### Windmills

**Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at** [http://archiveofourown.org/works/9532013](http://archiveofourown.org/works/9532013).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Explicit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>Rape/Non-Con</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>M/M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Captain America (Movies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>James &quot;Bucky&quot; Barnes/Steve Rogers, James &quot;Bucky&quot; Barnes/Hydra Agents, (past)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>James &quot;Bucky&quot; Barnes, Steve Rogers, Sam Wilson (Marvel), Other Avengers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>Consent Issues, Past Rape/Non-con, Unreliable Narrator, POV Alternating, Hurt/Comfort, Food Issues, Flashbacks, Bucky thinks the avengers are his new handlers, he expects them to use him like HYDRA did, yet he's pretty defiant about it, HYDRA Trash Party, HYDRA Trash Party adjacent, this was written in response to a kinkmeme prompt asking for Bucky’s sense of tmi being screwed up, he's unable to ask for basic stuff like food, while he sees no problem in jumping people with details of his abuse by HYDRA, This fic is more aftermath than anything, Bucky Barnes Needs a Hug, but don't you dare give him one, Aftermath of Torture, Violence, see chapter notes for additional warnings, explicit flashbacks, Not Captain America: Civil War (Movie) Compliant, Post-Captain America: The Winter Soldier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2017-01-31 Completed: 2017-07-27 Chapters: 14/14 Words: 21894</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Windmills**

by coffeestainanalyst

**Summary**

His current codename is Bucky. His new handlers are called friends. Steve, one of the highest ranking friends, only had to correct him once before he’d adapted to the new vocabulary. Yet so far, things are looking rough: decommissioned from active duty, he's left with no other purpose than their entertainment. All he can do is wait, push through with gritted teeth and do whatever he can to turn the tables in his favor again.

**Notes**

This fic would be nothing but rambling and semicolons if it wasn’t for Neery, taydev and eatingcroutons.
May the patron saint of kinky dumpster divers heap blessings upon you today and always.
See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

01 - Steve

Bucky’s slumped in the armchair, head bowed but eyes tracing Steve’s every move. With his jaw clenched and his brow knitted in frustration, he looks so much more alive than wearing that blank stare of the last few days, and Steve can’t help feeling almost hopeful even though they are arguing.

"No, Bucky, no. You’re not cleared for the field. I thought we’d discussed that you’d wait in the tower."

He stops pacing and looks at Bucky, watches his nostrils flare and his half-hidden eyes glimmer. After a while it becomes clear that if Steve waits for an answer, he’s waiting in vain. Steve slaps himself mentally – most of the time, Bucky still does not speak unless he’s specifically told to. One of a million reasons his place is anywhere but on a battlefield.

Steve walks up to him and squats down, makes sure to show Bucky his empty hands before he gently rests them on Bucky’s knees. Despite his almost arrogantly sprawled out pose, every muscle in Bucky’s body is taut.

"That being said," Steve continues more softly, "I want you to know that you did help us out a great deal there. Probably saved my ass in more ways than I realize. So, thank you."

Bucky glares up at him from hooded eyes, and something in Steve’s chest tweaks uncomfortably as he forces himself to give Bucky the permission he needs to speak. "C’mon, Buck. Talk to me."

"I did not do it for you," Bucky shoots immediately. His hands twitch and his eyes flicker over Steve’s forearms as if considering grabbing him there. Eventually, he simply digs his fingers deeper into the fabric of the armchair. "I want an upgrade," he hisses.

Steve frowns. Bucky’s said borderline disturbing things before, and Steve’s stomach fills with dread at the possibility of Bucky nonchalantly proposing them cutting him open to make adjustments again. When that does not seem to be the case, he exhales a deep breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding.

"I can be a soldier," Bucky urges instead. He leans forward and fixates Steve with that unblinking stare he’s been sporting lately. "I can be an entire army. I can – whatever you want. Out there, in the field. I won’t disappoint you."

"Of course not," Steve says with an exasperated frown. "You never have, you know that, right? And in time, if you still want it then, I’d be honored to fight by your side again. But not just yet."

Steve hears Bucky’s jaw work. His fingers thrum restlessly. No answer. Eventually, Steve taps Bucky’s thigh and stands up.

"Shower?"

Bucky goes completely still. After a long moment, he nods sharply and gets up. "You do it," he says and walks towards the bathroom, not looking left nor right.

Steve gives him a head start for privacy. At least Bucky’s taken to dressing and undressing on his own again. Red-hot anger still flares up inside Steve at the thought of those bastards controlling Bucky’s life to such an extent that he didn’t even get to do that alone. Hell, the guy can single-
handedly take out a room full of enemies, blindfolded, probably while cracking a code or disabling a
top-notch alarm system – of course he is capable of using a shower. He still expects Steve to be
there, though.

Maybe he needs to adjust to his new freedom gradually.

Or maybe… Steve doesn’t dare hope, because Bucky has been nothing but highly reserved towards
him – and who can blame him, honestly – but maybe he wants Steve close on some subconscious
level. Maybe he does want a friend around when he feels vulnerable. Who cares how awkward it is,
Steve will do whatever it takes to make Bucky feel even remotely more comfortable.

After a few minutes have passed, Steve follows him into the bathroom.
Chapter 2

02 - Bucky

His current codename is Bucky. His new handlers are called friends. Steve, one of the highest ranking friends, only had to correct him once before he’d adapted to the new vocabulary. It seemed an odd choice for a minute, until he remembered that before the handlers, he’d had comrades.

He’s shed his armor and lies in the bathtub. Steve sits behind him on the bathroom floor and shampoos his hair, fingers rubbing soapy circles into his scalp while he’s casually chattering. He’s talking about the rest of the team, how they unwind from the mission.

Steve says that Tony’s down at his workshop, repairing his suit’s dents and cuts. Clint’s asleep on the common room couch, covered in band-aids, and Steve hopes Clint’s right when he says it looks worse than it is. His own wounds, well. Steve shrugs almost apologetically.

While he keeps talking, Bucky’s mind drifts off. Steve obviously cares a great deal about the others, that much is clear. Bucky finds he only cares about himself, about the punishment he’s got coming for his earlier transgression.

Steve turns on the water again, and every time Bucky feels hands threading through his hair, he expects their grip to tighten, waits for his throat to be arched back and the gush of water to hit his face. He vividly remembers the sharp pain in his nose, the pressure in his lungs, the panic – even though it’s been years since the last time they made him drown.

Steve likes it when Bucky remembers.

He’s said so repeatedly. So do the doctors that are assigned to make sure Bucky’s brain functions the way SHIELD likes it. Not all of them wear white coats, but Bucky can smell their lot from a mile away. He’s seen plenty in his time, and they always smile at first.

Bucky doesn’t admit how much he remembers. He breaks into a cold sweat every time he’s scheduled for a brain scan, worried they’ll find out he’s been lying. They haven’t used the machines that soothe his mind, and hell if he’s giving them or Steve the satisfaction of knowing that he suffers from it.

In truth, more and more memories resurface each day, clear and sharp like polished blades. Just the other night he had almost panicked for no other reason than the whistling of a kettle. That’s all it took to send his mind spiralling back to the safe house, that evening he made his CO so mad that they burned his genitals with hot water.

"Steve…? Do you think it’s cheating if someone passes out before a punishment is over?"

Steve’s irritated that Bucky’s spoken out of line, but even though there’s anger in Steve’s voice, he’s again not reinforcing the rule. His own fault if his team lacks discipline. If Steve’s too weak for the job, Bucky’s going to exploit it the best he can – sorry Steve, but that’s the way of the world.

Steve agrees that passing out is definitely not cheating. Bucky nods with grim satisfaction and wishes Commander Rumlow could hear that. Wherever he is, Bucky hopes he’s suffering.

Unfortunately, Steve also says that it’s wrong to punish people in ways that make them pass out, so SHIELD probably has experts who cause maximum pain without losing their victims one way or the other. Bucky’s willing to bet his best knife that the woman is one of them.
He’s getting more and more reckless, and he knows it. At this rate, he’ll find out about SHIELD’s torturers sooner rather than later. All he can do is try to become as indispensable as possible, preferably as a fighter. It’s his strongest suit, anyway – he’ll have to keep reminding them of that fact, even if his initial attempts result in temporary punishment.

For now, nothing happens, though. Steve merely rinses his hair, not hurting him beyond the fact that he makes sure no water runs down Bucky’s face for him to inconspicuously lap up.

Then, Steve lets go of him again and hands him a washcloth: "You can do the rest on your own, right?"

Bucky closes his metal hand around the wet cloth, kneading it between his fingers. It’s obvious that he’s supposed to scrub the sweat and dirt off his body. But can he do so quietly or is he supposed to put on a show, moan and all that? He’s pretty sure Steve’s one of those who want Bucky to pretend he likes what they do to him.

Not tonight, he decides, and starts washing mechanically. No matter how feigned, nobody wants to see him enjoy himself right after he’s broken the rules like that only a couple of hours ago.

Turns out he made a good choice. Steve keeps looming behind him, but doesn’t complain. He evenbusies himself with the towels for a while, still talking about this and that. Bucky uses Steve’s momentary distraction to slip a hand between his legs and wash there, too. He’s usually allowed to touch himself for maintenance procedures, but a lot of things work differently around here. To be on the safe side, he keeps the washcloth wrapped around his hand at all times.

When Steve turns back to him, Bucky’s done. Steve seems pleased, and Bucky files the knowledge away for further reference.

- 

After the bath, the usual mocking starts: "Are you hungry?" "Do you want food?"

If Steve thinks he can be made to beg that easily, he’s sorely mistaken. Yes, the tower is surveilled around the clock – cameras everywhere and there’s an artificial intelligence keeping watch, hindering Bucky from stealing food while the others are sleeping. Yes, his stomach is in knots at the mere thought of food. Of water. But no, he won’t display any more weakness than he absolutely has to. They are just looking for cracks in his armor, opportunities to dig their claws in.

"Talk to me, Buck. Grab some food or straight to bed?"

Bucky swallows bitterly. It’s one thing to know what’s going to happen and another to be taunted about it. Steve asks directly though, which he can’t ignore, so he shrugs. "Your decision."

Judging from Steve’s face, the answer isn’t what he’d have liked to hear, but it doesn’t warrant immediate correction either. Instead, Steve decides they’ll join the others for dinner.

For the fraction of a second, Bucky lets himself hope that it was time to be fed again already. He’s not yet used to his new schedule, so maybe… But food’s a reward and he certainly hasn’t earned one today, so they’ll probably make him sit at the table and watch them eating. He remembers that, too. Maybe they’ll offer him scraps for favors.

Bucky straightens up, promising himself that should they give him a choice, he won’t give in. He’s not that desperate yet.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Additional chapter warnings:
Nothing overly gruesome in this one, but just in case: Due to a misunderstanding, Bucky attacks Sam at some point. If you want to know exactly what's going on and don't mind spoilers, see end notes.*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

03.1 - Steve

Even after the most exhausting day it's difficult to eat with real gusto if the person opposite you stares you down as if instead of sitting at a dining table, you two have just entered a boxing ring.

Granted, they're late and the others have already eaten, but there's plenty of leftovers and the food at the tower is, if sometimes a tad fancy, always of great quality.

They're having the table for themselves, but Pepper and Sam are also still around. Pepper's demonstrating some of the more exceptional kitchen appliances, and they both can be heard laughing from time to time. Steve feels a rush of gratitude towards her, momentarily dulling the insistent sting of guilt over inviting Sam to stay at the tower for a while, and then dragging him along on no less than three different missions in the past two weeks without otherwise spending any real time with him.

Something's buzzing and Sam comes over, carrying a casserole dish. "Now look who shows up for dinner after all," he says, smiling. "Thought the senior citizens had retired early. Here, saved you some chicken mushroom stew."

Bucky hasn't even looked properly and already makes a face like he hates it.

"If you're still hungry after, there's more cheese and stuff in the fridge," Sam says. "The rest of us was pretty starved." He smiles, facing Bucky.

"There'll be more food once you're dead," Bucky answers.

Steve splutters his orange juice back into his glass, but Sam gestures to him to wait. "Yeah?" he asks. "Um. Got any immediate plans for that?"

Bucky shakes his head. "No. But you are not physically enhanced, and you don't have a protective suit either. You cracked at least two ribs today and suffered various abrasions. Your range of movement is impaired and it will slow you down for days. Between you and Barton, it's only a matter of time."

"Bucky!" Steve cuts in, once again waved off by Sam, who seems pretty calm considering he's being dragged into a conversation about his untimely demise.

"Yeah, and then what? You'll get my share of food… anything else?"

Steve knows from experience that Sam's got a knack for finding raw nerves and asking questions
that are just as important as they are uncomfortable. He’s got the best intentions, but that sure as hell
doesn’t mean everybody’s going to appreciate it. Steve watches Bucky with growing worry.

Bucky just frowns. "Not my decision. But yes, maybe food. Maybe they’ll give me your wings, once
they’re so short on fighters that they’ll have to make me a soldier again."

Sam tilts his head and leans down. Bucky does not even look at him, staring straight ahead at the
table. He doesn’t flinch at the hand on his shoulder.

"You keep saying that, it’s very important to you, right?" Sam asks. "Being a soldier… as opposed
to what?"

Without warning, Bucky rears around and spits in Sam’s face, who stumbles back in surprise.

Cracked ribs or not, Sam’s up and ready to defend himself in no time, but before Bucky can lunge at
him, Steve’s over the table – so much for the casserole – wrestling Bucky’s arms behind his back. He
hates to agree with Bucky on this, but few people can shrug off a sock to the jaw with that metal arm
and Sam’s not one of them.

"What the hell, Bucky?!"

Bucky hisses something unintelligible. For a moment he struggles against Steve’s hold, but then he
stops abruptly. He’s keeps breathing raggedly, just staring at Sam, and Steve doesn’t trust the peace
one bit. He keeps hold of Bucky and steers him towards the door, encountering no resistance.

