

“But you didn’t get to finish.”

“I don’t care about that.” Steve brings Bucky’s hand to his lips. “That wasn’t the last time we’ll ever have sex,” he murmurs against it.

But what if it was? Bucky thinks, which is when he realizes that Steve was correct to stop him, when he realizes that his head isn’t in the right space to be doing anything of importance.

Steve shifts to lie on his back, and he makes a sudden face of surprise and discomfort. “I’m gonna hop in the shower real quick.”

Bucky smiles in spite of himself as he puts the pieces together. “Guess that’s the price of doing it without a rubber.”

Steve returns the smile. “Definitely worth it. Come with me?”

The actual showering is quick, but they linger afterwards while Bucky whispers apologies and apologies until Steve shushes him. And Bucky keeps apologizing by touching him, kissing him, until he can feel Steve’s forgiveness on his lips and his body.

When they turn off the lights and settle into bed, Bucky holds him close. But the sound of Steve’s breathing as he falls asleep brings with it a fresh wave of terror, because what if that breathing were to stop? How could the universe possibly reconfigure itself around the vacuum he would leave? How could Bucky ever repair the sucking wound that Steve’s death would deliver?

Bard once told him that PTSD is a time traveling disorder. The present and future are both consumed by the past. But Bucky thinks that now he’s losing the present to the future, one possible future of many, a tragedy that may or may not ever happen. This future is a thief, because it’s robbing away the only thing that’s actually real – this moment, right now. This wonderful, priceless moment.

Steve’s here now, Bucky tells himself. He tells himself this over and over again, until the fear melts away. Steve’s right here. They’re both here. And this moment, this moment right now, and right now, and right now, this is the only time they’re ever guaranteed to have.

And suddenly, somehow, he thinks that this might be enough. This moment, lived fully, and every other fully lived moment they have together, is enough. It has to be. It simply has to be. Because there is nothing else. Because the past is an echo and the future is uncertain, and the space in-between is where life happens. Where their life together is happening.

A primordial calm settles over him as he drifts off to sleep, carried by the waves of Steve’s breathing. It’s the most beautiful sound he’s ever heard, and all he feels is love.

Chapter End Notes

Agents of SHIELD Spoilers:
1) The male lead of the show
2) The male lead’s injury at the end of season 2
3) Mentions of the season 4 SHIELD director and the Inhumans
I want to apologize, because I originally intended to post the last two chapters together. However, as I’ve been cranking away, I realized that the last chapter is actually more of an epilogue than anything, so having a week of distance between this chapter and the next will probably be better.

This is the last chapter of the story line from Bucky’s perspective. The epilogue will be Gretchen Stilwell’s feature article on him. I hope you enjoy!

Also, this is a 10k word chapter, so plan to be reading for a little while :)

Bucky’s not at all proud to have asked for an extra session with Bard on the week they usually don’t meet. When Bucky sits down across from him, he crosses his ankle over his knee, looks into Bard’s expectant face, and preemptively concludes that this emergency session is going to be a colossal waste of Bard’s time.

But as Bucky sucks it up and tells him what happened the night Natasha and Coulson arrived, the story that clings in the air between them takes a different shape than the one in his mind. Bard follows the jolty narrative with great interest, his brows moving, his head nodding, his throat pushing out little *hmms* along the way. By the time Bucky’s done, his ears are hot, and his glassy eyes are glued to Bard’s socks, which feature – of all things – a picture of The Bard himself.

“So, what do you make of that?” Bard asks.

“I still have issues.” Bucky crosses his arms over his chest and slumps further in his chair. “I’ve just replaced one set of fears with another.”

“And what is that new fear?”

“Losing Steve.”

Bard’s mouth twitches, and his bald head angles left. “Is that really what it is, or is there something deeper? What would it mean if you lost Steve?”

“I’d lose everything.”

“Okay. Like what?”

Bucky opens his mouth to deliver what is surely a compelling list of accomplishments and personal qualities that are directly resultant of Steve’s love and generosity. But when his mind grasps for specifics, it stutters. So he settles with:

“Everything that’s good about me now has come from my relationship with him.”

“Again, like what?” Bard asks.

Bucky breathes a sharp sigh. “I don’t know. My ability to love other people. To let myself be
loved. The belief that I could do something good with my life.”

“But did that come from Steve, or did that come from the work you’ve been doing?”

Bucky purses his lips as this alternative explanation permeates him. “It feels like it came from him.” Doubt weighs heavy in his voice.

“Do you think maybe it feels like that because he’s the first person you’ve really allowed yourself to be close to? Is it possible that your relationship is the manifestation of those things rather than the cause of them?”

“What do you mean?”

Bard turns up his palm as if he’s offering his interpretation upon it. “Maybe the work you’ve done here has allowed you to have that relationship, rather than the relationship being the reason why you can feel love and imagine those possibilities.”

The transposition of cause and effect falls upon Bucky like an anvil, which shows in the back-and-forth quavering of his blue-gray eyes and the loosening of his frown.

“There’s some not-so-healthy boundary stuff going on here,” Bard observes. “Do you see it?”

Bucky answers with a small and not entirely present nod.

Bard shifts in his seat and modifies his tone to draw Bucky’s attention back to him. “Do you remember what I said about complex PTSD when we first started working together? How it disrupts your sense of self?”

“I remember.”

“This might be the pendulum swinging a bit too far the other way. At first you couldn’t see any value in yourself at all, and now you’re only seeing your value in the context of your relationship with Steve,” Bard explains.

Bard’s words and the concepts they form click in his head like the elegant gears of a Swiss watch. God damn it, how could he let himself do that? How is it that he keeps fucking himself over so subtly that he can’t even see it happening until it’s already systemic, dug in deep like septicemia? It’s almost like he can’t help himself, like his real punishment for all his Winter Soldiering is a perpetual, eel-slick, ever-mutating cycle of self-sabotage.

“So, going back, given this new possible interpretation of things, what do you really think might happen if Steve died, or if he left you for someone else?” Bard asks.

Bucky’s answer is the clutching squeeze in his chest. The pinpricks in his sinuses and eyes. The siege of despair that crashes through his guts.

“I would be devastated,” he says, as if that one word could symbolize the depths of the emotional annihilation that would come with losing Steve.

Bard nods. “Yeah. And then what?”

“I’d cry. I’d get angry. I’d get depressed again. I’d stop sleeping. Stop eating.”

“And then what?”

Bucky gnaws on his lip. “I guess that would go on for a while.”
“And then what?”

At this point, he’d still be alive, probably. A flaming pile of wreckage, but probably still topside. The thought of suck-starting his .45 – wherever the fuck Steve hid it – doesn’t even enter his mind, to his great surprise.

“I guess the pain would get weaker over time,” he says.

Bard presses on. “And then what?”

And then what? What comes after grief? What comes after obliteration?

“I’d carry on, I guess. Steve said I would find someone else.” Bucky shakes his head slowly. “I don’t know about that.”

Bard raises his index finger. “But it’s possible.”

“I guess.” Bucky shrugs.

“And what if you didn’t find someone else?”

“I’d be alone.”

“There’d be nobody else in your life?”

“I might have friends.” Bucky examines Bard’s face and sees a telltale twinkle in his eyes, one that says there’s another layer to dip down into. Something he’s resisting. “And I’d have myself. The good things about myself. Whatever those are.”

A wide smile spreads across Bard’s face. “Bingo. That’s right.”

Bard then rises to his feet and drops his portfolio onto the coffee table. “Let’s do an activity. It might seem a little simplistic, but it’s pretty powerful,” he says as he walks over to his desk. He opens one drawer (”Nope!”) then another, and he returns to his chair with a bundle of cards wrapped with a black rubber band.

“Remember when you were talking about re-learning to trust yourself?” Bard asks, looking at Bucky for confirmation. When he gets a nod, he continues. “This goes along with that. I think it could be a good way to help you figure out who you are, irrespective of others, so that you can fall back on that and use it as your compass.” He slides off the rubber band and sets the stack of cards on the coffee table between them. “Here are 83 cards, each with a different value on them. I want you to shuffle through and pick out the 10 values that are the most important to you right now.”

With the quirk of his left eyebrow, Bucky scoots to the edge of his chair and takes the stack in his hands. He does a meticulous first pass through the entire set, which has been alphabetically organized, making mental notes of every value that strikes his gut the right way. There’s a wrong kind of strike that happens, too, one that loops into his fear circuit, like when he passes the values of Safety and Power. He goes through the stack again, waffling when he has to cull 18 cards down to 10. When he finally settles, he lays his selections on the table between them.

Autonomy – To be self-determined and independent
Contribution – To make a lasting contribution to the world
Growth – To keep changing and growing
Inner peace – To experience personal peace
Intimacy – To share my innermost experiences with others
Loved – To be loved by those close to me
Loving – To give love to others
Purpose – To have meaning and direction in my life
Realism – To see and act realistically and practically
Self-Esteem – To feel good about myself

Bard nods approvingly as he looks them over. “Do you see some general themes here?”

Bucky considers the cards. “I want to choose my own path, but I want close relationships, and I want to do good in the world. And I want to keep my head on straight and stop dicking myself over psychologically.”

