Folie a Deux

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Folie a Deux

by cloud_wolfbane

Summary

When Bucky falls off the train in the Alps, Steve follows, and Russia gains two of the greatest assassins that ever lived.

Notes

This is not a happy story. While it will have a happy/promising ending, this story tells the break down of two people that are manipulated and tortured to become weapons. While I tried not to be overly graphic the story does contain torture, a rather graphic depiction of amputation, disordered eating, and some self-harm.

That being said, thank you for reading. This started as a NaNo novel and became a part of the Stucky Big Bang 2017 and it has been a hell of an adventure.

Also a huge thank you to my long suffering beta, ilovebeingme, and my two awesome artists for this SBB Xemsonx and Mithborien
Chapter One: The Fall

“You remember when I made you ride the Cyclone on Coney Island?”

“Yeah and I threw up.”

“This isn’t payback is it?”

Steve shoots Bucky a grin, “Now why would I do that?” A moment later he’s rocketing towards a moving train. He can’t look behind him, every ounce of his concentration needs to be focused on the train roaring beneath him, but he doesn’t need to look behind him. He knows Bucky will follow.

Only three of them can safely make the jump. Steve goes first, landing smoothly and taking out the first Hydra soldier with a flash of his shield. A quick glance shows Bucky and Gabe made it as well. He jumps into the first compartment he comes across. He takes out two more soldiers with ease, surprising them before they can so much as shout.

The last Hydra mook in the car is a little more difficult. He’s got some sort of armor around his torso with two of those damn laser guns strapped to his arms. Steve’s shield absorbs the first two blasts, the
deadly light diffusing with a buzz. Before the man can get off a third shot he tilts his shield up and
slams it into the man’s covered face, shoving him back so his head slams against the wall. The goon
falls with a satisfying thud.

Steve moves quickly, drawn by the sound of gunfire. In the next car he can see Bucky taking cover
behind metal crates. Bucky fires twice and then his gun jams, a flash of worry crossing his face
before he spots Steve.

Steve opens the door and tosses his own gun over. Bucky lays down suppressive fire and Steve gets
the soldier by shoving a metal crate in his face.

“I had him on the ropes,” Bucky teases, a cocky grin twisting his lips.

“Course you did,” Steve grins back, but his eyes widen when he spots the armoured Hydra agent
back up, his guns lit with blue light. “Bucky,” he shouts, shoving his friend out of the way.

He absorbs the shock with his shield, but it knocks him back, slamming him into the wall with jaw
rattling force. He shakes his head to clear it and sees Bucky pick up the shield while firing his pistol.

Another blast takes out the side wall of the train, unfurling the metal like a tin can.

“Bucky!” Steve shouts when another blast sends his friend tumbling out the door. He runs forward,
grabbing his dropped shield and tossing it with every ounce of strength he has. The vibranium
knocks into the guard with force, denting his helmet and dropping him like a stone.

Steve ignores him, running to the opening. Bucky is still alive. He’s clinging to the side of the train,
pressing his body as tight to the metal as he can so the wind won’t rip him away.

“Grab my hand!” he yells, leaning as far out as he dares.

Bucky tries to stretch for him, but the bar he’s holding onto gives a screech and breaks from the wall.
He slips and tries to reach out again.

Desperate, Steve leans further out, using the torn wall to hold on.

The look Bucky gives him isn’t fear, it isn’t blame -even though it’s Steve’s fault- it’s resigned. He
tries to reach out again, fingers grasping, but the last of the metal gives out and he tumbles off into
the abyss.

Steve doesn’t hesitate. He launches himself after him. The wind deafens him, beats against his face
and blinds him, but he streamlines his arms and legs, propelling himself after his friend.

It is all instinct. When he reaches Bucky, he grabs him by his coat and curls his body around him,
protecting him as if Steve is the shield. An instant later they hit the ground. The snow is as hard as
concrete, ice scraping across his face and tearing into his uniform. They slide, roll, and bounce down
the cliff, seemingly hitting every rock and stump in a mindless tumble through the Alps.

There is nothing Steve can do to slow them down. He can only tighten his grip on Bucky. Finally,
they come to a jarring halt. Steve can’t see, can’t breathe, and every bone, muscle, and nerve in his
body feels lit on fire.

He can feel Bucky, tucked as tightly as Steve could manage, protected by the super soldier’s body.
Despite the pain, he registers his friend’s breathing, can feel the rise and fall of his chest against his
own.
Then freezing cold dumps on them, a pile of ice and snow scraping against already torn flesh. Steve tries to hold it together, tries to force himself to move, to act, but darkness chases him and finally, he has to let it catch up.

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He wakes only for a moment, his body aches and his lungs burn. He thinks he must have forgotten his medicine. There are voices above him, muffled. He slips back to sleep.

The second time the voices are more distinct, but he can’t understand them. It’s not English, but he’s pretty sure it isn’t German either. He tries to focus, but his mind is fuzzy. Everything goes black.

The third time he is more aware. He is still in pain, the whole left side of his face feels scraped raw. There is pain in his shoulder, ribs, hip, and ankle. He tries to shift his left shoulder, it aches like that time behind the corner shop when John Anderson shoved him up against a fire escape and Bucky had to push it back into place before it swelled up. Steve hasn’t felt this bad since before the serum.