Sam wipes his face with his sleeve, looking more thoughtful than angry. Pepper’s rushed to his side,
but Steve can’t make out what she’s saying. He’s going to catch up with Sam later, offer him a
thousand apologies, even though he knows he’s not responsible for Bucky’s actions. Still, Sam
deserves so much better than this. First though: de-escalate the situation.

Bucky does not resist as he’s led out of the room. He only looks back once, running his gaze over
the ruined casserole on the floor, before he turns back and falls into step with Steve.

03.2 - Bucky

On the way down the corridor, Steve does not say a word, but Bucky can discern his anger from the
tense way he carries himself, clipped stride tightly controlled and yet echoing too sharply through the
lifeless hallway.

When they enter the elevator, Bucky catches a glimpse of Steve’s face in the mirror and squares his
own shoulders in turn.

He’s got no one to blame but himself. He probably just blew any chances of an early promotion, plus
agonized the people in charge of him tonight. Way to go. And the worst is that he should know
better: Let them mock him, tell them what they want to hear. Don’t struggle.

And yet. Here they go again.

Bucky remembers the first time he was led to the room, back when his codename was still Winter
Soldier. They showed him around the tower, and with every workshop they passed by without
entering, every storage room that did not hold the capsules in which he was allowed to rest, his
stomach sank a little more.
Eventually, because he was worn so thin by his injuries and the lack of sleep, he actually asked, spoke up just like that, made them frown. No, they said, no, they would not store him in the weaponry, nor with the robots, and they would not freeze him anytime soon, either. They said it was no longer his place.

It was then that he realized just how dire his situation had become. Dread gathered in his guts with every step they took towards what they announced would be his room, and when they opened the door, he almost howled in frustration.

A bed. The room consisted of nothing but one huge bed, and they were going to permanently store him in it. Even without the memories clawing at the back of his mind, the implication would have been unmistakable.

Since then, he's spent every night there, waiting. They don't even let him out to sleep, to recharge in relative safety from time to time. It's no use anyway; they've destroyed his capsules. If he wants to rest, he has to learn to do it here.

(They’d always told him the day would come, hadn’t they? He should have known the moment the burning debris of the helicarriers came crashing down around him that that was it, finally one failure too many. Of course they were going to decommission him from active duty, leaving him no other purpose than their entertainment. That’s all he has now, no more missions, no more ‘He needs to be functional tomorrow’ like a shield between him and them.)

More than that; he’s being put on display, and the shame of that cuts deep. Everybody knows about the bed and all he can do is wait, push through with gritted teeth and do whatever he can to turn the tables in his favor again.

It’s a race against time, earning an upgrade before they can do permanent damage and ruin every last chance of being useful in other ways again.

Tonight, he failed spectacularly.

Chapter End Notes

*1) Bucky's not very subtle about wanting Sam's (or anyone's) spot on the team and sees no problem in discussing their untimely death, and 2) when Bucky misunderstands something Sam says as an attempt to mock him, he lashes out in what he perceives as self-defense.

Nope, the guy's not particularly stable right now.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Additional chapter warnings: food issues

04 - Bucky

Steve shoves him through the door. "Sit."

Bucky sinks down on the edge of the bed. Steve crosses his arms and leans against the wall. "Why’d you do that?"

To his own annoyance, Bucky is still not adept at reading his new handlers. Right now, Steve seems equally angry and sad. Bucky’d take the risk and lie, but he doesn’t have the slightest idea what to say to placate him. With a sour pang of disgust, Bucky realizes that the frantic beating of his heart might be loud enough for Steve to hear. He hates when they know that he’s afraid. He forces himself to meet Steve’s eyes.

"I didn’t want to say it. Wilson asked, and I should have answered, but…” He sets his jaw. “If I’d really meant to hurt him, he wouldn’t be on his feet right now."

"Bucky! If you don’t wanna say something, then don’t, but that’s no reason to attack someone!"

"No," Bucky repeats grimly. "It’s not. I made a mistake. I’m sorry."

Steve urges him on the bed and lies down next to him. Bucky realizes that he missed the right point to undress, and he’s not allowed clothes in bed.

Steve’s not complaining about Bucky’s pants and t-shirt though, instead he gives him the racism talk again. (It’s no secret Steve doesn’t like Bucky’s former owners, and he’s admitted he’s worried that spending decades with them might have screwed up Bucky’s worldview. Bucky almost laughed, but then found himself strangely moved by Steve’s assumption that he was someone HYDRA’d bothered talking to. He did not clear things up.)

Besides, listening to Steve’s speeches isn’t half bad. There’s a glimmer in his eyes that Bucky likes watching. He nods and shakes his head at all the right times, in between echoing things Steve’s said previously, again and again, until Steve seems satisfied.

"I get it," Bucky says. "It’s not about Wilson personally. If Barton dies first, that’s just as well."

"Bucky," Steve groans and smacks his shoulder. "These people wanna be your friends! If warming up to them takes time, that’s absolutely fine, but can you stop wishing them dead?"

"No harming my friends," Bucky recites, "I know that. I won’t do it again. I could even help you protect them, if you’d let me. But I can’t, you know… from here."

Steve’s lips tilt up in a lopsided smile. "Not attacking them is more than enough for now."

"Right," Bucky sighs.
"C’mere" Steve says and Bucky lets himself be pulled into Steve’s arms. Up close he can smell him, not only his shirt – his skin, faint traces of sweat on his neck, and it jogs Bucky’s memory. Steve has been his friend before, he’s admitted as much. Bucky remembers scraps, fragmented and blurry. He remembers the scent, he… he knows what that skin tastes like. Oh. He swallows bile. Why is he even surprised? Of course Steve’s done it before.

Bucky exhales slowly. It’s not painful per se, Steve’s hand threading through his hair, unsticking wet strands from his neck. Skidding lower. Lower, lower. Rubbing his back. It’s the apprehension that doesn’t sit well in Bucky’s guts. He wishes they could just get it over with.

No such luck. Maybe the waiting is part of the punishment. It goes on and on, but Bucky doesn’t walk into the trap. He can’t zone out, not just yet, he needs to keep his concentration and brace himself, in case the pain comes sudden and sharp. Steve’s strong, stronger than any of his latest handlers. He was able to deal enough damage when Bucky was allowed to defend himself. All the things he could do now.

Bucky’s head is pressed against Steve’s t-shirt, fabric stained from the mess at the dining table. Bucky doesn’t need to eat yet, not that desperately, so he’s surprised that even in a situation like this, his mind threatens to wander off. Food.

Yet again, his body betrays him. It does not take super-soldier hearing to notice the loud grumbling of Bucky’s stomach. It’s been latently hurting for days, but not enough to let it show. He needs to prove how strong he is, how valuable. That even on minimum rations he can deliver peak performance.

Steve laughs at him. "Your fault dinner fell through."

"I know."

"You want me to whip up a snack?"

"No." Another humiliating grumble.

"Yeah? Doesn’t sound like –"

"Stop it!" Bucky sits up sharply. "Just because I’m hungry doesn’t mean I need to eat!" He glares at Steve. "I can go without food for a very long time."

Steve frowns at him. "Okay," he says carefully. "Listen, I’m gonna bring some sandwiches, and you can take them or leave them as you like."

---

Steve returns with an entire plate of food. There’s bread and cheese and sliced meat – Steve’s cunning enough, he’s chosen what smells best, made sure Bucky’s mouth is watering before the door even clicks shut. (He catches himself considering – no. The wave of bitterness that wells up inside him is strong enough to nip the thought in the bud.)

Steve places the tray on the bed right between them.

"All yours."

"What do you want for it?" It’s out before he can stop himself. He bites his tongue. Steve can order it and there’s nothing he can do to change that, but he won’t go willingly, no matter what. Food be damned.
“How about getting some rest without your stomach keeping me up?” There’s a wry smile on
Steve’s face that fades the longer he looks at Bucky. “Nothing,” he says eventually, and Bucky
thinks his voice sounds pained.

He eyes Steve suspiciously. Regards the food. Maybe he does remember the first time he’d been
assigned to Steve, a long time ago. Steve used to wear suits then, and he’d been gentle and generous
at first, too, and Bucky had fallen for it hard. (Until.)

Bucky sighs. He’d been so stupid.

The initial acts of kindness had been legitimate though, so maybe they’re still at that stage and he can
actually get away with taking the food. On the other hand, wouldn’t it be satisfying to shove the plate
right back in Steve’s face, telling him he’d meant it when he said he didn’t need it?

It’s a nice thought, but he can’t live off nice thoughts (nor off pride), and by the time he’s decided
that he’ll take the risk and eat, he’s already cleared half the plate. There’s grease on his fingers, or
maybe it’s just the lingering scent of cheese but he makes sure nothing goes to waste, and Steve
hasn’t ordered him to be quiet anyway. He has trouble swallowing because his mouth is dry and he
isn’t chewing long enough for saliva to do the trick, but every chunk of bread that he gobbles down
before Steve changes his mind is a victory.

He’s trying to suck out a crumb that’s got caught between two plates of his metal arm when he meets
Steve’s eyes for a second over the palm of his hand. It’s Steve who looks away first and Bucky notes
that his ears are burning red. Bucky doesn’t look up again until he’s finished everything to the last
bit.

Without Bucky chewing, the room suddenly seems very silent, and Steve looks at him strangely. But
no matter what, the food is down and only now that it’s fading, Bucky realizes the amount of pain
he’d been in. He rubs his stomach.

Dangerous.

Steve drops his hand. His voice is all wrong, too. "Buck, when was the last time you ate?"

If he could, he’d wolf down another plate. And another. His stomach would rebel for sure, but given
the chance he’s not sure he could stop. He knows he doesn’t have to worry about that, though.
Attack dogs are kept hungry, and there’s no use wasting perfectly good food on a fucktoy that’s only
going to puke it up in the middle of the action anyway.

Still, it’s been a long time since his stomach wasn’t in knots from hunger. It’s worth a little teasing.

"Sunday," he answers dutifully.

Steve’s eyes widen. "Su- why?"

Bucky bows his head in the most submissive gesture he can muster. "Because that was the last time
you fed me, and I’m not hungry until you say I am."

"No," Steve blurts out, "no, that’s wrong, that’s –"

(That’s how most sentences addressed to Bucky start nowadays.)

Steve goes on rambling that in the heat of prepping for the mission they may have skipped out on
regular meals together, but that was never supposed to mean… and Bucky can always… and
whatever he wants… and so on, and so on. They both know food has to be earned, but Steve doesn’t set a price. Bucky supposes that’s half their fun, coming forward with it afterwards.

Suddenly, mid-sentence, Steve stops dead. "Bucky, what about liquids? Anything… water?" He shakes Bucky’s arm when he doesn’t immediately answer. Bucky bites his tongue. So JARVIS has been snitching on him after all.

"Yeah, right. Sometimes when I wash my face, I. I’ve been –" He shoots up a quick glance and sets his jaw defiantly. "Wasn’t much."

Steve stares at him like his transgression is too unfathomable to grasp. Then, all of a sudden he straightens up, face set in grim determination. He rises. "Follow me."
05 - Steve

Steve’s floor has its own kitchen. It’s part of the huge living room, and while it’s not as well stocked as the common floor’s, it’s got the basics down. He gestures Bucky to sit on a bar stool and after some rummaging, sets down a large water bottle in front of him. Steve leans on the kitchen island, watching Bucky alternately glaring at the bottle and at him.

Hearing Bucky say it was one thing, but actually seeing it, letting the realization sink in feels like a fist closing around Steve’s throat. "Drink," he pleads and it sounds all wrong, like Steve was the one dying of thirst.

Without further hesitation, Bucky opens the bottle and raises it to his lips. He drinks the whole thing in one go, heaving as he sets it down again between them with a hollow thud.

Steve watches him intently. "Another?"

Bucky nods grimly, and Steve squats down to open the cabinet doors again. "How many?"

There’s no answer, and eventually Steve looks up. He grabs two more bottles, even though he doesn’t think even someone as dehydrated as Bucky could drink that much in one go. "Hm?"

"As many as it takes to teach me not to cheat," Bucky sighs. He sounds like he’s bored out of his mind, and it takes Steve longer than it should for the penny to drop. The bottles clatter to the floor.

"No, no, Bucky, no," he says. "This is not punishment! I’d never do that! Nobody here would, okay? If you’re thirsty, you grab some water, anytime! And if you can’t, I do it for you, understood? And when you’re done, you’re done, I’d never make you –" There’s not enough air in his lungs. What have these sadistic scumbags done to Bucky? If he ever gets his hands on them –

He pushes the thoughts away – postpones them – until the ringing in his ears quiets down. This isn’t about him, it’s about what Bucky needs. (If only he was better at detecting what that was.)

Steve can almost see the wheels working behind Bucky’s eyes. He looks very, very tired.

"But… you used to say…" Bucky starts, opens his mouth in an attempt to continue, but after a while blinks repeatedly and shakes his head. He resumes staring into nothingness.

"No," Steve says, "No, I didn’t."

"You didn’t," Bucky echoes tonelessly, lost in that thousand-yard stare. It hurts like hell to watch him like this, and Steve wonders for the umpteenth time if his constant urge to draw Bucky close was for Bucky’s comfort or his own.

He picks up the bottles and places them within Bucky’s range on the counter. "I want you to take them back to your room," he says. "And whenever you feel thirsty, you drink. Can you do that?"

Bucky reaches out and drags the bottles close. "Of course I can."

"Is there anything else, anything at all, that you want?"

For the first time since they entered the room, Bucky really looks at him. "You know what I want."
Steve smiles sadly. "The missions? Why’s that so important Buck, can’t you take a break before you throw yourself back into battle?"

"It’s what I’m best at," Bucky says insistently, and the hopeful look in his eyes breaks Steve’s heart.

"Oh, Buck," Steve murmurs, "You know that’s not true."