“Great.” Bard points to several cards in descending order. “So with these themes of autonomy and closeness in particular, I’m thinking those might continue to be tough for you to balance.” He looks up at Bucky. “Or to realize you can have both without sacrificing either.”

“I know.” Bucky stops himself from rolling his eyes, because if he really understood it, he wouldn’t be having so many goddamn issues with it. “Boundaries.”

Bard rests his elbows on his knees, leaning in. His laser-sharp engagement and almost limitless compassion creates a pool of warmth in Bucky that he’s not sure is okay to feel, almost like he’s receiving a gift he doesn’t quite deserve.

“Do you think this values list is similar to what you would have made before the war?” Bard asks.

“Oh, hell no.” Bucky shakes his head firmly. ”Not even close.”

“If you can imagine that list versus this one, what would you say about that change?”

The words rush to Bucky’s tongue, but he halts them there, because they don’t seem to be consistent with any possible interpretation of his time with Hydra. But they’re insistent, charging forward, propelled by their absolute, indisputable truth.

Bucky gestures faintly to the cards he selected. “This is a better person.”

The grin on Bard’s face could light the entire city of Birnin Zana. “Wow. How ‘bout that.”

Yeah. How fucking ‘bout that?

“There’s a concept called posttraumatic growth,” Bard tells him. “It’s where people improve and grow and become more resilient because they’ve been through something really terrible. I think it’s something worth discussing as we move forward.”

“Sure.”

Bard points to the cards Bucky picked out. “I want you to keep those. Maybe they’ll come in handy. Especially with such a big decision on the horizon.”

Bucky nods in acknowledgment. They still have to decide whether they’re going to take Coulson up on his offer. They requested an extension, because a week’s worth of discussion has yielded little in the way of certainty. He’s remained mostly quiet on the subject, observing the new group dynamics, getting a feel for the terrain before he digs in his heels on anything.

“I wanna circle around once more, really quick, and be absolutely clear,” Bard says, brows drawn in an unusually serious line. “A healthy relationship where you feel safe is very important for
healing from the type of trauma you’ve been through. I don’t wanna downplay that or give the impression that your relationship with Steve is getting in the way of your recovery. But part of the health of that relationship is the differentiation between the two of you. I can only imagine the attachment issues he has with you from his side, after everything he’s been through. So that differentiation is very important for him as well.” His face softens again. “Does that make sense?”

Bucky nods again. He hates the blind spots he has around Steve, especially when even Bard can perceive them clearly through simple logical deduction. He’s been so preoccupied with his own toxic relational patterns that he rarely considers that Steve is probably struggling with something similar, only for different reasons.

“Would you ever see Steve?” Bucky asks.

Bard runs his hand over his beard. “For therapy?”

“Yeah.”

“No.” Bard’s tone leaves no room for argument. “And not because I don’t want to work with him. I wouldn’t be objective, given all the work you and I have done together. It wouldn’t be fair to either of you.” He raises a curious eyebrow. “Does he want therapy?”

Bucky shrugs. “I don’t know. But I bet he could use it.”

Of course, by this point, Bucky is fairly convinced that everyone could benefit from therapy. But he could see particular benefits to Steve working out some of the issues around their relationship, benefits he would most certainly reap the rewards of.

“Yeah, I bet he could use it, too. I can give him a referral to a colleague, if he wants. She’s wonderful.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.” Bard pats his hands on his lap with a soft clap. “Now, give me an update on all this stuff with Gretchen Stilwell…”

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After session, Bucky takes his time heading back to their room. He stops to chat briefly with Wanda, Natasha, and Laura in the living room, who are in the midst of a hackle-raising discussion about the cataclysmic course of U.S. politics. Laura seemed to take to him in very short order, a surprise to Bucky, one he cautiously reads as a testament to Clint’s positive regard of him.

He fingers the cardstock in his pocket as he walks through the hallway, passing and acknowledging Clint lounging in his room and his children doing arts and crafts in Scott’s room (which is still Scott’s room, Bucky assures himself, perhaps naïvely, every time he passes it). He’s avoided interacting with them at any substantial length, not because he doesn’t like children but because he’s profoundly unsure if they like him. And like the good self-saboteur, he’s given himself very few opportunities to demonstrate what might be considered likeability.

Steve’s somewhere. Probably working out with Sam, which is what Bucky should start doing in earnest in case they’re bound for some Avenging in the near future. He kneels on the floor in front of their dresser, the bottom two drawers of which now belong to him. The first is for clothes and the second for miscellany, which is the drawer from which he pulls out the 9x12 drawing pad. He rarely opens it, because it makes him so raw. Most of the time, it’s enough to just hold it, to remember the night Steve gave it to him, and to sit with the warm palpitations of fondness and
gratitude.

Bucky sets it aside, aiming for what’s stored beneath it, and his attention gravitates involuntarily to the blood red of The Book. He can’t decide if it is or is not incomprehensively stupid to store it in such an obvious place, given that he shouldn’t be able to prime with the activation sequence anymore. He’s entertained ripping out that particular page, but he’s always stopped himself, because what if someone asks for proof? He can’t decide which risk is greater. He can’t decide anything pertaining to The Book, perhaps by design, so he just leaves it like he always does.

What he’s looking for is his therapy notebook, which he stores next to The Book with not a little sardonic humor. He flips it open to the first blank page, the one after his final impact statement, then pulls the cards from his pocket to see if they’ll fit on one sheet. He pauses, expression thoughtful, then rises to his feet and returns to Scott’s room.

He knocks on the doorframe with his real hand, trying with limited success to shield the kids from his left, which is bright and glaring in the t-shirt he’s wearing. All three sets of inquisitive eyes look up at him.

“Can I borrow your glue stick?” He points to the purple tube sitting on the floor next to Lila.

She takes the tube in her hands and rotates it, appearing deeply engaged in the twirling of the label, then glances up at him. “Can we see your arm?”

Bucky pauses for a beat as he internalizes that he’s just entered negotiations with a child for a stick of glue. He squares his shoulders and holds out his left arm, then initiates a functions check sequence. Five-fingers-fist-wrist-elbow. His old arm might have been more impressive to a child, louder, more robotic, a poorer emulation of a real arm.

But if the slacking of their jaws is any indication, they still seem to be impressed – with the exception of Nathaniel, who appears to not quite fully comprehend the creepy unnaturalness of it. Cooper and Lila run him through an interrogative gauntlet (Can you lift a car? Can you lift a horse? How far can you throw a football? Could you lift all of us together?), and they then ask if they can touch it. He must really want that glue stick, because he says yes. They poke it and drag their fingertips over the interlocking pieces while continuing their questioning (Where did you get it? Do you have a real arm underneath? What happened to your real arm? Where does your [straining to find the term for stump] end? Did it hurt? Does it hurt now?). He answers plainly and as honestly as he can until they appear satisfied, and Lila relinquishes the glue stick with a pleased smile.

Back in their room, he sits on the floor and glues the values cards into his notebook. It strikes him that the tape in the kitchen junk drawer would have been entirely sufficient for the job, but he stops short of questioning the choice he made.

He wonders if he should make up a rule, create a habit, build in some safeguard to keep himself vigilant. To keep him connected to these values and to himself. To somehow train himself out of this tiresome pattern he’s entered. He then wonders if he and Steve spend too much time together. He second-guesses his decision to move in, to sleep with Steve in the first place, to be in this relationship at all. He entertains what it would be like to break up, and his visceral rejection of the prospect is so powerful that it actually concerns him.

Bard would remind him that there’s a middle path, that he can be himself and be with Steve, but it still feels like he’s missing a crucial skillset to make this happen. Then he wonders if he has a stuck point around his ability to make this relationship work, and he’s relieved when the idea begins to crack under his well-practiced scrutiny, which is so ingrained that he doesn’t even need his
worksheets anymore.

He can handle this. He can make this work. He can have autonomy and intimacy. He just needs a plan.

Steve comes back from the gym just as he’s returning the glue to the kids. Steve smiles as he walks past, and Bucky hooks effortlessly into him, pink-cheeked, smelling of sweat, hair mussed, muscles straining the fabric of his too-tight clothes. Any thoughts about any plans hurl themselves out of consciousness as Bucky follows him.

It almost feels like a betrayal, his body’s and heart’s addiction to Steve, especially amid such psychological tumult. But he reminds himself that the tumult has always been there, in one form or another, ever since his early days of self-castigation for wanting another man. Maybe his natural state is chaos. Maybe when it comes to Steve, inner peace is a fantasy with no real hope of fulfillment.

Bucky closes the door behind him and leans back against it as he watches Steve pull off his shirt. Christ, that chest. Bucky halfheartedly wonders if he’ll ever fail to find him breathtakingly hot.

“How was therapy?” Steve asks, tossing his shirt into the hamper.

“We talked about what happened on Friday.” Bucky sees a flash of concern pass over Steve’s face.

“Ah. How’d that go?”

Bucky doesn’t bother trying to temper anything, trusting that Steve already has a pretty clear grasp of the problem. “I realized that I’ve let myself get too enmeshed with you, in a way that’s not healthy. For either of us.” He lets out a dry laugh. “After all that talk about needing more space from you, here I am doing the exact opposite.”

Steve takes a seat on the edge of the bed and peels off his socks. “Why do you think that happened?”

“Bard says it’s because I didn’t have an solid sense of self for so long that I pretty much forgot how to have one. I identified myself by what Hydra told me I was, and then when that didn’t seem true anymore, I started using you and our relationship to define myself. Which, obviously, isn’t good.” Bucky shrugs. “Just more trauma shit to sift through.”

“What do you need from me?” Steve asks, his expression open and sincere. Damn, he’s getting good at this supportive boyfriend bit. “How can I help?”

“It’s mostly an inside job.” Bucky points to his own head. “But thank you.” Bucky pauses then, body suddenly awash with tension, but he charges forward on the momentum of all the good work he’s already done today. “Would you ever consider seeing someone for therapy?”

“For what?”

“All this stuff. With us. And whatever else you might be dealing with.” Bucky gives a tight shrug, because the confusion on Steve’s face has him doubting now whether he should have asked at all.

“Do you want me to?” Steve asks tentatively.

“No. I don’t want this to be about me. I want it to – ” He sighs. “Never mind. Forget I asked.”

Steve nods slightly. He glances up at Bucky and holds there, his expression difficult to read.
Bucky’s sure he’s about to tell him that he really doesn’t need therapy, that he’s fine, that they can work it out on their own, but then he replies, “Lemme give it some thought.”

“Oh.” Bucky shifts his weight to his other leg and clamps down on the smile that’s threatening to make him look too eager. “Okay.

Steve nods again and looks down at his bare feet. “So, everyone’s going into town for dinner later.”

“You asking if I wanna go?”

“I’m asking if you wanna stay.” Steve looks up then, and there’s a nervous excitement in his eyes, something that Bucky interprets immediately. Something that sparks the same nervous excitement in him.

“Yeah. I’d like that.”

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“Mmm.” Bucky closes his eyes and sinks into the water, leaning back even closer into Steve. “We don’t do this enough.”

“We’ve never done this.” Steve’s arm drifts down over Bucky’s shoulder, coming to rest easy on his chest. “ Somehow.”

“Stupid. We’re stupid, Steve. Coupla stupid soldiers who don’t know how to relax.”

“Coupla poor shits who never had a bathtub big enough. Or water hot enough.”

Bucky laughs softly. *Not that we would have been doing this if we did,* he thinks. He knows it’s still a sore spot, but he still pokes it sometimes. Somehow, it hurts less every time he does it.

Bucky’s been thinking all day, ever since session, and he cooked up a pretty good plan while Steve was taking forever in the shower. Move his journal to his nightstand. Read his values every morning and every night. Take at least a few minutes before falling asleep to reflect on his day to see if he’s living them, with a particular focus on his relationship with Steve. It feels like a good plan, a workable and effective plan, and Steve gladly accepted the task of reminding him about it if it seems like he’s forgotten.

“I think we should do it,” Bucky says. “Accept Coulson’s offer.” He feels the rumble of Steve’s acknowledgement against his back.

“Yeah?”

“If we can do something to help, we should.”

They can’t yield to fear anymore. Not when they can help. Because it’s what they were made to do. Whether they were made by the Army, the Air Force, SHIELD, Pym Technologies, the Red Room, or Hydra, they were all made to act. Not sit on their asses in a literal palace while the world quietly burns.

“And what do you think about the risks?”

“C’mon, when have there never been risks?” Bucky says this emphatically, partially for effect but partially to keep selling himself on it. “Walking out the front door to go to some shitty office job is
a risk. Taking any chance involves risk.”

“You think we can do it? From a tactical perspective?”

“With some additional training, yeah. Definitely. That with the right gear and we’ll be good to go.”

It dawns on Bucky that Steve’s not just chatting with him in the tub as his boyfriend. He’s consulting with him as a subject matter expert. And that feels pretty damn good.

“I’m gonna say yes,” Steve tells him. “Wanda, Nat, and Sam are in. I’m still not sure about Clint, and I wouldn’t blame him if he sat this out. Scott’s still TBD, last I heard from him.”

Bucky frowns mildly. “Think he’ll come back?”

“I hope so.”

“Me, too. Can’t get much more stealth than Ant-Man.” Bucky lays his right arm on Steve’s leg, brushing his fingers over the fine hair covering his shin. “Plus, I miss him.”

“So do I.” Steve’s hand drifts down from Bucky’s chest to his stomach. “Enough with work talk, though, ‘kay?”

Bucky’s muscles flinch under Steve’s touch, part autonomic reaction, part excitement in response to the general direction he’s heading. “Sure, boss.”

Steve breathes a chuckle in his ear. “Think you can handle taking orders from me again?”

Bucky almost makes a comment about being very good at following orders because of his previous occupation, but the feel of Steve’s fingers ghosting over his dick compels him to choke back his not very alluring reply. He settles instead with “Definitely,” his voice rasping out like sandpaper wrapped in silk.

Steve makes a thick, pleased sound, and Bucky feels him hardening against his lower back. “You’re so sexy,” Steve murmurs against his neck.

Bucky’s own cock begins to awaken amid the coordinated offensive of Steve’s hand, his words, and his lips. He’s excited, no doubt, but his nerves are still cinching his muscles, nipping like a dog at a heel. It’s exactly what he doesn’t want. He thought the bath would help him relax, and it has. But he’s still… is scared the right word? It can’t be. There’s nothing to be scared of. There’s nobody he trusts more, and he wants it. They both want it.

But what if, his brain insists. It fills in the blanks with a rash of scenarios, all of which are logically improbable and decidedly detached from reality. Most of it comes down to that night that still haunts the halls of his subconscious, when he had that nightmare, when Steve came in, when they first kissed, when they made out, when everything was going fantastically until – Bam! – things were not okay at all. The suddenness of it, the violent axial twist, the unpredictability of his own mind, it all still lingers in the realm of possibility.

But this is Steve, and Steve is safe. Steve loves him. Steve would stop in a second. Steve knows what it feels like. Steve can read him well. Steve knows that he’s scared –

Yeah, okay, he’s scared. He’s fucking scared.

He breathes. It’s fine. It’s okay. It’s all okay.
“You all right?” Steve asks, lowering his head into Bucky’s periphery.

Bucky turns and shifts until he can make eye contact. And when he looks at Steve, he knows that, yes, he’s okay. Everything is okay.

“Take me to bed.”

To his continued credit, Steve’s ability to imbue calm is not limited only to conversation. He spends nearly an hour helping Bucky feel comfortable, kissing him, touching him, licking and sucking on his dick, fucking him slowly with his fingers, loosening him up with so much lube that Bucky wonders with the small remainder of his rational mind if he used enough with Steve the times he was inside him.

“How do you feel?” Steve asks.

“Good.” He’s been a writhing mess under Steve’s ministrations, but all that erotic energy kindling inside of him has displaced most of the nerves. “I think I’m good to go.”

“You sure?”

Bucky nods then smiles coolly. “Are you?”

Bucky follows Steve’s glance down at his own cock, which has leaked a wet spot onto the sheets. “Maybe a little too ready,” he admits as he gently withdraws his fingers. “Be right back.”

Bucky watches him pad to the bathroom to wash his hands. He seems to take a while, and when he returns, he brings a small hand towel back with him. He lies back down on the bed next to Bucky and grabs the lube with a small sigh.

“Don’t sound so excited,” Bucky says, tone wry, turning over on his side to face Steve.

“No, it’s not – ” Steve sighs again and opens the bottle. “I get why this was stressful for you.”

Bucky takes the lube from Steve’s hand and squeezes a hefty gob into his right palm. “You don’t need to be stressed.” He wraps his fingers around Steve’s cock and works the lube around, relishing the way his touch seems to drain a little of the worry from Steve’s face. “This is supposed to be fun.”

“Maybe I should wear one,” Steve says, jerking his head toward the nightstand where the condoms are.

Bucky shakes his head. “It feels much better without it.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

Bucky squeezes Steve’s dick firmly to pull him out of his thoughts. “Forget all that. Just be here with me.”

It seems to work, because Steve hands him the towel with a small smile that wasn’t there before. When Bucky’s done wiping off, Steve tosses the towel toward the foot of the bed, then lays a soft kiss on Bucky’s mouth.

“How do you wanna do this?” Steve asks.
Bucky’s debated it backwards and forwards, far too much for someone trying to convince his partner that it’s just “supposed to be fun.” He wanted to allow himself to be completely vulnerable, to let Steve be on top and in control, but he just can’t. He just can’t, and he’s decided somewhat reluctantly that he’s okay with that for now.

Bucky lays his hand on Steve’s shoulder and pushes him over onto his back. He then sits up and situates himself astride Steve’s hips, a heated smile curving his mouth at the feel of Steve’s cock rubbing against his ass.

Steve’s eyes widen. “Oh God,” he says under his breath.

Oh God, indeed, Bucky thinks. Welcome to the *Oh God, Oh Fuck* club, where your boyfriend sits on your cock and rides you while you lose your mind.

Bucky runs his hands over Steve’s chest, his fantastic chest, palming over his nipples, trying for all the world to convey a level of comfort and confidence he still doesn’t quite feel.

“Any last minute advice?” Bucky asks. He smirks at their collective lack of experience with this, where the whopping two times that Steve’s taken his dick makes him the resident expert on bottoming.