Bucky’s shoulders slump forward. He lets out an almost inaudible sigh, looking nothing short of miserable.

"You cold?" Steve asks, frowning at the goosebumps forming on Bucky’s arm.

"Functional," Bucky answers tersely, averting his eyes. Seems he’s back to sulking again.

Steve runs his hand over his face. "Come on, Buck" he tries, biting his thumbnail, something he hasn’t done in… well, over 70 years probably. "Talk to me. You can ask for anything, always. People might say no, but nobody is going to punish you for asking, I swear." He almost adds by Misses Eldridge’s beard, but he’s not up for another blank stare at jokes they used to share.

For a long moment, Bucky looks like he can’t muster the energy to reply. "I want…" he murmurs eventually.

"Yes," Steve says, "Yes, Buck?"

"Tomorrow… when you’re having your morning workout with the others. I wanna join."

Steve tilts his head. "Is that all?"

There’s obviously some resolve returning to Bucky’s expression – he straightens up, gaze sweeping the kitchen counters. "And that energy bar." Steve’s eyes follow Bucky’s gesture. Bucky bites his lip hard. "Energy bars. Both."

Steve reaches over, dumps them right in front of him. "There’s gonna be no morning run tomorrow," he says. "We’re having a quick briefing and then special training for an upcoming op. I suppose – no wait Buck, you’re absolutely not joining the mission – but there’s no reason why you couldn’t take part in the training."

Now there’s definitely more than just a spark of interest in Bucky’s eyes.

"If Sam’s alright with it. Listen, I know you’re having a hard time and you didn’t mean to attack him, but I don’t want him to be uncomfortable either, so I’m gonna make this his decision, okay?"

Bucky nods slowly, holding his bottles and the energy bars tightly to his chest. "I’ll apologize." His eyes find the clock over the sink and he stands up. "Right now. And I’ll ask him about the training."

Steve would be lying if he said he didn’t find Bucky’s sudden change of attitude suspicious at all. "Do you want me to come?" Bucky shakes his head vehemently.

"Alright," Steve says, "but I’ll put JARVIS on you, Buck. If you try to threaten Sam in any way, there won’t be any joint trainings for a long time."

Bucky nods. "Clear."
Chapter 6

06 - Bucky

Back in his room, Bucky stores his price underneath a loose floorboard.

Between the desk and the window.

In the sleeves of a jacket.

No, no, no.

In the end, he lines up the bottles on the desk, in plain sight, energy bars right in front of them. By now, he’s almost sure there’s only audio surveillance in the room – but even so, the hiding places are limited. They’d find it anyway, and he’d only look pathetic.

Bucky gives the table a last, thoughtful look. Stuff’s looking nice piled up like that, all shiny and colorful. A feast. But he can’t treat himself, not now. Not with what he’s planning to do.

He exhales slowly, then steels himself. When he’s done and the water’s still there, he’ll allow himself to have as much as he wants to wash the taste away.

It’s a good thought, it almost makes him smile, but he knows damn well chances are high that when he returns, everything will be gone. He can’t stop them, but.

Bucky tears a corner off a bottle’s label, just a tiny shred, and pockets it. They can take it all away, but they won’t get to convince him he never had it in the first place. Not this time.

He nods grimly and makes himself continue preparing for battle. It helps to think of it that way, makes him feel like a soldier rather than –

Makes him feel like a soldier.

And it’s going to be a fight, in a way. He’ll take some punches, to his body and to that burning feeling that keeps flaring up in his chest lately; the one that makes him want to bare his teeth and go for their throats. The one that makes him say no.

Bucky snorts. There’s not going to be any no for him tonight – but if he returns with Wilson’s permission to join the mission training tomorrow and manages to stay in a condition to actually attend, well. Joke’s on them.

Briefing’s scheduled for 0800, which leaves him with just a bit over nine hours from now.

He’s mapping out all the injuries that’ll heal in time and those that won’t. Wilson doesn’t seem to be the type for broken bones, he’s no classic brute. But Bucky antagonized him, and now it’s personal. (Stupid stupid stupid.) He’ll want to set the hierarchy right again, and one way or the other it’s gonna hurt.

Bucky finds that as long as it’s not overly cruel, he prefers physical punishment. Kick him, burn him, flog him red and raw – he’d rather push through it twice than having to do the whole groveling thing.

Not tonight, though. Tonight, he’ll do his best to steer the punishment in the direction that will leave his body in the best condition for tomorrow. He’ll drop his gaze and fall to his knees, let the shame
wash through him until he can breathe again. They always liked him kissing their feet, right?

And then, from down there, he’ll. He’ll tell Wilson what he wanted to hear at dinner, about his other purpose. He can do it, yes, he’ll make himself do it. And if he’s really convincing and dwells on all the juicy details, maybe Wilson will come in his pants, just like that.

Yeah, okay, maybe not. It’s his secondary function for a reason – he’s admittedly not very good at it. (He doesn’t want to be good at it, he shouldn’t have to be he doesn’t want to go-)

Focus. He needs a plan.

There’s no doubt Wilson will order the dreaded ‘Show me’ sooner or later, and as it’s unavoidable anyway, his best shot is to take control of it. He’d rather have trouble speaking than walking tomorrow, so he’ll try to get things settled with his mouth. They’ve said before that his lips are just made for it, right? So if he plays his cards right…

Maybe Wilson won’t be able to get it up a second time, and then goodbye and good night, see you tomorrow at 0800.

But. He knows the other outcome is far more likely than getting away with quick suck. And he’s worried Wilson won’t want to do it alone. What’s the point of reclaiming your power over someone if there’s no one around to watch?

Maybe he can talk him out of it, ramble some shit about exclusivity or something. If not, whatever. Still doesn’t mean things need to get out of hand. As long as he keeps it together and doesn’t fucking panic again, there won’t be any unreasonable injuries.

He reminds himself that it’s statistically extremely unlikely that tonight will be one of those nights where they’ll fuck him up for real. (Those memories have been coming back with a vengeance; when he lies in the darkness waiting for them, drifting in and out of fitful sleep. He thinks by now he remembers every single time things seriously escalated – and honestly, considering how long he’d been there, they were almost negligible. At least, that’s what he keeps telling himself over and over again when he wakes with a start and can’t get enough air into his lungs and his heart tries to burst out of his chest.)

He feels his pulse spike up even now, and he knows it’s a vicious circle. If he can’t keep himself from struggling, they’re going to use force for sure. Bucky licks his lips, eyes flickering to the nightstand. He could… but it’s for emergencies, for nights when fear eats him up from the inside, clawing its way out until he’s retching.

Maybe it’s time for an exception.

He rummages through the drawer and pulls out a carefully wrapped bottle. One of the doctors officially gave it to him, gesturing at his shoulder and saying something about scars. As if he’d ever waste it on that.

Bucky’d gambled. He’d thrown the bottle back at the doctor and told him if he couldn’t whip up something unscented he could save both of them the time. It’d been risky, but he was lucky and now he owns this, it’s slick and it doesn’t even burn, and best of all: without the persistent smell it’s almost untraceable if it’s applied right.

If he’s lubed up well enough, whatever they do hurts a lot less, and that alone helps to keep the panic at bay. He can tell himself even if they’d decide to shove some stick or baton in, they won’t be able to do that much damage again.
He coats his fingers with the slick balm. He doesn’t lie down, doesn’t undress, just hides his face in the crook of his elbow as he braces himself against the closet door, slipping one hand down the back of his pants. The plan is to get it over with quickly, but when his fingertip brushes against the soft flesh of his anus, his stomach does a sickening flip. What a cruel joke that anything about him should be soft.

The ring of muscle gives way with a wet sound that might or might not be just in Bucky’s head, but he grits his teeth and continues. He’s dug a bullet out of a gunshot wound at least twice, and if he could do that, he can do this. He keeps fumbling mechanically for a while, not allowing himself to slow down until he decides he’s sufficiently prepared.

There, done. Done. He wipes his hand and reminds himself that this serves a greater purpose, and that it’s worth every indignity he’ll have to suffer to get there.

Tomorrow at the mission training, he’ll show them again how invaluable he is; how strong, how fast, how very, very useful. Make sure he’ll be allowed to attend every time, learn all there is to know about the mission and if – when – somebody has to drop out, he’ll be the natural replacement.

And then, hah. Once he’s upgraded again, he won’t have to be on edge all the fucking time, jumping at every footstep, waiting for them to use him whenever they want.

No. There’ll be rules. There’ll be times when he knows he’s untouchable, when he can rest. He won’t spend every night on duty, and even if he does, he’ll be able to cling to the knowledge that they’ll need him to fulfill his primary function again at some point. They won’t be allowed to do permanent damage. (And if anybody toes that line again, brings him back with blood dripping down his thighs and babbling numbers over and over, HYDRA – no, SHIELD – will make them disappear forever. They’ve done it before, and maybe next time he’ll ask for permission to do it himself.)

Yes, definitely worth whatever Wilson can dish out tonight.

Bucky’s almost at the door when he turns back and puts on his combat boots. It feels a bit like armor.

He gets up, takes a last deep breath and leaves for the guest floor.
07 - Sam

Sam’s leaning against the window wall, watching the dancing lights of the city at nighttime. A rare moment of silence after what was, to put it mildly, an *eventful* day. Or, you know, not so mildly speaking, a goddamn crazy almost-disaster that could have ended with all their asses getting vaporized by a giant laser beam.

Still, Sam can’t say it’s the worst holiday he’s ever had, a fact that might be slightly worrying. At least he gets to keep busy.

He sighs. It’s late, and he’s supposed to do that fancy thing Stark implemented as the high-tech equivalent of drawing the curtains before he goes to bed, but he dislikes being this high up in the air and practically blind. Because sure, the tower has a surveillance system way superior to his eyes, but occasionally it’s nice to rely on something you can control.

There’s always the possibility of moving to a room on the lower floors or even underground, but he’s here for the company, isn’t he? Up here, he’s much more likely to run into some of the others in the common rooms or even in the hallway – and damn, if they’re not making him sign some confidentiality agreement, he’s so gonna tell his little niece about what seems to be the Norse version of pajamas.

He’s thinking of Maisie’s infamous snort-giggles as JARVIS announces a visitor. "Sergeant Barnes to see you, sir."

Sam raises an eyebrow. "Oh yeah? Does he come in peace?"

Over the last couple of weeks, Sam has come to agree one hundred percent with Steve’s unshakable conviction that Barnes had been a victim rather than a villain in HYDRA’s grand scheme of things. Unfortunately, as long as he’s a walking bag of explosives, that doesn’t make him any less dangerous.

"He wants to talk, sir," JARVIS proclaims.

"Is he armed?"

"Yes, sir."

Immediately, Sam hears the clattering of something metallic outside his door, at least four variously heavy objects clanking to the ground. If Sam didn’t know better, he’d say JARVIS sounds almost chipper.

"No, sir."

Jesus H. Christ. "Let him in."

The door opens with a beep. Barnes wears the same combo of black sweats and a t-shirt he’d had on at dinner, but with the way he carries himself he couldn’t look more imposing if he was in full armor. Damn, there might be something to learn here.

Sam nods. "James."
"The boots have several slots for knives," Barnes blurts out with an irritated frown. "By design. I didn’t mean to – that’s not why I’m here. I came to apologize."

Straight to the point, Sam’s gotta grant him that. And the man spent almost two of Sam’s lifetimes as a POW, so he’s willing to cut him some slack. Besides, Barnes’ outburst earlier had practically screamed defense rather than attack. Thing with Barnes is that the two are often one and the same, and if it’s important for anyone to learn that their actions do have consequences, it’s incredibly strong, extremely confused super-soldiers with metal arms that can smash concrete.

"I’m not mad at you," Sam says. "But I appreciate that you came. Guess apologizing’s never easy."

"I can handle it."

Sam hums. "Yeah. Hey, can I ask you something?"

Barnes nods swiftly.

"Do you know what set you off? Shouldn’t have touched you, right?"

"You can touch me whenever you want."

Sam raises an eyebrow. "Don’t think so, ‘cause is it me or were you that close to shoving me straight through the wall?"

Barnes stares at him. The sound of his jaw working as he mulls over whatever thoughts he’s having doesn’t do much to relax Sam.

"I should have answered," Barnes says eventually. "I didn’t want to, so I broke protocol. I’m sorry. I’ll make it up to you."

Jesus, it’s ten past midnight and everything Barnes says raises around a trillion more questions. Sam might have been onto something at dinner, and he’ll pick the thread up again, but he’d rather not do it now. In the last decade or so, his ass has become wise enough to appreciate backup.

"Your ribs are still hurting," Barnes comments out of the blue.

"Uh," Sam answers, hand absently rubbing his side. "Well, you should see the other guys. But yeah, doctor says nothing’s broken, just bruised. Coughing won’t be my favorite pastime for a while, though."

Barnes nods thoughtfully. "You’re still gonna be at mission training tomorrow?"

Sam can’t help but grin at that. "Did you hear what it’s about, infiltrating an underwater base? Pepper told me that Tony’s flooded half the basement for the simulation – no way in hell I’m gonna miss out on that one."

"Right," Barnes says, "about that." He licks his lips. "I want in. Steve says I can, if you allow it. Just the training, not the mission. I’m sure we can work something out."

Sam’s just about to joke that it’s meant to be a covert operation though, and ask whether Mister ‘Stop the car? Sure, let’s just rip out the driving wheel’ felt ready for that much subtlety, when Barnes drops to his knees. "Hey –" Sam catches him by the shoulders despite his ribs screaming bloody murder.

Barnes is white as a sheet, breath coming in low, uneven spurts. Shit. Carefully, Sam lowers Barnes
to the floor, reaching for his wrist to check his pulse before realizing that he has no fucking clue what’s even considered normal for someone like Barnes.

"Hey," he asks, "James, are you with me?"

Barnes’ skin is covered in a thin sheen of sweat, but his eyes are open. Blown wide, they follow Sam’s every move. "Wouldn’t kill you to take it slow," he says through gritted teeth, "way to set back your recovery."