Steve swallows hard. “Go slow. It’s not gonna feel great at first, but it shouldn’t hurt. If it does, stop.” He lifts his hand and brushes it against Bucky’s cheek with a tenderness belying the wildfire burning in his eyes. “Okay?”

Bucky nods and lays his hand on top of Steve’s. “I love you, Steve. I don’t say it enough. I should say it more, because I feel it all the time.”

The joy that lights up Steve’s face is truly beautiful to behold, and Bucky marvels at how his every confession of love seems to draw the same caliber of heartfelt response. He needs to say it more. He needs to shitcan the excuse that his words are never enough and just say them, because he’s absolutely right – unspoken words never could be enough.

Bucky sits up on his knees and edges further down Steve’s body, and Steve sucks in a breath when Bucky takes hold of the base of his cock and angles it up. Bucky starts breathing deeply to quell the sudden jolt of fear that cuts through him, which is followed by a riotously inappropriate, self-directed taunt to stop being a little faggot and just sit on that dick like a man. He nearly bursts out laughing, and the internal break in seriousness gives him the psychological leverage to do just that.

Steve was absolutely right. It doesn’t feel very good at all. His attentional capacity is hyper-focused on the sensation of Steve’s not insubstantial length sliding into him, and he only dimly registers the sound of Steve’s attempts at reassurance and the warmth of his hands on his thighs. His brain vacillates chaotically between this intense concentration and bursts of regret for ever thinking this was a good idea.

But he takes it slow, just like Steve told him. Very, very slow. And very slowly, he begins to adjust and starts to relax again. He finally settles atop Steve’s pelvis, where he can rest and allow his consciousness to open up again to the sensation of being touched, to the sound of Steve’s strained voice telling him how amazing he is, how tight he is. It’s like emerging from fog into a clearing, or that feeling when the straining sun finally breaks through to the clouds to bathe the body in light.

Bucky folds at the waist and braces his hands on either side of Steve’s head. He leans down to kiss Steve’s delectable, full lips, which are even pinker now from being lightly bitten. Steve’s breathing is tense and shallow, and he seems barely able to coordinate his mouth to kiss back.
“You okay?” Bucky asks, brushing his thumb over Steve’s chin, searching his dusky eyes.

Steve nods with a breathy “You?”

Bucky returns the nod and kisses Steve again, deeper, pulling energy from the heated pressure in his groin and infusing it into his mouth. Steve inhales sharply and wraps his arms around him, taking everything Bucky’s giving him like he would completely envelop and consume him, if he could. Steve lifts his hips, sinking the last bit deeper, and he gently pushes Bucky back.

“I’m sorry,” Steve says, then repeats himself twice over.

Bucky lays another fleeting kiss on Steve’s frowning, apologetic mouth and pushes himself back up, spine long, chin still tilted down to keep eye contact. He hooks Steve’s arms around his lower back from where Steve dropped them onto the mattress, all out of concern over the fraction of an inch he took without permission. Stupid, sweet son of a bitch.

“I’m not that fragile…” Bucky’s words trail off when he tilts his hips forward to slide himself up Steve’s length, replaced by a fast intake of breath between his teeth. Steve’s mouth opens, like he’s about to say something that he forgot. Maybe Oh God or Oh Fuck, the most sophisticated word pairing either of them could probably construct at the moment. Bucky lets his hips fall back again, impaling himself to the hilt. He moans as he fully comprehends the pure, grinding obscenity of it all and as the friction turns loose a storm of wild lust in him.

He rocks into a slow rhythm, leaning into Steve’s hands as they press against his chest, taking in Steve’s feverish beauty and the sounds of him being unraveled by pleasure. Bucky closes his eyes to those sounds and lets his head fall back, leaning, pressing, one hand behind him braced on Steve’s thigh, the other on Steve’s stomach, then rocking deeper, harder, groaning and swearing underneath his breath.

It’s mind-blowingly amazing, and Bucky really doesn’t understand why. It doesn’t fit into any logical framework he possesses, why being on top of Steve like this, being full of him, fucking himself onto his hot cock, would make him feel so incredible. It defies everything he’s ever learned about masculinity and power, and when he grabs Steve’s hand and tells him to jerk him off while he barrels headlong toward oblivion, he feels like a fucking king.

Bucky comes soon after with a hoarse shout, shoving hard into Steve’s hand and spilling into it. Steve thrusts his hips up twice more into him, then slams his hand back against the headboard as he growls his release. The whole thing is utterly, blisteringly pornographic, especially that sound Steve makes, which Bucky’s never heard outside of a fight.

“That’s what I want,” Bucky eventually says when his lungs stop heaving. “That’s the picture I want you to draw. The special commission.”

Steve drags his free hand down the sheen of sweat between Bucky’s pecs, then lays that hand on the side of his right ass cheek. He sucks in a breath of feigned uncertainty, “I dunno, I’m not sure I got all the details committed to memory.”

“If we must, I suppose we could do it again. For art.” Bucky reaches back and grabs the towel to hand to Steve. He then carefully lifts himself from Steve’s lap, unprepared for how the sudden sensation of emptiness would both relieve and disappoint him, and he falls heavily to Steve’s side.

Steve smiles that sweet, earnest smile of his, the one that crushes Bucky a little because he’s not sure if he’s ever once deserved to see it. “How’d I get so lucky?”
Bucky fights the urge to say something to the effect of “Some fuckin’ thing you call luck.” Instead, he settles with the milder but still accurate: “To get some messed up grouch to do nasty things to you in bed?”

Steve’s smile only grows brighter. “Yeah.”

Bucky laughs, because that answer, that face, and that smile are exactly why he’s really the lucky one here. “I think it’s best not to question the universe’s fucked up accounting system.”

“Good point.” Steve hands the towel to Bucky. “You might wanna hang onto this.”

“Oh yeah?”

“I, um, cleared the chamber in the shower, but I don’t know how much it helped.”

“Ah. Gotcha.”

Steve lays his hand on Bucky’s chest. “Hey, about your question earlier.”

Bucky raises his eyebrows. Which question? He combs through the slick jello of his brain.

“If you…” Steve stops and clears his throat. “I’ll go see someone.”

Bucky’s mouth falls open. “Really?”

“Oh. I want this to work. I want us to work. And I know I’ve got my own stuff to sort out.”

Bucky can’t contain the ecstatic smile that blossoms on his face. What a beautiful thing to do. For himself. For them. His heart fills and he kisses Steve, hard and mushy, as he flies over the fucking moon with happiness.

Eventually, they pull themselves together, finish cleaning up, and put on their sleep clothes. They venture out to the kitchen, rummage around until they find microwave popcorn, and pop it while they catch up with the others on their night in the city.

Back in their room, they turn the lights out and turn on the TV. They cuddle in bed. They eat fistfuls of popcorn and gripe and chuckle and talk shit. It’s so fantastically, perfectly normal that the blooming sensation in Bucky’s chest becomes almost unbearable.

This is it, he thinks. This is that life he wanted back. The realization blindsides him and he’s beaming, blinking back tears in the glow of a sitcom to the sound of Steve laughing.

This is it.

The next few weeks are rough. Bucky spends hours upon hours in recorded conversations with Gretchen, most of which feel like he’s being scraped bloody over hot rocks. The first article has been published in the Times, generating great public interest, and suddenly she tells him that the New Yorker is “too old, too Upper East Side” for the long feature article she’s planning. When she tells him that the editor of the Rolling Stone is practically begging her to choose them instead, Bucky tells her to do whatever the fuck she wants, to which she replies, “That’s the spirit!”

The one small, happy beacon in the chaos is that Steve arranges an intake with the therapist Bard recommended. They’re scheduled for next week and, like Bard, she agrees to come to the palace for everything. Bucky talks Steve through the jitters and tells him that if he can do all this therapy
crap, anyone can. He plans to cheerlead Steve every step of the way, not just because he’s going to
need it, but because Bucky’s not ashamed to admit that he’s got a horse in this race, too. Steve’s
forward momentum also inspires Bucky to redouble his own efforts in therapy, and with each
passing day he feels more grounded and stable in himself.

They contact Coulson on secure video to tell him that they tentatively accept, but only under certain
conditions that they’re still trying to negotiate amongst themselves. They propose a five-member
team with Clint and Scott serving as pro tem mission support specialists. Scott continues to lie low
in California but plans to be smuggled back to Wakanda when Hank Pym makes a refueling stop
on the way to Cape Town for a particle physical conference in two months.

Coulson advises a train-up period of six weeks, which is moved up to eight by Steve, sending a
clear message about who’s making the calls here. The extension seems like a contrivance to buy
time for more than just training. Time for the Accords to disintegrate even further. Now that there’s a new president, bringing with him a host of new international tensions, the fate of the Accords seems more tenuous than ever. But it’s still
difficult to determine how bad things really are, because Tony’s PR campaign is still going strong,
which may be indication in itself of how poorly things are going. Although there’s stress in the
uncertainty, they try to put a positive spin on it, because if the Accords do fall, at least they’ll be
back in fighting shape to re-join the other Avengers at the drop of a hat.

After the initial burst of excitement around their formal establishment, there are several
uncomfortable conversations talking around the problem – the problem, apparently, being Bucky.
It all finally spills out into open during their fourth team meeting, after the luster has thoroughly
dimmed and the gritty reality of what they’re committing to begins to settle in.

“What do we do if someone goes down?” Natasha asks. “Not hurt, but apprehended on site?”
The correct answer, the one Bucky learned in the Army, is that you never leave a man behind. He
can see Sam squirming as he fights this answer as well, an especially daunting task for a man
whose job it was to rescue the people nobody else could rescue. But they hold their tongues,
because this is not the Army or the Air Force.

“It depends,” Steve says. “On how many apprehenders there are. Couple guys or a fire team, those
are pretty good odds. But if there’re a couple squads with weapons, that’s a different scenario.”

Wanda’s face goes sour. “What does that even mean?”

“There would have to be a calculation of risk at that time,” Steve attempts to clarify, frowning as
he does so.

“This is going in a really ugly direction,” Sam says, crossing his arms. “I don’t like it at all.”

Bucky clacks his metal fingers lightly on top of the conference table, pursing his lips. Sam hit the
bull’s-eye on that one. It’s ugly. It’s gross. It’s not any scenario they should be seriously
entertaining for what is essentially charity work they’re conducting because they’re going stir-
crazy. The stirrings of doubt are plain in the faces of his teammates, and Bucky feels that same
stirring within himself.

But there’s a work-around. There always is.

“Or we create the conditions where we don’t get caught in the first place.” All eyes land on Bucky,
if only because he so rarely speaks up at these meetings. “There are ways to plan these operations
to minimize probability of capture. 90/10 front-end effort. Planning meetings. Rehearsals. Buddy
teams. SOPs. Algorithmic tactical protocols. Real-time monitoring. Rigorous contingency planning.” He shrugs. “This doesn’t have to be super high risk.”

His comment is met with five sets of raised eyebrows. It’s as if they’d all forgotten that he spent virtually every waking moment he was with Hydra either running stealth tactical operations or training for them.

“We can’t plan for every scenario,” Clint counters, though his tone is one of devil’s advocacy. “And any of us could still get caught or KIA’d. Best laid plans and whatnot.”

“Those are risks,” Bucky replies. “And if we can’t tolerate those risks very well, maybe that means we don’t do every mission. Simple as that.”

Wanda turns to Bucky. “Do we have that choice? To not do missions?”

“We’re doing this because we can and want to, not because we have to,” Bucky says to her, then glances at Steve for confirmation. “Right? This is supposed to be voluntary, selective threat mitigation.”

Steve nods decisively and jots in his notebook. “Okay, that’s a condition. We have the right to reject any mission we deem to risky.”

“And the right to abort any mission in progress for any reason we see fit,” Bucky adds.

“Done.” Steve taps his pen a few times on the page, his expression contemplative. He then looks up and tracks his gaze slowly around the table as he speaks, ensuring that he makes meaningful eye contact with everyone. “So, how prepared are we for this? Let’s be honest with ourselves. What are our growth edges here?”

Silence settles but then expands, generating heavy, uncomfortable pressure. Eyes look at walls and ceilings and carpets. Chairs swivel nervously from side to side. It’s Clint’s voice that finally breaks through on the heels of a burdened sigh.

“Can I be very unpleasantly honest here?”

Everyone’s hooked then, keenly interested, especially when they glimpse the weight that’s settled on Clint’s brow.

Steve gestures toward him. “Please.”

Bucky has trouble comprehending what’s happening at first. He doesn’t predict that Clint is going to turn his chair to him. He doesn’t predict the somber look on his face or the words that his grim expression heralds.

“I’m not sure you’re ready,” Clint tells him.

The confusion – or, perhaps more accurately, the denial – digs in deeper. “What do you mean?”

“You know I like you a lot. I hope you know that. I mean, we all love you, and you’re part of our family.” Clint leans in as he talks, his congeniality doing very little to soften his words. “But I think this is a little soon. It hasn’t even been two months since you freaked out so bad that you lost control and blacked out and woke up somewhere you didn’t even realize you went.”

Bucky visibly flinches. Clint grimaces but continues.
“You’re obviously doing better, and I support you a thousand percent in the work you’re doing. But what if something like that happens on a mission? What if you can’t follow these amazing protocols you cook up because you black out or freeze up or get triggered by something? Not to mention how much worse it would be for you to get caught compared to the rest of us.”

There’s a curious sensation of static filling Bucky’s head. Filling up his ear canals. Filling up the space where rational thoughts might generate.

“Just say what you mean, Clint. Bottom line.” Bucky’s tone is glazed ice.

There’s a pair of ticks in Clint’s jaw muscle, and his light blue eyes land firmly on Bucky’s.

“You shouldn’t be in the field right now,” he states, and the toughness he mustered begins to slip almost as quickly as it settled. “But you have a great mind for this stuff. You should be our ops guy. You should train us. Help us be as good at this as you are.”

Bucky can’t look at him anymore. The static surges and wanes, giving way to the hard sting of hurt.

Clint sighs again. There’s a sharp, exasperated edge to it. “Am I the only one?” he asks the room. “I feel like a fuckin’ asshole, but I can’t not bring it up.” He drags his hand through his hair. “I’m sorry, man. I have a lot of respect for you, and I care about you, and I care about all of us. I care about all of us being safe.”

“And I’m not safe,” Bucky confirms.

It’s that old cosmic sense of humor again. The one that tells him he’s better and that his stuck points are lies, but then throws down a huge helping of Clint Barton telling him that, indeed, he is a danger to others. He is out of control. He can’t be trusted.

“He’s not saying you’re not safe,” Natasha supplies gently. “He’s saying that this isn’t something to rush into.”

Natasha’s voice snaps something in Bucky, ripping him from the numbness of his disbelief, stealing venom from that dark, angry, jealous place inside of him that hates her fucking guts for absolutely no reason whatsoever.

“What the fuck do you know, Romanoff?” Bucky spits, glaring. “Really, what the fuck do you know? You just got here.”

God damn her unflappable composure, which is tinted with just the infuriating amount of genuineness and deep, unspoken compassion for him. “I know I trust Clint’s judgment on this more than I trust yours.”

Steve holds up his hands in a halting gesture. “Hey, let’s all just calm down.” He looks over at Sam and Wanda, who have yet to say their piece on the matter, a look Bucky does not miss.

“Yes, let’s give everyone else a chance to shit on me,” he says to Steve. “Please.”

“We are not shitting on you,” Sam says. “Like Clint said, this is because we care about you.”

Wanda’s shoulders tense. “I don’t want to…” She seems to struggle to find the right word. “… inflame this anymore.”

Bucky shakes his head with a bitter, incredulous laugh. “Fuck.”
Steve flips his notebook closed with a decisive flick of his wrist, his face carefully neutral. “Let’s break for today.”

Everyone rises except Bucky, who keeps his head down, wishing for long hair to shield him from the looks he feels on him. The worried looks. The regretful looks. The secretly relieved looks.

“Lemme guess,” Bucky rasps when the room is cleared of everyone but him and Steve. “You agree with Clint.” He glances up at Steve then and sees him standing tall and resolute, like a redwood. “Clearly you do, or you would have said at least one word in my defense.”

“I think he’s right.”

Bucky clenches his hands into fists. “Un-fucking-believable. So, instead of telling me in private, you decided to hang me out in front of the whole team so they could take turns kicking me in the balls?”

Steve makes a small sound, one Bucky thinks might even be apologetic. “I didn’t know how I felt for sure.”

“Fine.” Bucky stands, shoulders back, chin thrust forward. “I’ll have Bard write me a fucking doctor’s note.”

“Do you really think he would clear you for field duty right now?”

Bucky opens his mouth to say Yes, yes, of course he would, because I’m better now. He said so. But then he remembers the other things Bard told him. That he still has PTSD. That he still struggles with balance. That trauma of such immense duration and intensity can take a long time to heal.

Steve’s face grows plaintive. “Do you think, truthfully, that you’re ready to be in the field?”

Bucky frowns as his lungs tighten, breath becoming harder to catch with every passing moment. His heart kicks up its pace, slamming against his ribcage, pushing waves of cortisol through every capillary. He walks because he has to, because if he doesn’t move, he’s going to scream. Behind him, dimly, he can hear Steve tell him “We’re not saying never. We’re just saying later –”

He walks out the conference room door. Down the hall. Down the stairs to the ground floor. Through the door to the arboretum. The florid, fruity smell crashes into him, sucking him out of the haze of pain and disappointment and the glaring loneliness of otherness.

Bucky sits heavily on the bench and scrubs his hands over his face. “God damn it,” he mutters, because, really, God damn all of it. God damn Clint for saying it, Natasha and Steve for agreeing, Sam and Wanda for standing by and letting it happen. But most of all, damn himself and his perfect demonstration of lack of emotional control. Damn himself for proving everyone’s point spectacularly, showing them all that he’s incapable of handling the slightest verbal confrontation without yelling expletives at a teammate. Damn himself for not being ready. Damn himself for not being better – worse, for thinking he was better. Damn himself for having to come out here, for running away again, for not being able to talk to Steve like an adult. For not being able to admit that he’s not ready, even when it’s painfully obvious. For being about as grounded as a fucking balloon.

Even with his enhanced hearing, he still barely picks up the sound of approaching footsteps. He does, however, most certainly pick up a familiar tingle at the base of his neck, that ambient aura of whatever-ness that precedes Wanda wherever she goes. He used to hate it. The lack of consent. The
way she can’t help it. The mind-wrecking power he knows is behind it.