Sam lets out a relieved chuckle. Sounds like Barnes isn’t that far gone after all, and Sam appreciates a healthy dose of gallows humor. He cocks an eyebrow. "Way to be grateful."

Barnes’ mouth clicks shut. Already, color is returning to his cheeks. They all had an exhausting day and Barnes’ brain is doing a ton of repair work on top of it, so it’s probably nothing serious. Still. "Want me to get a doctor?"

"No," Barnes replies quickly. "Didn’t mean to be difficult, won’t happen again."

"How’d you mea-" A hand closes around Sam’s wrist, hard and cold. Metal. Barnes follows Sam’s gaze and immediately replaces his left hand with his right, pulling Sam’s palm against his chest almost gently. By now Sam’s pretty sure that for a super-soldier, a heart rate like that is elevated. Barnes doesn’t let go, and Sam gives him a questioning look.

"When HYDRA didn’t need me as a fighter, they used me for stress relief," Barnes says, voice so low Sam has to lean closer. Barnes doesn’t meet his eyes.

Sam frowns. The sooner they put all that HYDRA scum behind bars, the better. "You mean like a punching bag?"

Barnes squeezes his eyes shut and metallic whirs fill the air as he clenches his left hand into a fist. The red flush on his skin deepens. "No," he grinds out, "like a fucktoy. A plaything, a whore, a cum dump. There, I said it. Are you happy now?" His eyes fly open and he glares daggers at Sam.

Jesus Christ. He’d suspected that amongst everything else, Barnes had been sexually abused, but damn, he would not have minded being wrong about that one. And if those lowlifes actually called him all that… HYDRA didn’t just make Barnes kill for them, they convinced him he was a weapon. God knows what else they told him.

"Man, I’m sorry," Sam says and even though there’s not a trace of pity in his voice, Barnes’ mouth still twists into a thin, hard line.

"Hey – you know you’re none of those things though, right?" Sam goes on quickly. "They did what they did ‘cause they are rapists, full-stop."

Barnes nods slowly. "Yeah. They said a good fucktoy loves to be raped." He watches Sam intently from the corner of heavy-lidded eyes. "Do you want to know what else a good fucktoy likes?"

Oh, damn. Everything about Barnes’ expression screams I dare you, and he seems to do sharing the exact same way he’s been doing everything else: aggressively. And while that’s totally legit, a small, yet very persistent part of Sam – located right in the pit of his stomach – wants to say no. Barnes got a top notch therapist and anyway, hey, wanna talk to a friend? No problem, Steve’s two floors down.

He shakes it off, though. Sam firmly believes in the importance of talking about all the shit that’s bottled up inside, and it seems that against Doctor Vong’s best efforts, Barnes has spent the last two months either silently glaring at the wall behind her, or bragging about how strong and capable
he was.

As for Steve, well. Sometimes it’s easier to confide in people who are not that close to you.

"Whatever helps. I’m listening."

Barnes swallows hard and nods. "So," he says, "guess you know, a good fucktoy can’t get enough. It’s designed to want a fat cock in every hole all the time. Can take the whole team and is still greedy for more. Never panics. Spreads itself even further when it bleeds. Begs for it if you tell it to."

Sam can feel Barnes’ heart rate spike up underneath the palm of his hand. He’d give him some space, but Barnes clings to Sam’s forearm like it’s a lifeline, so he stays. The least he can do is not to back down, no matter how ugly this gets. He owes Barnes that much.

"It’s a thing," Barnes continues, "just meat, meat with holes to use, only better because it’s alive and able to follow orders. Oh, and do you know what the best thing about it is?"

Sam shakes his head.

"It gets off on it." Barnes smiles grimly. "It’s fucked up, but also kind of hot, you now? Watching it shoot off all over itself."

He sounds so bitter that it makes Sam’s heart ache. "James," he says quickly, "a physical reac-"

"It’s not allowed to touch itself, of course," Barnes interrupts. "Strictly forbidden. If it needs it so bad it’ll get off on having its holes reamed. Or hump something like the animal it is. Good fucktoy. Pathetic creature." He stares at the ceiling, pure hatred etched all over his face. "And," he spits, turning his head to look at Sam, "you don’t need to worry about the carpet, or the van, or your boots. It’s – the whole procedure isn’t as messy as you’d think, because it – it’s" his voice cracks and he opens his mouth a few times only to abort the effort and gnash his teeth instead.

"Give yourself a break," Sam says. "Let me get you a –"

Barnes scrambles up and grabs Sam’s forearm with both hands this time. "Wait." He takes a deep breath through the nose. "A good fucktoy cleans up after itself. Licks up every last drop as if it runs on it." He nods. "No work for the team, just pleasure."

Barnes lets go of Sam and rubs his face. Sam gives him a moment, partly because he doesn’t want to push and partly because he’s not sure he trusts his own voice. When Barnes lets his hands drop, his jaw is set in a grim line. He leans back against the bed, looking Sam up and down.

"Sam Wilson, you’re a hard man to please. And here I thought you liked talking." He shakes his head in mock-disappointment. "Yeah, well. Guess it’s not the best use for my mouth anyway." He chuckles darkly. "Come on, are you always such a killjoy? Geez, you must be the life of every party." He inclines his head with a deep sigh. "Oh no, wait, that’d be me."

"James –" Sam says softly.

The fake amusement drains from Barnes’ face in an instant. "This is a waste of time and energy. Why don’t we both put our cards on the table."
This is fucking ridiculous.

Fine, Wilson had wanted to see him humiliated – it’s not like he’d be the first. So Bucky had gritted his teeth, cracked himself open and pulled on raw nerves until his whole body thrummed with his heartbeat like a giant wound, raw and tender for Wilson to dig his nails in… and for what? The man’s not even hard yet. Bucky wants to howl in frustration.

"Listen," he says instead, "let’s get to the point. I want our disagreement to be settled, and I want your permission to join the training tomorrow. That’s it." Bucky lets his tongue dart out, slowly tracing the shape of his lips, trying to make himself look inviting. Tempting. "And in turn, well. Why don’t you fetch yourself some shoes, the dirtied boots from earlier today, or your favorite shiny pair, whatever you like. And I’m gonna kiss and lick ‘em real good, show you how sorry I am."

He certainly has Wilson’s full attention now. "You… what? Shit. Is that HYDRA’s idea of an apology?"

Asshole. "'course not," Bucky grunts, "and if you’d let me finish, you’d know that wasn’t all I’m offering. So, once you’ve decided I learned my place, I’m gonna… lick my way up. Open your fly with my teeth and all that. Show you what I’m good for when I’m not scheduled for a mission." He schools his expression, aims for a casual half-smile. "Anything you want, all night, as long as you keep it to my mouth. You’d like that?"

Obviously not.

Bucky’s still trying to figure out the finer points of human emotion, but that’s a giant *nope* on Wilson’s face if there ever was one. Shock, too – he probably thinks Bucky’s lost it, trying to bargain with something that’s free for all anyway.

"James, wait, what –"

Stupid, stupid, stupid. He’d thought… because people sometimes enjoyed it when he showed initiative, pretended he liked it, right? God. Worthless, he should have known.

"Sure, yes, you could just fuck my throat with the –" What was the name of that damn thing? Bucky makes a gesture with spread fingers as if to force his jaws apart. "That. But have you ever tried it without, wet lips and tongue and real sucking first? Take it as a gesture of good will." Bucky concentrates on Wilson’s expression, trying to interpret the way it goes from wide-eyed to collected over the course of one deep breath.

"James," he says firmly, "you don’t have to offer sexual favors to me or to anyone. Ever, okay?"

Yeah, pretty unnecessary if they don’t care for his cooperation anyway.

"Come on," Bucky says, "one exception won’t kill you. I’ll make it worth your while."

Wilson shakes his head slowly. "Listen to me. You’re no longer with HYDRA. You’re among friends, and when we talk about apologizing, we sure as hell don’t mean forced blowjobs."

The needles in Bucky’s stomach twist at that, he has to squeeze his eyes shut to focus. *He’s right.*
You knew you wouldn’t get away with it. Come on, you’re as ready as you’ll ever be. Sooner or later they’re gonna do it anyway, tonight it’d be your decision.

"I was joking," he makes himself say, voice lower than intended. "What I said… what I said about keeping it to my mouth, you didn’t take that for real, right?" He coughs out a breathy laugh, makes a handwaving move. "’course you can – anything, okay?" Bucky tips his chin up. When he hooks his thumbs in his waistband, firm hands come up to engulf his wrists, and he thinks finally. He thinks he cannot, under any circumstances, panic now.

"Stop it," Wilson says sharply, "you don’t have to do this. I don’t want it, you don’t want it. Stop."

Direct order, stand down, stand down. But –

"James, come on. You’re white as a sheet, your skin’s all clammy. You hate this. You’re terrified."

Yeah, so what? Bucky loathes to have his weakness thrown back in his face. As if they didn’t like it best that way; 200 pounds of deadly force shivering at their feet. Besides, Wilson has made it perfectly clear that he’s not interested in any potential enthusiasm – this is no real objection, this is him seizing the chance to revel in Bucky’s shortcomings.

"Your own fault. You know the doctors could fix me." It slips out before Bucky can think better of it. It’s true, though. They always made such a fuss about his Soldier mode, were all over him at the slightest transgression, but if he malfunctioned during his recreational duties, they just strapped him down.

Wilson frowns. "Fix you?"

Bucky is used to being teased, but something about Wilson’s face… wait. Of course, stolen goods rarely come with a proper manual. Bucky’s mouth drops open. "It’s not in the file."

"The file… your file? Hell, no. These things hardly make it into the official papers, not even with HYDRA."

The realization seeps in like icy water. He’s such an idiot. He told Wilson all that stuff about how an ideal fucktoy works, so obviously he’s expected to rise up to that now. Fuck.

He might, he tells himself. He’s done well in the past sometimes, spread his legs at a snap of their fingers, amused them by getting off on it no matter what. But there’s no point denying that he malfunctioned just as often, badly, couldn’t even hold still, couldn’t follow the simplest orders because he couldn’t breathe, and if it happens tonight Wilson’s going to be disappointed as hell and – and what if SHIELD isn’t as lenient about it as HYDRA was? They’ll hand him over to the doctors like they always threatened they would, white coats table immobilized pain no no no –

Bucky jumps at the touch of a hand on his shoulder. He hasn’t been listening.

"… breathe. It’s alright."

_Calm down, calm down. Get a grip, dammit. Don’t you want to be fixed? No more struggling. Imagine never having to be afraid again._

Yes, but. He’s pretty sure it’s no mechanical thing, no switch that can be flipped to make him miraculously function like he should. It’s going to involve a lot of training, a lot of failing. He remembers enough to know how rapidly their cruelty increases whenever they feel they’re not making progress fast enough. And what if… what if they find they can’t fix him?
"It’s better this way," Bucky blurts out. "What I told you, everything a good fucktoy does? You’re right, I can’t, not always – no wait, let me explain." He nods eagerly. "It doesn’t have to be a disadvantage. See, HYDRA didn’t do anything about it because all things considered, they liked it better. I know you’re enemies, but you don’t have to disagree on every single thing!"

Wilson frowns but he doesn’t lash out, doesn’t break out any correctional devices at being interrupted repeatedly, and Bucky takes this as a nod to go on. "It all depends on the games you want to play. HYDRA never approved of my acting skills, you know?" He shrugs. "So if you wanna pretend I’m some dangerous enemy and you overpowered me, and now you’re gonna claim your prize, it’d make sense that I struggle. Even better if it’s real, much more convincing. All you gotta do is make sure I’m properly restrained."

"Whoa there, nobody’s going to –"

"That’s a common one," Bucky adds quickly, "but if you’re not into that there are tons of other scenarios we can try. Shall I… you want some more examples?"

"No." Wilson pries Bucky’s right hand open slowly. His palm’s full of bloody crescents in various states of healing. "Right now, I want you to listen," Wilson says. "Can you do that?"

Bucky steels himself. He nods.

"What HYDRA did to you – they had no right. You don’t belong to anyone. You’re nobody’s weapon, nobody’s plaything, and no one is allowed to touch you when you don’t want it. Do you understand?"

Bucky frowns.

Want, what does want even mean? Does he want when his skin is so hungry he wishes they’d take off their shirts and press against him while they’re at it? Does he want a doctor to reset a badly healed bone even though he knows it’s going to hurt? And isn’t he supposed not to want anything at all?

"No," he says truthfully.

"That’s alright," Wilson says. "You will, in time."

Bucky hates not understanding. It’s dangerous, and incredibly frustrating. He’s failed, he’s being rejected, and it has to do with his inability to experience or display the right emotional responses. Want. Parameters unclear.

"Explain what that means for the training tomorrow."

Wilson looks at him softly. "Sure, of course you can come." Before Bucky’s able to say anything, Wilson calls JARVIS and asks him to make sure they’ll have enough handouts and equipment for an additional person. JARVIS confirms and Wilson nods at Bucky. "8 o’clock, briefing room on the common floor. We’ll continue from there."

It seems perfectly legit. What the hell does Wilson hope to gain from that? Something stirs in Bucky’s chest, something he never wanted to feel again. Hurts too much when it’s trampled out eventually.

"James, do you think you can rest a bit till morning? If you’d prefer not being alone –"

"No," Bucky cuts in quickly. "I’ll rest."

Wilson gives him a smile Bucky can’t interpret. "Try to get some sleep. See you tomorrow." He
frowns at the alarm clock. "Well, later, that is."

Bucky doesn’t run, not when he turns his back to leave, not when he picks up the knives in front of the door. Not the long way up to the elevator while he waits for someone to break into a laugh.

Nobody stops him.
Chapter 9

09 - Bucky

Back in his room, everything seems unchanged. Bucky rests against the door, heartbeat loud against the silence.

What the hell just happened?