She sits next to him, crossing her legs at the knee. “I’m sorry I wasn’t more supportive. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

Bucky stares out into the tree line. “It’s okay. I get it.”

“I know it’s not exactly what you want, but we do need you.” Wanda turns to him, resting her arm across the back of the bench. “We need your expertise.”

He nods.

“Clint feels terrible.”

“I know. I’ll go talk to him.”

“And Natasha was only trying to help.”

Bucky snorts. “Yeah, yeah. I’ll talk to her, too.”

“Just give it some thought. Please?”

He’s torn between feeling insulted that she would even doubt his willingness to help and complete understanding of every single one of her doubts. Perhaps it’s not insult so much as disappointment that he’s cultivated the perception that he’s unreliable.

“I’ll do it, Wanda. Don’t worry.”

Wanda smiles. “I’m glad. It’s not a team without you.”

They sit in the stillness, which is full and humming with life. He watches her foot swing slowly at the ankle. It’s too bad. Bucky was hoping to get out of Wakanda, if only for a few days. The vastness of the palace and its grounds feels stifling when it once felt uncomfortably immense, too much space for unpredictability to happen. It’s a cocoon he’s now outgrown, and yet, here he must remain.

“I remember sitting out here with you not that long ago.” Wanda lays her hand on his shoulder. “You’ve grown so much. You should be very proud.”

Bucky looks down the length of his legs, thick with muscle, which are stretched out in front of him. “Sometimes it’s hard to remember that, especially now. All I see are the things I can’t have or can’t do. Sometimes I forget.”

“Well, consider this a reminder to remember, and to be gentle with yourself.” Wanda gives his shoulder a firm pat and stands.

He smiles up at her. “Thanks.”

Bucky stays behind after she leaves, taking a few intentional minutes to breathe before moving into problem-solving mode. He makes the rounds to apologize to the team and finds Steve in their room, sitting on the bed, writing in the notebook from the meeting today. Bucky crawls onto the bed and lays his head in Steve’s lap, facing his feet.

“What’s this all about?” Steve asks gently, passing his fingers through Bucky’s hair.

“I’m sorry,” Bucky says. “I was out of line.”
“No, you weren’t. Not at all. That must have felt like an ambush. I’m the one who should apologize.”

“I understand. I’m not ready.” Hearing himself say it out loud somehow imbues it with even greater truth. “I’m obviously not ready.”

“You will be.”

Bucky shifts so that he’s looking up at Steve, his expression stern. “We need to do skills assessments for everyone. Shore up weaknesses. Start drilling. And we need to set up an operations center with – “

“Don’t worry, we’ll get to all that next meeting.” Steve traces his fingertips over Bucky’s forehead, over those serious brows. He regards Bucky like he would a blank canvas, like he’s seeing something there that others can’t yet perceive. “I don’t know if this is the right thing to do. I’m worried about getting caught.”

“Of course it’s the right thing to do. And we’re not gonna get caught. You know how I know?”

“How?”

Bucky’s eyes narrow. “Because I never got caught. Not until Bucharest. And I won’t let us get caught, either.”

Steve tilts his head. His gaze flits from Bucky’s face to the bedspread to the wall and back. “If you hadn’t been set up,” he says, “do you think we ever would have found you?”

Bucky shakes his head. “Not a chance. Not unless I wanted it.”

“I can’t imagine what that would have been like. To never find you. To always wonder. To dream about you and think about you and worry about you, but never…” Steve falters.

“You’ve got me now. All the rest of that is just noise. Just your brain making up stories that aren’t even real.” Bucky reaches up and lays his hand on Steve’s cheek. “This is the only thing that’s real.”

“You’re right.” Steve leans into Bucky’s palm and kisses it. “You’re right.”

Six weeks later

Bucky nods as he finishes his walk-around of the new Quinjet. It’s a beautiful machine, fresh delivered from SHIELD, having traded in the old one for it. Bucky wonders what sort of sleight of hand will be involved in making that transaction appear legitimate on Coulson’s end, but it’s not his problem.

The team starts to filter down a few minutes later. Nat comes first to conduct pre-flight checks from the flight deck while Bucky re-checks arms and ammo. They shouldn’t need them. It’s a simple intelligence collection mission. Break into Advanced Idea Mechanics’ Mumbai lab. Knock out some CC TV cameras. Lift a couple hard drives. Everybody comes home. It’s very low risk, almost too easy. Clint and Scott aren’t even going. But the data will be invaluable in future mission planning for both them and for SHIELD.

Bucky and Nat chat about what Bucky’s going to do while they’re gone, and he offers such
preposterous proposals as “enjoy the quiet” and “watch Band of Brothers with T’Challa.” They both know he’s just going to camp out in the ops center and neurotically monitor everything, from their flight course across the Indian Ocean to the comms traffic once on site.

Wanda and Sam are next, pep in their steps, practically bouncing with excitement. Wanda tells him she’s going to miss him, with enough sincerity to think that it’s probably true. Bucky forces a small, hollow chuckle when Sam claps him on the back and tells him to hang tough. He knows very well how hard this is for Bucky, and Bucky doesn’t want there to be any concerns among them about his ability to handle their absence with grace and self-control.

God damn it, he wants to go with them. But he chokes down the astringent creep of envy and finishes his checks. When everything is prepared to his satisfaction, he wishes the team good luck and walks down the ramp to the landing pad just as Steve approaches, shield and helmet in hand.

He looks amazing in his uniform. Tall and golden and dizzyingly handsome. Bucky notices with a bittersweet smile that he also looks happy.

“You look good,” Bucky tells him.

“Wasn’t sure it’d still fit. Got a little soft around the middle since we’ve been here.” He pats his flat stomach.

“Yeah, you really let yourself go.”

Steve smiles. “Think you can still love me?”

Bucky reaches up and holds Steve’s face in his hands. He searches his eyes, placid, clear, and warm. And alive. So alive. Fear rips through him, because what if that light burned out? What if…?

He feels it. He lets himself feel it. Because it’s love. Because love is joy and also sorrow. He kisses Steve softly.

“Be safe.”

“You got it.”

Bucky watches Steve disappear up the ramp, but not before wheeling around to give Bucky a cheeky two-fingered salute. Bucky returns it and covers his ears as the engines spool up. He turns away until the jet wash clears, then watches them become a shimmering reflection. He stays on the landing pad, tracking that shimmer, until he can’t hear or see them anymore. Until the palace compound and everyone in it is just a speck to them.

Emotion swells and ebbs. He rides it like a wave. Ugly, scared thoughts scrape the inside of his skull. He acknowledges them and lets them pass. And through it all, he stands, solid, anchored in himself. Anchored in the self he’s somehow sculpted out of rubble and ash and devastation.

Bucky smiles. He’s going to be okay. He knows it in his heart and his mind. He knows it in his gut. He knows it like he knows the sun on his face. Like he knows his own breath.

He’s going to be okay.
Well, it’s the end of the line, folks. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for allowing me to give you a glimpse into my headcanon. This is the first piece of fiction I’ve written in many, many years (and my first fanfic), so I came into this with trepidation and low expectations for how this would be received. I have been absolutely floored and filled with gratitude by the support you’ve given me through your kudos, bookmarks, subscriptions, and comments. For those of you who post on AO3, you know just how awesome it feels to receive feedback, and your kind words were essential in helping me continue to slog through this beast.

I hope you enjoy this sort-of-epilogue, which has been a ton of fun for me to write. To give you a sense of the timeline, this article was published about three months after the last chapter, which would make it the September 2017 edition of Rolling Stone.

ALSO!!! For those of you who are interested in knowing what Cognitive Processing Therapy is like in the therapy room, this is an extraordinary example of it conducted by a real trauma therapist and a real patient (and journalist) for This American Life. It’s excellent and I highly recommend it. (CW: it involves some discussion of sexual assault). Enjoy!!

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The Man Who Survived Winter

Gretchen M. Stilwell

James Buchanan Barnes stands on the roof of the sprawling Wakandan royal complex that’s been his home since May 2016. “This is the best part,” he says, staring out intently over the jungle canopy. It’s dawn, already warm and muggy, and James says that the mornings have been particularly “glorious” this month – his descriptor. A more fitting description might be “ghostly” or “haunting,” particularly the way that the sun is completely veiled behind the clouds and thick fog creeping from the deep-forested ridges. Discrepancy is a fairly typical occurrence when spending time with James. You get the sense that his brain and senses are calibrated just a few clicks to the left or right of your own. It feels odd at first, and you wonder if it’s you or him.

“It’s me,” he says. “It’s definitely me.” He smiles at this. James is strikingly handsome, more attractive in person than he is in photographs. He’d probably be even handsomer if he didn’t look so tired. There appears to be an existential tiredness stacked upon the physical kind. “I basically didn’t sleep for 70 years,” James says, referring to the decades he spent in cryonic stasis while he was a prisoner of Hydra.
According to Petra Teresi, Professor of Biochemistry and researcher at the California Institute of Technology’s cryonics research lab, “the brain doesn’t undergo any regenerative processes during cryostasis. You can’t even call it sleeping, because everything stops. It wouldn’t be at all refreshing, and when combined with the stressors involved in bringing the body in and out of stasis, this process repeated over the span of decades would be absolutely exhausting.”