Has he succeeded? Has he failed? He got what he wanted, but Wilson wasn’t satisfied with his performance, not at all. Bucky had offered a lot more than he originally planned to and still got turned down, that’s how bad he fucked up. He’d expect punishment, correction; but instead he got rewarded. None if this make sense.

Bucky clenches and unclenches his fist, focuses on breathing the tremors away.

It’s over, it’s over. Get a grip.

As soon as he’s forced his body into submission, he sets out to scan the room for signs of intruders. There are none. Everything checks out, down to the crumpled scrap of paper Bucky fishes out of his pocket and holds against the water bottle’s label. Perfect match.

He grabs the bottle and slumps into the desk chair. His mouth is so dry that his tongue sticks to his teeth, which is ridiculous because absolutely nothing happened. The water’s warm, but it’s so good on his parched throat that his eyes flutter shut at the first sip. His own water supply – hell yes, that’s something he could get used to.

Bucky wipes his lips. He’ll have to step up his game, though. All Steve ever says to him is no, and Bucky still feels his cheeks burn at the thought of groveling at Wilson’s feet in vain. And yet here he is, cleared for the training, two bottles of water, two energy bars, zero injuries.

His previous handlers never used to leave him in the dark about the state of their approval. Whenever he crossed a line they called him out immediately, made sure the pain cut deep enough for the behavioral code to stay with him even if the memory did not. Instead, Wilson had tried to explain. Bucky’s head swims. He needs to figure out what Wilson wants, or else they’ll change their tactic, decide the sensible route just isn’t for everyone. (Animal, just an animal. Attack dog.)

He takes another sip of water. Even though he’s still pretty shaken, a bone-deep tiredness starts weighing him down. He hadn’t misheard, had he? Get some rest.

Yes, he’s got explicit permission, orders even. He smiles grimly – no bed for him tonight.

Bucky jabs the floor with his heel and the chair swivels around. He crosses his legs and demonstratively rests them on the mattress. While he dislikes everything that reminds him of his recreational purpose, nothing fills him with more disdain than beds. Stupid actually, because they probably don’t even make the top three of things he’s been bent over. It’s just… the way they used to calibrate his brain, he never remembered this part of his tasks until it was due, and by the time he realized what those orders, those hands on him meant… by then it was already happening. With every nerve aflame with adrenaline his mind got stuck on one single thought; get through this, get through this, get through this.

And he did, didn’t he? It happened, it passed, end of story.
Night shift, though. Post-mission nights at safehouses were the worst. Because his sleep had always been fitful, even violent sometimes, they used to bring a storage capsule to secure him during downtime. By then they’d usually given him a taste of his recreational purpose, and when they ordered him on the bed instead of in the capsule, he knew better than to expect rest.

And it would have been… not fine, no, but doable, if they’d just gotten it over with right away. Instead, they left him like that, left him for food and drinks while he lay there, stripped of his armor, waiting.

It’s not like Bucky doesn't understand the need to blow off some steam. He does. He knows as well as anyone about the ugly urges bubbling up in a fight, the intoxicating rush of power, and how hard it can be to come down again. Stress relief’s vital, and he supposes that’s why they created him: to be their reward as well as their weapon.

He can’t argue; his body was the toughest of them all, hard to bruise and fast to heal, and he wasn’t supposed to be distracted by emotions either. And as a bonus… well. They probably had good intentions when they made him able to get off on it.

Bucky rubs his face, huffs bitterly. He’s not sure if he malfunctioned or if he was just being weak, but every time he lay there waiting, listening to their laughter and chatter in the other room, his mind tore itself to shreds coming up with all the possible scenarios for the night. Stress relief could mean any number of things; wet lips on his neck, skin on skin so perfect it’d be hard to breathe. Or.

That was what his traitorous mind usually focused on, all the ways things could go wrong. Pain. Cruelty. Games. An icy lump in his guts at the thought that maybe some of the more vivid pictures were actually memories.

He tried to get the hang of it, he really did. Reminded himself over and over that he’d be alright, that he was made for it. Sometimes, if they’d positioned him face down, he’d rub his hips against the mattress, trying to get in the mood. (And didn’t he deserve a reward, too?)

In the end, nothing stopped his stomach from flipping every time he heard footsteps approach. He was drenched in sweat before they even touched him, pulse through the roof. It was the anticipation that got to him, the dreaded waiting.

And he’s been waiting every night for several weeks now.

Yeah. Well, not tonight.

Bucky stands abruptly. No use fretting about the past. He needs to rest, make sure he’ll earn a place on the team so he’ll have the security of not being disposable. As long as they need him, they won’t demote him to full-time stress relief, and they can’t do anything permanent to him either.

He gives the bed one last glare and proceeds with his nightly rituals, trying to focus on nothing but the tasks at hand. It doesn’t look like much, that’s the trick; a t-shirt carelessly discarded in front of the door, the imprint of a fingernail in the leaf of a butt ugly gum tree, a few smudges on the window to indicate the position of the stars. He revisits these things as regularly as he can, even if he thinks there are no holes in his memory. Especially then.

When he’s done, he hesitates. Between him and JARVIS, Bucky’s never sure who calls the shots. The chain of command in the tower is complex.

"JARVIS?"

"Yes, sir?"
"Set the alarm for 0700 – for 7 o’clock tomorrow."

"7 o’clock, confirmed. Good night, Sergeant Barnes."

Bucky snarls. JARVIS calls him that whenever he’s got the opportunity, preferably in front of others, even though he must know Bucky’s never been farther away from being a soldier.

He takes a deep breath, lets it go. For now. He hasn’t come this far to have a fucking program mock him. Someday soon, he’ll show JARVIS just how much a non-person is worth.

Not that he’s come up with a specific plan yet, but Stark – as brilliant and dangerous as he is – is vulnerable in his vanity, and because he looks as far as to the stars for danger, but never right over his shoulder. He’s said his master passwords to overwrite JARVIS’ security protocol out loud on several occasions, and Bucky has almost half of them down. Might even get another chance tomorrow.

If JARVIS does indeed wake him. As spiteful as he might be, a less-than-a-thing cannot act on its own volition. But maybe that was Wilson’s plan all along. Why, I allowed you to join the training and you better be grateful, it’s not my fault you missed out because you overslept. Like the bed that much, huh? Should have known.

No way he’ll let them outsmart him that easily. He grabs the water bottle again. Overindulgent, he could do without, but if he drinks half a bottle (his heart aches – what a waste) in addition to what he had earlier, he estimates he’ll wake around 6 at the latest.

He wipes his mouth, eyes sweeping the room for the safest place to sleep. There’s none, not really. Wardrobe’s too narrow. Between the bed and the window is a slot just wide enough for his shoulders, but there’d be endless room between him and the ceiling. Eventually, he hauls both pillows underneath the writing desk. Due to its placement against the wall, it gives him five of six sides covered. Yeah, that will have to do.

Bucky can’t remember the last time he slept in clothes. It’s not cold, but he wraps the blanket around himself anyway. Neither’s usually allowed; no hiding, that’s a rule. But tonight anything goes, and damned if he doesn’t exploit that to the max.

His stomach’s starting to feel a little hollow already, despite the food Steve let him have. His mind flickers to the energy bars, but no, it’s nowhere near bad enough to touch his supply yet. Doesn’t mean he can’t keep them close, brush his fingertips over the smooth wrapping paper once in awhile.

Bucky doesn’t want to talk to JARVIS again, but when he holds completely still for 15 minutes, the lights dim all the same.

The world is on pause. Yes, good.
Chapter 10

10 - Sam

Sam’s not sure if his head or his ribs hurt more, and Stark’s not helping. Guy’s pretty damn enthusiastic about his latest inventions, which yeah, is nice to see but makes him fill his sentences with twice the amount of words at double the speed.

Sam downs the rest of his coffee. Okay, so. Underwater HYDRA base, infiltrating from three different entry points. Low profile, at least at first; goal is to get their hands on as much valuable intel as possible before it might be removed or destroyed in an open fight. Sam already knew that much.

His thoughts keep drifting back to his encounter with Barnes yesterday. Instead of sleeping the sleep of the righteous (or at least of those whose blisters have blisters from keeping up with demigods and super-soldiers), Sam’s mind had run in circles.

He kept replaying the entire encounter in his mind over and over, and the more it sank in, the sicker Sam felt. It’s the little things he can’t shake: the way Barnes’ body kept hunching in on itself, and how he’d forced his posture to open up whenever he saw Sam looking at him. That eerie smile. The way his voice cracked when he assured Sam he loved it. That he’d lick the floor clean after.

Sam’s chest aches. He can’t even imagine what it must have cost Barnes to offer himself up like that. And what worries him most is that Barnes had such a hard time wrapping his head around the fact that Sam wasn’t gonna take him up on it.

Sam rubs his face. Since he’s been back from Afghanistan he’s tackled people down more than once, kept them safe from gunfire that wasn’t coming. Half a decade later and he’s still not hot on someone bursting into a room unannounced, but even at his worst he usually understood his mistake as soon as the gut-kick reaction was over.

He’s no longer sure Barnes feels the same.

In the end it comes down to this: either Sam has done something exceptionally stupid without even realizing it, made Barnes not only feel like he wanted to get into his pants, but that he would go through with it even if Barnes was fucking shaking with terror. Wow, really not the vibes he wants to give off.

The other option is even worse though: that’s still the treatment Barnes expects by default.

But that can’t be, right? Sam keeps glancing over. Barnes is sprawled out in his chair like the room belongs to him, tracking Stark’s every move from behind hooded eyes. Between Sam’s wandering mind and Natasha scribbling something on Barton’s arm with a ballpoint pen, he’s probably the only one following the briefing with the attention it deserves.

Steve’s been watching the other two giggling for a while, and when he’d tried to start something similar, Barnes didn't even bother to take his eyes off the presentation. Technically, he hadn’t ignored Steve’s attempt at conversation, but he’d filtered out the direct questions only, and replied so tersely he couldn’t have turned Steve down more blatantly if he carried a sign saying *Fuck Off*. That’s not the behavior of someone who expects abuse and punishment at any time, is it?

Yeah, then again that’s the same guy that spit in Sam’s face yesterday and offered to kiss his feet a few hours later. Sam can only hope for small blessings, like that Barnes’ general suspicion doesn’t
extend to Steve. The uneasiness in Sam’s stomach grows heavier at the thought. Steve’s been soaking up Barnes’ presence like water in the desert, and nobody can tell Sam Steve’s not secretly hoping that underneath that gruff facade Barnes feels the same.

For Christ’s sake, this morning Steve had brought two identical bagged lunches, even though there’s coffee and toast in the briefing room. He’d waved off Sam’s questioning look. "Super-soldier metabolism," he said, unwrapping sandwiches the size of small mammals. At first Sam thought Barnes wasn’t particularly impressed ("You want me to sink like a stone or what?") but then he pocketed his share pretty quickly for someone who wasn’t interested. So yeah, who knows what he was thinking. Steve on the other hand had smiled so fondly, as if he couldn’t be more pleased with the world.

And Sam gets it, really. Your best friend coming back from the dead, hey, who wouldn’t latch on to a chance like that. No regrets this time, say everything you were too stupid to say the first time round. No taking anything for granted.

Steve certainly doesn’t. For weeks he hasn’t missed out on any opportunity to be close to Barnes, brushing their fingers together or leaning against his shoulder, stroking his hair or just sharing the same space. From what Sam sees, Barnes never so much as indicates that he might be uncomfortable with Steve’s touches, which could be a good sign. Then again, Sam doesn’t want to imagine what those perverts at HYDRA did to him if he tried to refuse.

Jesus Christ, he has no idea how to soften that blow for Steve. He’s got to bring it up though, Steve can’t go on like this until they know more about Barnes’ actual mindset. Damn, that’s going to be messy.

Stark jolts him out of his thoughts. He’s upgraded Sam’s wingpack with an underwater mode and they’re in for a test run. Right, he’s been looking forward to that all week, and now he’d almost forgotten about it.

There’s nothing he can do at the moment anyway, but as soon as the training’s over, he’ll work out a strategy. Because hell, nobody can change what Barnes has been through, but the very least he deserves is to feel as safe as possible now.
Chapter 11

11 - Bucky

Bucky sits at the edge of a giant indoor pool, dipping his feet in. It doesn’t smell of chlorine like you’d expect, it’s salty and dark and cold enough to simulate the sea. Bucky thinks the training went well.

They’d lowered a metallic dome to the center of the pool, a replica of the HYDRA base they plan to invade. It’s the outer shell only, but complete with the high-tech security system they’re supposed to disable.

Steve had assigned tasks. True to his word, Bucky was allowed to watch everyone closely, practice everything they practiced in order to be their potential backup. The team’s capable, Bucky grants them that, but he learns fast and takes no breaks. In the end there were several occasions where he did better than them. He hopes Steve noticed.

Stark had them try out various equipment while he and Banner kept scribbling down notes, dividing the gear into yes and no piles. They called it a day when Barton’s force field collapsed and he got sucked down the hole he’d cut into the base’s metal shell. For a moment Bucky thought he might be moving up the lines faster than he’d hoped, but the woman was nearby and pulled Barton out in time.

Stark took more notes.

Bucky estimates they’ll need one or two more test runs, but Stark seems satisfied enough with their progress, and even Barton looks bruised but content. Technical difficulty aside, Bucky did good and everybody saw it.

He smiles wistfully, watching the water sparkle in the artificial light. The others are in the shower now. A slow, heavy feeling creeps up his stomach, reminding him that he’s not officially signed up for the mission yet. Even if he was, it’s not due for a while. He shivers from a sudden chill. Their bodies will be warm.

"Hey." The Widow – Romanoff – smiles at him. She has already changed into dry clothes and smells of something fruity. "Queue at the guys’ bathroom?" She laughs. "Always the same. You can use mine, I’m done."

She sets her shower gel down next to him, and his eyes get caught where her t-shirt is damp from the tips of her hair. He looks away. Sometimes he craves being touched more than he minds the rest. But then why can’t he bring himself to just go and join the others?