As for the existential tiredness, James shrugs. “Probably the trauma. Whenever I don’t know why something unusual or bad is happening with me, I just assume it’s the past wreaking havoc in the present.” James tells me that he has been seeing a trauma therapist since October 2016 and that he has been diagnosed with depression and PTSD. “Complex PTSD,” he emphasizes. “The kind you get when you’re treated like shit for so long that you eventually stop believing that the way you’re being treated is wrong.”

Harvard psychiatrist Judith Herman coined the term “complex PTSD (C-PTSD)” in her 1992 book Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror. C-PTSD is distinct from PTSD because it arises from prolonged exposure to trauma of an interpersonal nature. It’s commonly associated with the chronic abuse, neglect, or maltreatment of children or adolescents. However, it can also occur in adults with no significant trauma history, such as prisoners of war and victims of torture. In addition to symptoms typically seen in individuals with PTSD, people with C-PTSD also have difficulties with regulating their emotions and having healthy relationships.

“Emotionally, it’s like you’re either dead inside or you’re in agony,” James says. “There’s no middle. There’s no ‘I’m feeling upset, but I think I can handle it.’” He talks regretfully about “bringing chaos” to the living space he shares with the Wakanda-based Avengers. Yelling, fights, punching the wall, having what he calls “meltdowns.” His housemates play down these incidents, insisting that his outbursts rarely escalate to anything that might be construed as chaos. They warn that James is prone to overestimating how disruptive he is, as well as underestimating his positive qualities. “He’ll tell you he’s all these terrible things, but he’s not,” says Sam Wilson. “We all love him. And we like him, too. He’s a nice guy. He’s funny. Yeah, he’s crunchy on the outside. But who wouldn’t be, after all that?”

Sam’s sentiments are unanimous among those who live with James. They describe him using virtually the same metaphors, all of which are tellingly sugar-related: a bowling ball with marshmallow fluff inside; an M&M; a cherry cordial; a porcupine filled with gummy bears. James is a likeable guy. A good guy. “When he gets down on himself for not being perfectly normal, you don’t know if you want to shake him by the shoulders and call him an idiot or wrap him in a blanket and hug him to death,” Wanda Maximoff says. “Sometimes we do both at the same time,” Scott Lang adds, “which I imagine is kind of confusing for him.”

Others have a different appraisal of James. In private, Natasha Romanoff offers the comparison to a stray cat. “He’ll start off pretty far away, but with time, he’ll get closer. He might even come sit by you, close enough to pet him. But he won’t ever let you touch him.” It’s clear here that she’s not talking about physical touch. “No matter how nice you are or how gentle you are, there’s never full trust there. When you get hurt like that, there’s a barrier there.” She presses her lips together. “There has to be.”

There is a sense of this in conversations with James. He asserts himself regularly, using language that sounds, for lack of a better term, clinical. You could imagine him practicing it with his therapist, trying to get the words and intonation just right. And there’s always a bracing that occurs when he draws a boundary, almost like a flinch, as if he’s expecting retaliation. It speaks to what Natasha is referring to, the unease that never quite goes away. When I ask the others about it, they all attest to experiencing something similar. Even Steve Rogers, who has the longest history with
James, admits to what he calls “guarding.” “I don’t think he even knows he’s doing it,” Steve says. “I don’t think it’s personal. It’s just how he is now.”

James tells me that the relationships he currently has were hard-won, largely because of barriers he created for himself. He says that in his experience with C-PTSD, “you either have no relationships or you get so fused with the other person that you don’t have a self. Because why would anyone want to be in a relationship with someone like me? That’s my logic. If there’s no me there, if I’m you, or everything about me is really about you, that makes sense to me. That’s the only way a relationship with me could make any sense. If I’m not really in it.” He snorts loudly and shakes his head. “Hear how fucked up that sounds? That’s the way my brain functions.”

That aforementioned discrepancy is especially obvious in the way people view James versus the way he views himself. People with C-PTSD often have distortions in their perception of themselves, which can contribute to the alienation they feel from others. With such extremes in emotions and relationships, “you have to create that balanced middle place from scratch,” James says. “That’s what the therapy’s for. If you don’t have a real sense of self, how do you build a person from that nothingness? It’s scary. Part of what makes it so scary is that you get to choose who you’re going to be.”

The continued development of the self is a reliable drive that many Americans have. It’s the reason why the self-help industry makes staggering amounts of money every year. C-PTSD, however, makes this task more of a challenge, as James describes it. “So you get to choose who you’re going to be, but what if you can’t trust yourself to choose the right type of person to become? Because your internal compass, all your instincts, they’re ass-backwards. But not even backwards, because then you could just do the opposite. Some of them are not accurate, but you don’t know which ones or how off they are. 15 degrees? 180 degrees? 90 degrees? Who the fuck knows. Needless to say, it’s been a bumpy road. Lots of course corrections.”

So far, James has completed two evidence-based treatments for PTSD: Skills Training in Affective and Interpersonal Regulation for emotion and relationship skills and Cognitive Processing Therapy for the direct treatment of the trauma. Both of these are considered first-line treatments and are used extensively within the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Defense. “Right now in therapy I’m working on how to use all the skills I’ve learned to try to have a decent life. Building healthy relationships, figuring out how to be a productive member of society, learning how to be alone with myself and still be okay.”

In this sense, James is working on the same things that many of us are. However, unlike most others, he’s also forced to cope with the lingering daily reminders of the horrors he experienced. I ask James how often he still remembers what was done to him and the things he was forced to do. “Every single day, multiple times a day,” he says matter-of-factly. “Sometimes it’s random, or sometimes I smell or hear something that reminds me of something bad that happened. I don’t get a pass on that, no matter how much work I do in therapy. It’s impossible to forget.” He pauses and rubs his hand over the few days’ worth of stubble on his face. “To be honest, I don’t know if I’d want to forget, even if I could. Because it’s what happened, and it’s just as important as anything else that’s happened in my life.”

James Buchanan Barnes was born March 10th 1917 in the Irish-saturated Bay Ridge neighborhood of Brooklyn. In the first part of his life, he went by “Bucky,” a nickname derived from his middle name “because every fourth boy in the neighborhood was named James, swear to God,” he says.
He then appears to become lost in thought. “I don’t know if that name fits anymore, though,” he admits. “People here call me that because Steve [Rogers] calls me that. But now that I’ve done all this work, I don’t know anymore.”

When asked how to describe himself as a child, James says he was “nosey and curious, but maybe those are the same. I liked to help my ma in the kitchen. Help her around the house. Help her with my sister. God, my dad hated all that. He’d throw me outside. Really. Lift me under the arms and toss me out the door and lock it behind me. Tell me to go get dirty or scraped up or else.” James laughs at this, but his eyes are a bit too dull to convince anyone that it’s strictly humorous to him. “I was good at school. I wanted to go to college, believe it or not. I didn’t care what for. Just wanted to be there.” However, when James’ father was fired for being intoxicated on the job, James was forced to step in and work full time to support his family. “I worked at the docks until Uncle Sam got my number.” He smiles now, and it’s genuine, completely detached from the misery that draft notice would ultimately bring him. “And that was that.”

His parents, George and Winifred Barnes (née Hubbard), were both first generation Irish American. James describes his father as a man whose favorite pastimes were “screaming and drinking.” His mother “was quiet. She shut down around dad. Let him run everything.” He prefers not to say anything more about her. George was drafted as an infantryman with the 77th Infantry Division and was part of the notoriously bloody Meuse-Argonne Offensive in the fall of 1918. “That messed him up,” James says. “Most of his yelling was about not wanting us to be weak, probably because of whatever happened over there.”

Knowing what he knows about PTSD from his own experience, James imagines that his father had it. He describes hypervigilant behaviors (standing by the window with a bayonet “just waiting for something bad to happen”), avoidance through drinking, and “lots of drunken babbling about the war. To me, mostly, when I was just a kid. Long, blubbering rants about guys all blown up, guts hanging out, choking on mustard gas.” James never knew if all of his father’s talk about weakness was because he thought those who died were weak or because he thought he was weak for being so distressed by their deaths.

James’ sister, Rebecca, was born in 1921. He talks about her in a distant tone. He recently found out that she’s still alive and residing in an assisted living facility for older adults with severe cognitive impairment. He thinks she might have Alzheimer’s, but he’s not sure. He won’t disclose where she is or where he got the information, but he wants to see her. “I don’t know if she’s alone or who’s coming to see her or what. I want to make sure she’s being taken care of.” James is prohibited from visiting, however, due to the outstanding warrants against him. “Probably wouldn’t remember me anyway,” he says, a half-hearted sour grapes dismissal if there ever was one.

If that tugs at your heartstrings, it should. James’ story is sad. It’s a story that qualifies, without an ounce of hyperbole, as tragic. It’s a story of a regular American guy who went to war and died, only to be resurrected as an unwilling servant to the organization he fought so hard to destroy. For those who haven’t read any of the series on James in the New York Times, it’s difficult to describe the magnitude of the abuse and torture James experienced as a captive of Hydra, both during his unit’s imprisonment in Kreischberg, Austria and after his recapture when he was presumed killed in action in 1944. James asks me to not reiterate the details in this article, because “nobody needs to read that shit again.” Let it suffice to say that it’s the stuff of nightmares. Even Stephen King was quoted as saying that he couldn’t have concocted a more macabre story than James’ own biography, and when the king of modern American horror can’t out-horror your life, you know it’s bad.