There’s sudden movement behind them. Bucky knows Steve’s looking for him, but before he can say anything there’s another voice, Wilson of all people, and Steve’s momentarily distracted.

Bucky picks up Romanoff’s shower gel. "Yes," he says quickly, "thank you."

She watches him closely, but then quirks up her lips. "Knock yourself out with my hair toys."

Bucky disappears around the corner before Steve can spot him. If anybody complains, he’ll blame it on the Widow’s orders. Which means, of course, that he’s in her debt now – Bucky’s suddenly very glad Barton made it. While he fails to see the guy’s value, Romanoff seems attached. Maybe he’s her personal plaything.
Bucky shrugs out of his wet clothes. The spray of water’s set on warm and his skin soaks it up eagerly. None of the cleaning products at the tower smell of disinfectant, not even those they normally use on him. He makes up for their potential lack of efficiency with extra thorough scrubbing.

A soapy strand of hair gets caught between the plates of Bucky’s metal fingers and he curses. He hardly remembers the last time he washed his hair by himself. Steve’s been taking care of that lately, more gentle than Bucky remembers anyone ever doing it.

The phantom touch of Steve’s hands lingers for a moment, prickling from his scalp down his neck. Bucky sighs and lets himself drift away, body throbbing pleasantly from the workout and the steady pattering of hot water – until he realizes the effect those thoughts have had on him. No. He shuts off the water so forcefully he dents the handle. (There’ll be hell to pay. Good.)

He braces himself against the wet tiles, fights down the frustration. Fucking animal, no wonder they used to mock him. Look at him playing hard to get look at him getting off like there’s no tomorrow yeah that’s right you love it stop pretending come for me look –

His mouth tastes of bile. They were right, too. He used to throw such tantrums, and for what? Once they were at it, he could barely think straight – pain fear shame hunger – until his mind zoned out completely and the vicious overload of sensations burned his body alive. More than once he thought they’d stunned him, but the white mess between his body and the sheets told a different story. (What the fuck why’s the blanket wet did he piss himself again goddamn it where’s the tech team when you need them flip him ‘round)

(Wait fuck look at that can you believe it did he come from every single dick we put inside him or what Jesus Christ)

Bucky groans and rubs his face. The part of his mind that claws and bites doesn’t let him stop wondering whether it would have happened yesterday. Sure, he’s been uneasy (afraid), but unless Wilson was into the really painful stuff Bucky might have moaned into the floorboards before the night’d been over. Disgusting. (made for it made for it made for it)

It’s unfair, he hates those people – no no no, that’s not even safe to think. But he hates being their stress relief, and yet all they have to do is lick messily along his neck and whisper to him that he’s the best fuck they ever had and he’s gone.

Something soft inside his chest whispers that maybe he’s changed, that maybe he’s better than that now – but he can’t afford to lie to himself, not when everybody else does. Bucky swallows the lump in his throat and exhales slowly. If he shuts his eyes and imagines an alternative outcome to last night, imagines Wilson being interested enough to at least check out his price… nothing much at first, just pressing against him, warm and solid, leisurely slipping a hand underneath Bucky’s t-shirt, feeling him out real good – fuck.

Could that be what Wilson missed; Bucky sporting a pathetic hard-on? If that’s what he meant when he complained about Bucky’s lack of want, then maybe he shouldn’t have thrown in the towel that early. Bucky snorts. Yeah, maybe that would have been the key – that entertains everybody, especially since Bucky’s not allowed to touch himself when it happens.

But how on earth could Wilson not know about that?

(What are you doing I don’t understand it’s not in the files)

(They had no right you don’t have to do this you’re nobody’s plaything it’s not in the files it’s not in
The thought hits him so hard his mouth drops open. Could it be that…? No, impossible. They might not have known about the amount of malfunctions he displays during stress relief, but they must know his secondary function exists. Right?

Then again, it’s not like HYDRA parted with him willingly, handed him over to SHIELD with a manual and a polite demonstration. Who knows where they got their information from and how detailed it is – god. Maybe they do think all they’ve acquired is a weapon. That would explain why nobody has even tried to use him recreationally yet, would explain their strange reactions when Bucky hinted at the possibility.

(Nobody has the right to touch you if you don’t want it)

But surely Steve has done it? Bucky’s got half-memories of Steve’s body on his. Or so he thinks. Lately he hasn’t been sure if all the Steves inside the tangled mess of his head are the same. If the truth actually got lost during his transfers, if they don’t realize what else he’s good for besides fighting – Bucky’s lungs feel like they’re bursting. This could be the chance of his life.

Could have been. The realization knocks all air out of him. He ruined it when he gave himself away last night, when he told Wilson the truth in all its ugly detail. Stupid stupid stupid – Wilson might be reporting him to Steve right now, and then, then. What are his chances they’re going to believe that he didn’t cheat them out of their right on purpose?

Bucky grabs his clothes without even toweling himself off. He needs to try and turn the tables. Cheat, lie, pretend – he’s already in for unspeakable punishment, he’s got nothing to lose.

"JARVIS?" His voice is so rushed it’s a wonder the microphones pick him up at all. "JARVIS, where’s Sam Wilson?" Maybe they’re still at the pool maybe they’re having lunch maybe –

"Sam Wilson is in Captain Rogers’ quarters, sir."

Bucky runs.
"Sexual favors?" Steve asks, frowning at Sam. "What do you mean sexual favors?"

Sam rubs his eyes, feeling like an intruder. Barnes doesn’t even like him much, certainly doesn’t trust him. He’d never have told Sam something as private as details of his sexual abuse if he hadn’t felt forced to. Well, ‘told’. Offered him part of it, more like.

"What I mean," Sam says, "is that he came to see me last night, said he wanted to apologize. But instead of going for a heartfelt sorry, he offered to sleep with me." Well, more or less. But Barnes’ pride has taken enough blows without Sam ranting to Barnes’ best friend about how he fell to his knees and asked to be degraded in any way possible.

Steve stares at Sam like he just declared the earth flat. He blinks. "But why would he – you sure you haven’t misunderstood?"

Man, if only.

Sam’s mouth twists into a sad half-smile. "He was being pretty explicit about it."

Steve pales, worrying his coffee mug between his fingers. "Okay," he says, exhaling slowly. "And you don’t think it’s possible that he’s… interested in you? His people skills right now, they’re –" He makes a vague gesture with his hand. "Maybe he was clumsily testing the waters."

Sam only just manages to suppress a desperate laugh. "You mean he discovered his true feelings for me a couple of hours after he literally spit in my face? Nah, man." He shakes his head. "It was painfully obvious that he hated every second he was in that room with me. Besides, he wasn’t expecting some cozy night for two, he thought I was gonna hurt him. Revenge, or punishment or some shit."

Steve looks up from his hands, staring at Sam. "And you’re saying he would have let you?"

"He was dead sure that he had no other choice."

Steve licks his lips. Sets his jaw. "Right," he says. "I read that flashbacks can get worse before they get better. I’ll talk to him, see how he’s holding up."

He stands abruptly, carrying his and Sam’s mugs to the sink. He doesn’t return. Instead, Sam hears the splash of water, followed by clinking sounds.

"Hey," Sam says softly, joining him at the built-in kitchenette where Steve busies himself scrubbing the dishes. Steve does not shake off his hand as Sam squeezes his rigid shoulder, but Sam gets the feeling it’s a close call. He lets his hand drop to his side. "Steve –"

"Thank you," Steve interrupts. "For the heads up. For looking out for Bucky." He nods at Sam. "See you later downstairs, ‘kay? Gotta be alone right now."

Sam bites his lip. "I’m sorry man, but what I was trying to say –"

"I know!" Steve wheels around to face him. "I know what that means, Sam, I’m not stupid!" He throws the sponge into the sink, grabbing a dishtowel to wipe his hands. "It means that he had to apologize like that before! That while I was here, getting mollycoddled because aw, all my friends are dead and I’m having nightmares for no fucking reason, Bucky was still out there fighting
HYDRA, alone. And when he gave them a hard time, they took his memories and tortured him half out of his mind, and they made him apologize." Steve grips the counter so hard it cracks.

"If you’d have had so much as a hunch that he was still alive, you would have moved heaven and earth to find him," Sam insists. "C’mon, you know it’s true."

Steve snorts. "Not good enough." He lets out an unsteady breath before he squares his shoulders and straightens up. "I don’t know why I’m even surprised" he says. "I’ve been there through some of his flashbacks. HYDRA… they’re the lowest kind of scum." He clenches his jaw, pain etched all over his face as he shakes his head.

Something in Sam’s chest twists in sympathy. He swallows. There’s no way to soften the next blow, so they’d better get it over with. "Listen, Steve, I don’t think he’s having flashbacks."

Steve frowns. "What d’you mean?"

Sam steadies himself. "He knew me, he knew where he was. And he still thought I was gonna do exactly what HYDRA would have done. He had the hardest time wrapping his head around the fact that I wouldn’t. Steve… I don’t think he knows it’s over."

Steve’s mouth drops open. "What? Come on, that’s ridiculous."

"I know how it sounds," Sam insists. "But think about it! His memories are still all over the place, and wherever he’s been – different people, different languages, even the rules may have changed, but at the core? Always the same: obey, comply, or you’ll be punished."

Steve blinks. "No," he says. "No, that’s not – he remembers me." Judging from the look on his face, he’s no longer 100% certain, though.

"Maybe," Sam admits. "But I’m telling you this because until we’re sure, we need to be extra careful ‘bout the things we say and do, okay? Just in case he’s not on the same page."

Steve stares at him, something horrible dawning on his face. "I sent him," he says. "I was angry that he attacked you, and I told him that he couldn’t join the training unless you were fine with it."

Steve’s eyes are wide with worry. "You think he thought I was sending him to be punished… to be raped?"

Unbidden, a memory flashes before Sam’s inner eye; Barnes’ forced grin, chin up while his nails pierced his palm bloody. A good fucktoy loves to be raped.

Sam shoves the image away firmly. "They messed with his head pretty bad," he says. "I’d say he’s generally used to expect the worst of people."

Steve’s hand trembles as he runs it over his face. "Oh god."

"Hey, you couldn’t have known."

"Of course I could have known!" Steve snaps. "I could have and I should have! All his offhand comments, the things he did – he was telling me all along, I just didn’t listen!"

His chest heaves with barely contained anger. "You know how long he hadn’t eaten when I dragged him off the dinner table yesterday? Days! Believe me, with a metabolism like ours, that’s a fucking eternity." The counter cracks under his hands again. "And you know why?"

Sam’s pretty sure he won’t like the answer.
"'cause he was waiting for my permission." Steve grits his teeth. "He thought if nobody told him to eat, he wasn't allowed. And then he was so close and I hauled him off. I laughed at him when his stomach growled." Steve’s face is screwed up in self-hatred. "Later when I brought him food, he didn’t think it was for free."

Sam swallows. Jesus Christ.

"He asked me what I wanted for it," Steve says grimly. "And I, I still didn’t get it! He’d said similar things before, and never realized he might – I always thought that something must have jogged a bad memory for him. The way his brain is healing, everything that comes rushing back… the doctors warned us that he was gonna get confused! But he wasn’t, not like that, right? He was bracing himself to let me hurt and humiliate him for a bite of bread."

Sam mutters a curse. So that was the reason for the gigantic lunch package Steve brought Barnes today, and why Barnes had reacted so gruff about it. Fighting for the last scraps of his dignity. Sam’s heart hurts for the both of them.

"For food," Steve says. "They made him, they – for food." His voice breaks.

"I know," Sam says quietly. "It’s not fair."

For a while, Steve says nothing. Then, out of the blue, "I’ve been touching him."

Sam’s stomach sinks. He hopes there hasn’t been more to it than what he’s seen Steve doing, but he’s not sure how to ask. "You two… you were together, weren’t you?" he says instead. "Before the war."

Steve nods. "Yeah. But more than that, he’s… he’s my friend, Sam. I’ve been over the moon to have him back. I’ve been so stupid, so selfish. Even without all that, I’ve seen enough of those files to know he’s been through hell, and yet when he turned up, I was so goddamn glad they kept him alive. Glad." He squares his jaw. "Friend like that, who needs enemies, huh?" He shakes his head, nips any protest in the bud.

"So all this time," he asks. "Whenever I hugged him – he was wondering, wasn’t he? If today might be the day I wouldn’t stop there." Steve squeezes his eyes shut.

"Don’t do this to yourself," Sam insists.

"I sure as hell did it to him!" Steve spits. He balls his fists. "I crawled into his bed yesterday. Not for the first time, either," he says, voice dripping with disgust. "He was so tense when I touched him, and I didn’t let go until he went all limp." He clamps a hand over his mouth. "Bucky’s right," he forces out eventually. "It’s not over. He escaped HYDRA just to end up with another pervert who can’t keep his hands to himself."

"Steve! You love him, you’re not – you meant well."

"That makes no fucking difference to him!" Steve shouts.

"It will. But we gotta think about –"

Steve raises his hand abruptly, and Sam falls silent. In the pause that follows, he hears it too. Footsteps. Someone’s running down the corridor towards them.

The living room has no door, and a heartbeat later Barnes stumbles in, obviously straight from the shower, hair dripping and shirt sticking to him wetly. He looks wild. That’s not what makes him look
scary though – his expression is.

"Wait," he blurts. "Listen, there’s been a misunderstanding."
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Sorry for the long wait. Have the last two chapters together to make up for it! :)

**13 - Bucky**

He’s too late.

Looks like Wilson already reported him, and as expected, Steve’s furious. His cheeks are flushed from what must have been a heated argument, and behind him there’s damage to the furniture. He calls out Bucky’s name, steps forward to seize him, but then seems to change his mind.

Bucky tenses, hyper-aware of his body, of all the ways it’s not nearly as unbreakable as he’d like. If Steve decides to make up for lost time while he’s in this mood, there’s gonna be real damage.

Bucky’s stomach churns. He cannot fuck this up.

"I thought you knew," he blurts out, eyes fixed on Steve. "I didn’t tell you because I thought you knew."

A drop of water trickles down his neck. He rushed up here straight from the shower, didn’t even towel off properly in the wild hope of catching Wilson before he had time to talk to Steve. Tough luck. Now he’s got to convince both of them that they can’t use him the way HYDRA did. He’s got to think on his feet.

"I knew what, Buck?" Steve’s voice is tight. Ah, for god’s sake, he’s playing innocent. Bucky’s so sick of the games.

"You know damn well what," he grinds out between clenched teeth. He glares at Wilson, who stands a few steps back. "You’re gonna pretend you didn’t tell him ’bout last night?" Bucky’s face burns at the memory. He’s painfully aware that he probably just interrupted Wilson impersonating his pathetic begging. He squares his jaw and shoots Wilson the most contemptuous glance he can muster. "Bet you had the time of your life watching me grovel at your feet like a fucking dog. Of course you told him." Bucky screws up his nose, snorts as Wilson’s expression crumbles.

Steve’s eyes dart between the two of them. "Wait, what…"

"James," Wilson chimes in, "Just – before you say anything further: Yeah, I told Steve we had a run-in yesterday, and that you thought you had to offer sexual favors. That’s about it. If you don’t wanna say any more than that, then I won’t either, to no one. Up to you."

Bucky’s dizzy from the vicious tangle of dread and anger in his gut. What the hell’s Wilson up to now?

"I tried to apologize," Bucky says, turning to Steve. "I hope he told you that? I knew he was out for revenge, but I got on my knees anyway." Steve's mouth is a thin, hard line and Bucky has no illusions about how much his word is worth against Wilson's, if it comes down to it. Still. "I offered," he insists, "I offered and it was him who turned me down."
"Yeah," Steve murmurs, but Bucky sees his hands turn into white knuckled fists. That's going to hurt. "Buck –"

"You don't know what that's like!" Bucky can't help the ugly noise that rips from his throat. "You've never had to lick anybody's boots, have you?" He expects a punch to the stomach for the mere suggestion, but Steve squeezes his eyes shut and shakes his head.

"No," Bucky says, "Didn't think so." He shakes his head. "I did all I could."

Wilson raises his hands in submission. "Hey, nobody's blaming you for anything. Quite the opposite." His voice is wrapped in that soft tone that's usually a prelude to pain. (Shh, sit down, hold on tight. We’ll make the delusions go away.)

"It's us who fucked up, not you. Nobody realized you'd have a completely different understanding of an apology, you know? We usually just say sorry."

Bucky swallows. So he was right. They didn't know about his secondary function until yesterday, until he gave himself away. Stupid, so stupid. But he's not letting go of the best chance he's ever had that easily. "So do I," he states. "Normally." He aims for a casual tone, silently reminding himself that their file on him is incomplete. If he's convincing enough, he might still turn the tables.

"You're right to complain, I'm not very good at... what I tried to do. It's not my usual protocol," Bucky says and tries not to think about the consequences of lying.

"I gave you the wrong idea with my little act yesterday," he tells Wilson instead. "I felt bad for attacking you, and I wanted to make sure you'd be okay with me joining the mission training, so I… went overboard. " He shrugs at Steve, who nods gravely. Wilson stays silent, but Bucky knows he doesn’t buy it. No wonder, considering everything Bucky told him the night before.

"It's true that I've been providing sexual services for my superiors in the past," he says, because he's not getting out of that one anyway. "Wasn't a regular thing though. You know how it is, no matter how careful you are, there’s always a chance of damage." He forces a laugh up his throat, but nobody joins in. Bucky clears his throat. "As a soldier, I usually got sent out when nobody else could handle it," he continues. "Believe me, you want your best weapon to be battle ready at all times."

"You're not a weapon," Steve says, a sharp edge to his voice that makes Bucky straighten his back. "You're not a thing." Not a thing, not a machine. (Think of him as an animal rather than a machine. If you value your life, you gotta show him who's boss)

Bucky’s head hurts. It’d been a mistake to sleep all night. He hadn’t rested that much in weeks, and now the rampant flashes of memories get more frequent than ever. He shakes them off angrily. He’s more than a filthy animal. Or he could be, if they let him.

"I know what I said," he continues, glancing at Wilson. "But I wanted to get you going, so I exaggerated." He shrugs. "Truth is, I’ve only been ordered to provide stress relief a couple of times, when there was no other option available. But people like hearing how I can’t get enough, right?"

Wilson shakes his head, "You don’t have to justify yourself to me, man."

Steve seems discontent. "They like hearing…" His voice breaks off as he clamps his mouth shut. "Stress relief."

Bucky frowns. Maybe SHIELD has another word for that, too. "To come down after a mission?" he explains. "A reward for the team."
Steve just stares, and Bucky feels his cheeks heat up. His headache’s getting worse, but he needs to focus. "I follow orders," he says defensively. "My opinion doesn’t matter. But just to be clear, I never enjoyed it. I’m not like that, I – I never got off on it." (Wanna see something weird? He totally loves it. No kidding, lick his neck or some shit and watch him lose it)

"Of course not!" Steve exclaims, sounding offended at the mere suggestion. Bucky wants to crawl out of his dirty skin.

Wilson shrugs. "Physical reactions mean nothing though, right?"

Bucky’s stomach coils. Wilson’s seen him brought so low, no wonder he’s not falling for his cheap excuses now. (Struggle all you want, you know you need it. If we didn’t take care of you, you’d go wild. You’d be humping the furniture left and right in no time)

Bucky shudders, wills the memories away. Bad enough they taunt him at night, whisper to him as his fingers dig holes into the blanket, praying for the footsteps to pass by his door, just tonight, just one more time. Hypocrite. Of course it’s his duty to provide sexual services. More than that: his purpose. That’s why his body craves it – he’s been going without for long enough now to know that with sick certainty. There’s no denying the growing hunger of his skin. And yet he’s risking everything trying to cheat his way out.

Bucky licks his lips. He thinks of Steve’s warm body cradling him close, of the traitorous weight stirring between his legs from nothing but Steve’s breath on his naked skin. No. He’s got to fight it. He can’t lose his mind like they said he would. "I didn’t like it and I never got off on it," he repeats, but even he hears the edge of desperation in his own voice.


Bucky shivers. Wilson knows. He’s like the Widow, they make you underestimate them to get into your head and – Bucky’s going to be exposed. The sudden certainty is like a needle, puncturing the ever growing lump inside his chest. His lungs flood with ice cold horror. No, no, no. Steve can’t see that he’s made to be used, that he’s been lying to spare himself. They’re gonna make sure he’ll never forget his place again, they’ll let everybody have a go and he’s gonna scream himself hoarse and underneath his carefully crafted human mask there’s nothing but raw animal shrieks and his headache’s killing him he can’t think and Steve’s reaching for him – (Howl all you want, should’ve thought about that before you attacked me) (Ask for it ask for it look at that fucking animal he loves it come on say thank you kiss it kiss it are you okay Bucky it’s alright do you hear me)

Steve’s back hits the wall with a crack, metal hand clamped around his throat.

"DON'T TOUCH ME!!" Bucky knocks Steve’s head against the wall with each word; thud, thud, thud. Not much more than a wheeze comes out of Steve’s mouth, but Bucky recognizes his name. "B-cky. M-s-rry."

Steve. He’s with Steve, he’s attacking Steve – they’re gonna put him in the chair for this. Everything he’s worked so hard for; passwords, door codes, any chance of ever putting an end to – wiped away, they – Steve doubles over as Bucky drops him. Wilson’s behind him, ready to attack, backup’s gonna come through the door on his right – no way in hell can he take all of them down. The intel he’s collected, his plans, he’ll lose it, he’ll lose everything.

"I didn’t mean to do that!" Bucky whispers feverishly. His eyes dart towards the glass wall. Ninety-second floor. There’s the tracker in his arm, and even if he lives, he won’t be in any shape to run. But if he stays, the punishment… and at nights before a wipe, the usual rules don’t apply. God, no.
"Buck," Steve rasps, getting back to his feet.

The wingpack. They tested Wilson’s new waterproof wings at the pool, and didn’t he come straight up here from training? There, leaning against the sofa. Bucky’s heart races.

"Hey, it’s okay," Steve says. Nothing is okay. This is insane. Best case he’s gonna steal SHIELD property, worst case he’s gonna destroy it. He swallows. Either way, he’s gonna break the rules one more time.

He dives for the backpack, flips and runs up full speed towards the glass panel. The moment his shoulder collides with the window, something hits his side full force, throwing him off balance. There’s a sick crack as his head breaks a floorboard, and the dull pain behind his temple explodes into nauseating fireworks. The last thing he feels as his vision goes black is Steve pushing him down, pinning his hands in a death grip. It’s over.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

There you go: second (and FINAL) chapter tonight. Yay! Thanks for your patience.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

14.1 - Steve

While Steve waits for Bucky to wake, he figures he might as well clean up the mess they’ve made of the room. He picks up a broken plate and various chunks of what used to be kitchen furniture. Nothing to be done about the wall. He wipes the floor. Makes tea. Reminds himself that he’s gonna have to assure Bucky that yeah, of course it’s for free. He’s sick again, but this time makes it to the sink. Brushes his teeth. You’ve never had to lick anybody’s boots, have you? He drinks the tea too hot, sets the rest of it on the table. Bucky hasn’t moved from the couch, chest slowly rising and falling under the thin blanket.

Steve forces himself to stop pacing and settles into the armchair. Every time he looks, the dark bruise on Bucky’s temple has shifted further towards purple. He’s healing fast, but the fact he got knocked out at all is painful evidence of the dire state he’s in. It’s no surprise, though. I’m not hungry until you say I am.

Steve rests his elbows on his knees and rubs his face. Besides the lack of food and water, and his brain struggling to undo decades worth of damage, Bucky must have been living in a constant state of stress ever since they brought him in, expecting torture and rape at any moment. The fact that he tried to play it down only makes it worse, because it’s such a Bucky thing to do. Who knows if he even slept at all these past few weeks.

A wave of dread rolls through Steve’s stomach: Was that why Bucky kept insisting on being signed up for field work? You want your best weapon to be battle ready at all times.

Another piece of the horrible puzzle falls into place. What if the missions itself were never the point, what if Bucky’d merely been fighting for a reason to be kept in good physical condition? So that they couldn’t just – Steve squeezes his eyes shut. And he’d turned Bucky down every single time. How often had he told Bucky it wasn’t important? And Bucky had merely grit his teeth and looked away.

Steve shivers. He feels the warm skin of Bucky’s neck under his lips, remembers planting apologetic kisses there. Bucky’d probably counted the minutes until he could scrub himself clean afterwards. Steve gags. What kind of man doesn’t realize his touch is unwanted? You’re glowing, Peg had said. What’ve you been up to?

Steve dashes for the sink again, but there’s nothing left in his stomach. He washes his face with cold water until his hands go numb, then presses them against where his throat still throbs from being grabbed by metal fingers. Bucky should have given him a few punches to the gut too, for good measure. Couple of dozen or so. Steve sucks in a steadying breath, turns and – he jumps. He didn’t hear Bucky get up.
He stands with his back to Steve, facing the window. After a moment’s hesitation, Steve walks up from the side, making sure Bucky notices him approach. He stops a little more than arm’s length away. "Hey," he says softly.

Bucky acknowledges him with a sidelong glance before looking back outside. He raises his hand, the right one, and runs his thumb over the crack his shoulder left in the glass.

"Yeah," Steve says, clearing his throat to make his voice sound less hoarse. "Can you believe they call that security glass? Stark should ask for his money back." He makes a dismissive gesture that suddenly feels awkward, drops his hands and shoves them into his pockets. Bucky exhales deeply and doesn’t move.

"Sam offers his apologies," Steve says quickly before the silence festers. He tilts his chin in the direction of Bucky’s torso, where most of the bruises must be hidden underneath his t-shirt. "When he saw you going for the window, he grabbed my shield and full-body tackled you. You hit your head pretty bad.” Steve chews at his bottom lip. He’s supposed to avoid upsetting Bucky, but he refuses to lie to him. Not when HYDRA had done nothing else for decades. So he says, "Buck, I get what you were trying to do and I’m sorry I startled you into it. Shouldn’t have reached out when you were obviously disoriented." He feels Bucky’s eyes on him again.

"But Bucky, the wingpack… Sam suggested a couple of tweaks to the generators after the test run. Everything that makes those wings fly is spread out on Stark’s workbench right now."

If Bucky’s shocked at the implication, he doesn’t show it. Steve prays he’ll never have to see an expression like that on Sam’s face again, and he himself has firmly postponed even thinking about what could have happened, but Bucky… if anything, he looks tired. Steve shifts his weight. "So erm, Sam’s with Natasha, we can join them later if you wan–"

"What happens to me now?" Bucky turns to Steve, eyes dropping to his throat and flicking back up quickly. Oh. Steve realizes he’s probably bruised, too.

"It’s alright," he hurries to say. "Dunno if you remember, I used to have worse all the time." He gives a sorry excuse of a laugh.

"Don’t reset me." Bucky works his jaw. "Do what you have to do, but don’t–" he tips his fingers against his temple and makes a frustrated sound.

"Reset you," Steve echoes, flexing his hands. "You mean –"

"I can be trained," Bucky says, eyes boring into Steve’s. "You don’t have to start over every time I fuck up. It’s a waste of time and resources, and there are other ways now."

Oh Jesus. Of course Bucky’s worried about being brainwashed again, even though Steve’s told him that they’d destroyed every one of those goddamn chairs that they could get their hands on. He racks his brain for a way to make Bucky believe it.