Since the release of these articles, the sea change in public opinion around James and his crimes
has been nothing short of monumental. “There’s a lot of repairing that needs to be done around Sergeant Barnes’ reputation,” says Carlos Herrera, spokesman for the Defense Prisoner of War/Missing in Action (POW/MIA) Accounting Agency. “And we consider that a public duty, not his personal duty.” Elliot Simons of the National League of POW/MIA Families has stronger words. “He’s been wronged in so many ways, including by his own government. That incident with the Smithsonian exhibit was just one example.”

Simons is referring to the removal of James’ annex from the Smithsonian’s Captain America exhibit soon after he was accused of the UN bombing in May 2016. The annex was taken down even despite Helmut Zemo’s confession absolving James of any involvement, as well as the investigation confirming the same. “The Smithsonian took [the annex] down because they didn’t want to look bad. Sergeant Barnes hadn’t even been formally charged with anything, at that point.” Simons is really pissed about this, and he’s not shy to admit it. His own father was a POW in Hòa Lò Prison for four years, during which time he was presumed KIA. “It was like Sergeant Barnes was removed from history. Like he didn’t exist anymore. A true war hero who endured unspeakable abuses because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time, fighting for his country.” Simons shakes his head. “It’s disgusting.”

The betrayal of the Smithsonian’s erasing of James does have unsettling parallels to the erasure of James’ identity by Hydra, and this was not lost on the public. The Smithsonian put out a series of statements in response to raucous outcry over its decision, which, it should be noted, did not escalate until nearly a year after the exhibit closed. Most of the Smithsonian’s statements pointed out that the entire Captain America exhibit was due to be dismantled in a few months anyway, which invited criticism of deflecting and rationalizing a poor decision rather than apologizing for it. James is carefully circumspect about this incident. “I appreciate the outrage on my behalf, but the situation wasn’t straightforward at that time. When they closed the annex, they didn’t know the things about me that the public knows now. I can’t really blame them for their choice.”

The aim of the public’s indignation over James’ treatment has not been limited to the Smithsonian. The outstanding charges from the U.S. Attorney General’s office have also drawn no shortage of ire. A source inside the Attorney General’s office states that the backlash against the charges has been “intense, to says the least. Emails, letters, angry phone calls, protests. People are mad. They sympathize with Barnes and want to see us throw everything in the trash. Unfortunately, the AG can’t dismiss 20 first degree murder charges just because the public thinks they’re unfair.”

James gets visibly anxious when you start talking about his legal status. He’s consulted with a lawyer, but “it’s a huge hurdle, and one I’m not ready to jump yet,” he says, referring to surrendering himself to U.S. authorities. Even ultimately favorable legal actions cannot occur until James is formally processed by the Department of Justice, which would require him to be in their custody. Lakesha Wilcox, professor of criminal law at Colombia Law School, suggests that James has a pretty good shot of being absolved of the charges. “If there’s as much hard evidence as the Times articles suggest, I would say there’s a fairly strong probability that the case wouldn’t make it to trial,” she says. “His lawyer could request a summary judgment after all the documents were investigated by both sides during the preliminary hearing process.” In short, all parties look at the evidence, determine that there is nothing actually in dispute, and everyone goes home.

However, despite decent odds of this favorable outcome, there’s also risk involved. “I don’t know if I could handle being in jail,” James says. Given his extensive history of traumatic captivity, “being in a cell like that would be…” He trails off and seems to drift away to someplace else. This happens with some frequency, and at first, it’s off-putting. But when you’re around James enough, you eventually become accustomed to the long beats and gulfs of silence. I prompt him to finish his thought. “It’d be tough.” Tough enough that he’d consider staying in Wakanda indefinitely, in a different kind of prison. “It’s not so bad here,” he says, giving an uneasy smile.
President Trump’s decision to rescind the U.S.’s agreement to the Sokovia Accords, along with the ongoing tensions between the Trump administration and the UN, has been advantageous for the at-large Avengers. When I ask him about the president’s promise to have his charges dropped, James chuckles. “That’s nice of him, but I don’t think that’s how the judicial system works.” However, he’s careful not to bite the hand that might feed him.

It’s difficult to tell if James is joking when he expresses concern that he’ll be left behind in Africa after the president’s impending pardons of Steve, Wanda, Scott, Sam, Natasha, and Clint Barton are made official. When you talk to the other Avengers, this concern seems entirely misplaced. “I’ll continue to stay in Wakanda until Bucky can leave,” Steve says. Wanda and Sam pledge similar loyalty. There has also been talk of reconciliation between Tony Stark’s and Steve’s teams, now that the Sokovia Accords are in their death throes, but there’s palpable strain in the air when we broach the subject. Clint gives me a silent signal to drop the subject, passing his flattened hand back and forth in front of his neck. “We’re talking,” is all Steve will say on the matter.

(Update: Two days before publication of this issue, the United States Attorney General entered into negotiations with King T’Challa to begin judicial proceedings on James’ case via teleconference, provided that he remain in the custody of the Wakandan government for the arraignment and preliminary hearing processes. It is uncertain at this point what would happen in the event that James’ case was not granted favorable summary judgment. When reached for comment on these negotiations, James said that he’s “cautiously hopeful and scared shitless.”)

The story of James Barnes is ultimately a story of war. James is a representative of generations of men and women who were sent overseas to fight for their country and became someone different in the process. War often demands actions that violate deeply held moral beliefs and social contracts, particularly the notion that killing is wrong. This creates an internal conflict in the warrior that is frequently settled by silencing those beliefs and disregarding those contracts in service of the mission. “You start off a regular person, and then you go to war and do these awful things that seem so right to you at the time,” James says. “I killed a lot of people when I was in the Army. Yeah, they were Hydra. They were bad guys. But it wasn’t noble. It was brutal.” If you were to exchange the enemies, replace “Hydra” with “Al Qaeda” or “Taliban,” you would have the words of countless veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

As unusual as James’ experiences are, he readily admits that they are still grounded in many of the same themes that other veterans struggle with in the wake of war. Creating meaning out of human cruelty. Finding a place in society. Learning to connect to people who haven’t shared their experiences. “The real work is making sense of pieces that don’t really fit together,” James says. “How can I be a good guy but also a guy who’s done bad things? How can I trust people when people have treated me so terribly? How can the world be so beautiful and so incredibly fucked up at the same time?” He shrugs. He’s still sorting those things out.

The toll of all of this has not been on James alone. Caring for someone with severe trauma is challenging, requiring patience, restraint, and an almost endless supply of energy. “When you care about someone who’s been through something so awful, you want to save them. You want to fix them,” Steve tells me. We’re alone, drinking coffee in a small alcove in the executive wing of the palace. Steve has been James’ primary social support throughout his recovery process, and the weariness in James’ eyes is echoed in Steve’s as well. “It becomes all-consuming. You worry constantly. You second-guess everything that comes out of your mouth. And sometimes the thing that seems to be the right thing to do is really the wrong thing to do, and you don’t fully understand
It’s difficult to get Steve to open up about James, and even when he does, you get the sense that he might slam the door shut at any moment. He’s defensive, wary, and very careful in his wording. He tells me that, ultimately, “it’s not my place to fix him. I can’t. The best thing I can do is be available and supportive and realize that sometimes stepping back is the best course of action.” As a man who literally saves the world for a living, you can sense how difficult this role is for him to accept, even after so long.

Later, I ask James what it means to him to be better. He thinks hard about it, fidgeting with the band of the digital watch he’s wearing. “I don’t know if there really is a ‘better,’ in terms of an end point,” he says. “It’s a verb. It’s a process. There’s so much maintenance that I do every day just to function. I can’t go back to the days where I could just live and not have to think about whether I’m dissociating too much or using my therapy tools the right way or whether I’m sleeping enough. That chapter of my life is closed.” There’s sorrowful resignation in his voice that he doesn’t bother to mask. Despite all of the work he’s done, this reality is something that continues to create fresh pain for him. He tells me that his expectations of his recovery have shifted over time. “I went from wanting to eat a bullet to thinking I was going to be able to live a normal life again. I’ve settled somewhere in the middle.” James describes this middle place as “normal-ish, with conditions.”

Back on the roof, we’re in one of those wide expanses of silence, and from the way James’ gaze is ambiguously fixed, it’s difficult to tell if he’s here or somewhere else. The tangible tension he usually carries in his body is, for the moment, completely absent. The thick mists are rolling over and through the trees, and there really is something glorious about it, if you adjust your lens. Perhaps in the eyes of a man who’s endured more suffering in one year than most of us will endure in a lifetime, glorious takes its form in things the rest of us ignore. Perhaps for a man who spent seven decades stored in a Soviet missile silo like a piece of equipment, a dark jungle pressed against the backdrop of an overcast sky is splendid.

“I’m happy,” James says spontaneously, his smile small but beautifully sincere. There’s light in his eyes, which are as gray as the glorious, creeping mists he’s watching. “Somehow, after everything, I’m happy.”

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