"At HYDRA, we’ve been testing conditioning techniques," Bucky says. "It works." He frowns at Steve. "I know I can’t grasp morals the way you do, that I can’t control my impulses. But I can be trained not to do bad things! I don’t need to understand, you just … you gotta make sure I connect unwanted behavior with pain and –"

"Bucky!"

"Please!" Bucky’s right hand hovers over Steve’s, like he meant to reach out and then thought better of it. Steve closes the distance, and Bucky’s fingers immediately curl around his wrist, clammy and
"Please listen," he says, "Yeah, it takes some repetition, and I can’t ask you to let me attack you again and again until I learn, but I promise, if you see this through I won’t be able to even think about hurting you again! If you wipe me, nothing changes."

Steve feels sick all over again, dizzy with images of Bucky being hurt and told it’s his fault for not keeping himself in check. As if he was not human enough to see reason. And god, those sick bastards, that’s just like them, but Bucky – Bucky believes it. How could anyone believe that? And how on earth has Steve not noticed?

"You don’t even need special equipment," Bucky says, "I remember – ah. Look." Bucky guides Steve’s hand to his stomach and Steve tenses as Bucky rucks his shirt up. He’s about to draw his hand away, but Bucky merely places Steve’s fingertips on a rough patch of skin, about an inch left of his navel. "Here. Do you feel that?"

It’s something Steve’s noticed on himself: even though his scars are hardly visible, the skin feels different there. "Yeah," he murmurs, ignoring the looming sense of dread bubbling up inside of him. He never used to be a coward. He’s not starting now.

Carefully, Steve traces the scar’s outline with his thumb. It goes from Bucky’s waistband almost up to his navel, where it makes a sharp turn, giving it a kind of flipped v-shape. "What happened?" He realizes Bucky’s holding his breath, so he withdraws his hand quickly.

Bucky smooths his shirt down. "Flat iron," he says. "Safehouse. We were improvising. Each session, they gave me a page from the newspaper – weird stuff, weather and horoscope and so on. I was supposed to read it out loud and they –" he gestures down, "did that until I was done."

"Wha –" Steve’s mouth drops. " Why? "

"’cause it works," Bucky says. "Or did you catch me stealing any newspapers lately?" He cocks his eyebrow. "You can search my room. Ask JARVIS. I don’t even skim the headlines when they’re lying around. Sounds promising, huh?"

"Sounds horrible," Steve says, wide-eyed. "Buck, I swear, nobody is gonna try to train you ever again."

Bucky’s expression hardens. "You don’t think I can learn? The goddamn guard dogs can be trained, and you think I can’t?" He looks at Steve as if he’s tasted something rotten.

“No,” Steve cuts in, “What I’m saying is you don’t need any rules tortured into you! I don’t know what HYDRA told you, but they lied. They lied, Buck. And for what they did to you they’ll never see the light of day again."

Bucky snorts, leaning back against the window.

“Come on, Buck.” Steve wants to shake him. “They treated you like some… some savage beast. Worse, like a thing. Don’t tell me that never felt wrong? It was, and deep down you know it!”

Bucky swallows. There’s something on his face – surprise, shock, fear – Steve can’t tell. Bucky turns and looks outside. Maybe this is it, Steve thinks, heat surging up his chest. Maybe he’s getting through. He dares take a measured step closer, but stops in his tracks as Bucky’s hands ball into fists.

"I used to suck that up like a sponge, didn’t I?" Bucky’s voice is acid. "How often did you do that to
me? Three times, four times… every time?” He screws his eyes shut. "I was so stupid."

Steve’s heart sinks. "What you’re talking about?"

Bucky ignores him. "So that’s your job, right? They send you in whenever I start messing up too bad. When the usual means of correction don’t work anymore." Bucky runs a hand over his mouth, nods slowly. "Yeah, and then you – you feed me all those lies I wanna hear. Tell me that I’m not… I’m not that different from humans. That I only malfunction ‘cause they’re treating me wrong."

_Not that different from_ – Steve’s hit by another wave of nausea. The fact that Bucky looks disgusted with himself more than anything makes Steve want to grab the nearest HYDRA operative and smash his head against the floor until there’s nothing left of it. He pushes the thought down. For now. “I’m so sorry,” he says instead, even though sorry doesn’t even begin to cover it. "HYDRA are masters of manipulation, and they stop at nothing. But Buck, you’re mistaking me for someone else. I never worked for them."

Bucky smiles, sadly. As quickly as it had come, the hostility drains from his face. Instead, he glances over at Steve with a strange fondness in his eyes. "I remember the first time we met."

Steve bites his lip. "You do?"

Bucky hums. "Well, one of the first times, that is. Not like you didn’t give yourself several chances at making a first impression."

Oh. Steve swallows painfully, stifles the urge to simply deny it. Presenting Bucky a truth he can’t believe in hasn’t done anything for them so far.

"I remember being restrained." Bucky says. "Been difficult again, huh? Guess that’s why they sent you in. Get me back on track.” He rubs his wrists absently. “Hadn’t seen anybody who wasn’t pointing a gun at me in a long while, and there you were, strolling in like that.” His smile is almost rueful. “The guards thought you were crazy when you ordered them to unlock my restraints. But you were not afraid."

Steve frowns. Did they actually plant a Steve lookalike with Bucky or was it a coincidence? It’s not impossible that some guy simply had more guts than what’s strictly sensible, and Bucky was unconsciously reminded of Steve. God, please no.

"You got me out of the lab whenever possible," Bucky continues, brow wrinkled in thought. "Upstairs, to your private rooms. I acted as if I was used to being treated like a guest, and you let me. That was… that was good." Bucky’s voice, usually rough and clipped, has softened around the edges, and Steve realizes with a sharp twinge of pain how vulnerable Bucky would have been to anybody who pretended to care.

“When your visits became rarer and rarer, I gave myself hell because I let you lose interest,” Bucky says, wiping his palms on his thighs. "Could have spared myself the effort, right? There’d been an expiry date on your little experiment right from the start." His eyes narrow at that, and Steve bites his tongue to let Bucky continue. If he doesn’t find out what he’s up against, he’ll live in that guy’s shadow forever.

"That’s what it was, right? An experiment. A _game_. Once I’d completed whatever mission you sent me on, there was no reason to keep pretending. Everything you did after that was for your own amusement." He looks at Steve with unaltered resentment now. "Bet you had fun watching me fall all over myself trying to win your favor back. You really get off on that stuff you made me do or were you just trying to see how far you could push me?" He laughs bitterly. "Were you surprised
that there was no end?"

The image hits Steve right in the stomach: Some perverted HYDRA agent getting his fingers on Bucky, who’s so desperate to be heard, to be seen, that he goes along with anything.

"You had no choice."

"Yes, I did," Bucky says. "For once I did, and look how I used it. All of HYDRA didn’t manage to degrade me the way I did when I tried to be more. Pathetic."

"No." Steve shakes his head. The self-hatred in Bucky’s expression is gutting. "There’s nothing you gotta be ashamed of. None of that’s on you."

Bucky coughs up a joyless laugh. "There was a time I would have done anything to hear you say that." He runs a hand over his face, rubs at the faded bruise on his temple. Then he says. "I don’t want anything that’s not real anymore. I’m not like you, or them, and I can never be. But I’m not that either."

He reaches into his pocket, fishes out a crumpled energy bar. Steve recognizes it as the one Bucky took from his kitchen yesterday. He gives it one last look, then throws it back to Steve. "Keep your little bribes. Keep your kindness and your promises. You want something, you gotta force me. I’m done crawling."

Steve wipes his forearm over his eyes angrily. "Yeah, you are." He puts the energy bar on the table, next to the cold teapot. When he’s pulled himself together, he straightens up. "When we first met, I was five years old. We grew up together, you dragged my sorry ass out of trouble more times than I can count. The day I lost you, you took a shot that was meant for me. You got blown out of that train – I never knew HYDRA had you, I thought you were dead!" He bites his lip. "I failed you, Buck. But I’m not the enemy."

"Stop it!" Bucky’s eyes measure him in a way that makes Steve wonder where Sam put his shield. Doesn’t matter.

"Listen to yourself, Buck. You came rushing in earlier, all worked up because you thought I had the wrong idea about what HYDRA did to you. And now you’re accusing me of being part of it? That doesn’t make sense!"

"Shut up," Bucky shouts. "Stop messing with my head!" His posture shifts, ready to attack, but there’s no mistaking the look of fear on his face.

"You’re safe here," Steve continues. "I’m sorry that you thought you weren’t. I’m sorry that I wasn’t there when you needed me. I can’t make that right, but I swear, I’d never hurt you on purpose."

Bucky makes a desperate sound. He raises his fists, but doesn’t engage. He just stands there, panting, pain etched all over his face.

"It’s okay," Steve whispers, "You’re safe. It’s over." Carefully, he steps forward. In the blink of an eye, Bucky grabs Steve’s shirt with both hands. He growls, and for a second Steve expects to be thrown across the room, but Bucky doesn’t go through with it. Instead, he lets out a shaky breath and hangs his head. He stays like that, hunched over and clinging to Steve. The muscles of Bucky’s shoulders are taut as hell, and Steve carefully moves a hand between his shoulder blades. Beneath the damp fabric, Steve feels tremors running through him. Steve rests his chin on Bucky’s head. "It’s going to be okay," he murmurs into Bucky’s hair.
After that, Bucky stops fighting. He lets Steve guide him to sit on the couch, wordlessly takes the cup of cold tea Steve pours and presses into his hands.

"I know talk is cheap," Steve says. "And you’ve been lied to for decades, it must seem insane to trust me. So don’t." Bucky blinks up at him.

Steve nods. "You don’t have to believe what the people here tell you. All I’m asking is that you take a good look at what they do, okay? ‘Cause there won’t be any punishments, no touches you don’t want. I promise." God, Steve wishes he could speed this up for Bucky, but it seems he ought to be glad if Bucky even agrees to take the long road.

"Since you’ve been here, you’ve done things HYDRA wouldn’t have liked, right? You told me about taking water from the sink. I’m sure there was more." Bucky tenses.

"No, that’s good," Steve insists quickly. "I want you to do that whenever you feel up to it." Bucky’s frown deepens. "Don’t hurt anybody," Steve says, "But… disobey. Not gonna lie: it won’t be easy, but you can start with little things. Talk whenever you want to. Take water, take food. Break the rules and watch as nothing bad’s gonna happen." Steve tries a lopsided smile. "Rinse and repeat."

Bucky looks at the floor, worrying the cup in his hands. "I know it takes a lot of guts," Steve says, "but if anybody can do it, it’s you." Bucky shrugs minutely. The cup clinks as he keeps tapping it with a metal finger. After a while, he gives a small nod. Steve smiles.

14.2 - Bucky

It must be a trick. It alway is. Logically, he knows it, but that weak, pathetic part inside him has already sunk its teeth into the dream of some other, glorious life. Again. Great – whatever comes, he fucking deserves it.

"So, what now?" he murmurs.

Steve beams at him as if he’s reinvented gravity. "Whatever you want. That’s the entire point, right? But uh… how about dinner?"

Bucky swallows saliva. How long is this charade gonna last – a couple of days, weeks even? Who cares if it’s not permanent. Nothing is, but the food tonight’s gonna be just as real for it. Right, what’s he even fretting about? He’ll jump at the opportunity and make the most of it as long as he can. And maybe, if he uses his chance well, keeps collecting security codes and construction plans and all the intel he can get his hands on… Maybe when Steve decides it’s over, Bucky will be ready to put up a real fight.

Bucky squares his shoulders. "Sounds good."

Steve pours himself the rest of the tea, eyes still shining wetly. He flashes Bucky a goofy smile. "Let’s drink to that."

Bucky looks down at his own cup. He’s made the decision to go along with this, and he’s had his eyes on the tea for a while, but his hand’s not moving and his heart starts hammering against his ribs so hard he feels dizzy. Get a grip, he scolds himself, they’re not setting this whole thing up just to come cashing in right away.

He manages to gulp down the tea eventually, but of course Steve has noticed him struggle. Heat shoots into Bucky’s cheeks as Steve lays a hand on his forearm and squeezes. The ground, as always, does not have the decency to swallow him. Bucky clears his throat. "At what third-rate place you gotta clink glasses with tea?"
Steve laughs. He taps Bucky’s arm one last time, then lets go and walks over to the kitchenette.

Bucky feels the loss immediately. Fuck, maybe that’s the trick. What better way to remind him of his place than to let him play human for a while? Indulge his little fantasy, treat him like he claims he deserves. And then all they have to do is wait until he comes crawling back, begging to be put to proper use. No. Like hell is he gonna give them that satisfaction.

Bucky watches Steve rummage through the fridge, rubs his forearm absently like he could scratch away the itch for touch. He’s got to be strong, prolong this game the best he can and use his new freedom to gain power. It’s gonna be hard, but he won’t allow anybody to touch him, not at all, true to the story he dished up. He’s used to pain, he’s used to starving. He can do this. He has to.

When Steve returns, Bucky does not allow his gaze to linger on his hands, or his perfectly flushed lips. He forces himself to meet his eyes, and as Steve hands him a brown bottle, Bucky makes sure their fingers don’t brush.

"To you," Steve says. "To a new life."


Chapter End Notes

... and this is it! I actually managed to clean this fic up and archive it, phew. Thanks everybody who made it to the end! <3

And again, kudos to Neery, taydev and eatingcroutons for all the help! (Also I'm one of these authors that don't always do what their betas tell them, and I keep changing things until the very last second, so every remaining mistake is absolutely 100% my own fault.)

And yes, huh, I know I kept mentioning the Porny Sequel I thought (and still think) about writing, but... I'm trying to finish my WIPs first. At the rate this is going, I might be onto it before I reach average frozen-superhero age.

End Notes

So… it only took me a year to clean this up from the meme. Ahem. I’ll update as I go.

If you like sad super-soldiers, cry with me on tumblr.
Works inspired by this one:

- *Spinning in Circles* by nightrose
- *Coil Spring* by flymetothemoon16
- *Порка* by Melarissa

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!