When he tries to move, he realizes that he is strapped down to a table, and he is blindfolded. He shoves against the restraints, feeling straps across his neck, shoulders, chest, hips, knees, and ankles. Whoever has him knew not to take any chances, and that worries him.

He hears another burst of language, and this time he is certain it is Russian, but that doesn’t make any sense. The Russians are their allies. He worked with their men plenty of times in bouts against Hydra. He’s vocal cords spark in pain when he tries to talk, but he manages to croak out the only Russian he knows. “I am American, I am ally.”

There is a harsh bark of laughter and then Steve feels the sharp prick of a needle in his arm. Everything goes dark.

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“Sir, he is an ally. The American’s will want their Captain returned.”

“An ally. Were they our allies when they tested their poison on our comrades in Finow?”

“Sir?”

“Put him in the Crypt.”

“And the other one, sir? His arm…”

“Hmm, him as well. I’ll need them both.”

“Yes, Sir.”
The Crypt

Chapter Two: The Crypt

Everything hurts. A sure indicator that Steve is more injured than he has been since the serum. Even opening his eyes hurts, but that’s mostly because of the blinding light that comes burrowing into his retinas. He groans and places his hands over his eyes, trying to blink away the painful spots. Tears run down his cheeks, and he can only imagine what his captors are thinking.

After a time, he finally manages to adjust his eyes to the light and take in his surroundings. The wall in front of him is seamless grey concrete, stretching far above his head. The other walls seem to be the same long stretch of concrete, but the one to his left has a familiar body curled against it.

“Bucky!” he wheezes, voice still sore.

He struggles over to him, crawling when his whole left side complains quite loudly about the movement. Bucky is laid on his back, a grey blanket pulled up to his shoulders. The left side of his face is scratched, snow burn. “Bucky,” he calls again, shaking his shoulder, but his friend barely moves. Though if they gave him the same shot they gave Steve, he’ll probably be out for a lot longer.

“Sorry about this pal,” he whispers, and pulls the blanket off. It’s the same scratchy wool as his Army-issued blanket back at camp. Bucky has been stripped down, but for a pair of clean grey boxers, which brings Steve to the realization that he too is stripped to a pair of grey boxers that are definitely not his.

He ignores them for now, looking over Bucky and assessing his wounds. His whole left arm is wrapped in thick layers of clean linen and bandages, held together with medical tape. His legs and chest are covered in bruises and a few scrapes, but look mostly superficial. They also have a shine to them like they’ve been treated.

He hesitates over the bandaged arm. It looks well wrapped and he knows it should be left alone, but he fears what might have been done to it. He unwraps it carefully, trying not to jostle Bucky too much. His friend just gives a soft groan and turns his head away.

When the bandages are undone, the arm that is revealed does not look good. Not good at all. The tips of his fingers are black and up to his knuckles the skin is white and hard. About a hand’s span below his elbow there is a riot of bruises and a y-shaped cut running down to his wrist. The cut is red and leaking a green pus that smells like rot. The cut looks like someone has cleaned and cut away the worst of the wound, using neat rows of stitches to pin everything together.

Only years of seeing terrible wounds on the battlefield keeps Steve from gagging. He presses at the edges of the wound carefully. The edges are black leading to the same hard skin like his fingers, but beyond that the skin is red and hot to the touch.

Bucky doesn’t respond to the touch, though it must be agony. That is not a good sign. “Oh Bucky,” Steve sighs and begins to rewrap the arm.

He has seen wounds like this before and he knows that once the puss turns that color and begins to stink, that the soldier either needs antibiotics or he needs to lose the arm. Neither option is looking promising at the moment.
Steve secures the arm back in place, feeling bad about reusing the bandages, but he doesn’t have much of a choice.

After, he starts to explore the cell. It is rather small, about ten foot by ten foot of the same grey walls reaching about thirty feet above him. The ceiling is obscured by the blinding lights, but he sees nothing to indicate a door or a window.

Bucky is laid out on a thin grey pad that comes about an inch off the ground and is barely wider than a cot, but is better than the hard concrete floor. There is a spigot on the far wall, sticking just out of the wall. When Steve turns it, the water that drips from the nozzle is clean and clear. There is a drain beneath to whisk the excess away.

A bit further from the drain is a hole in the ground barely larger than his fist. There appears to be a pipe of rushing water beneath it. Judging by the lack of any facilities, Steve supposes this is their latrine.

Other than that, the cell is bare. It is just him and Bucky with a mat and a scratchy blanket. There is no medicine or food anywhere in the cell, and as far as Steve can tell, nowhere to get any.

“This doesn’t look good pal,” Steve says, going to sit beside the pad. He had recovered Bucky with the blanket, but his face is flushed and there is sweat beading at his brow. Only Steve’s own experience with being ill, stops him from removing the blanket.

The cement is cold against his back, but he doesn’t mind it, his temperature has run hotter ever since the serum. He sighs and leans his head against the wall, lets himself look up into the lights. He stares and stares, blinking away tears as his eyes water and black dots flash across his vision. It takes some adjusting, but he finally manages to spot a small hole in the wall just below the lights. It isn’t a door, not exactly, just a small rectangular opening that could be used to throw things down to them.

What Steve can not figure out is how they got the two of the them into the room and how to get out of it. He turns away from the light, blinking the flashes of dots out of his vision and wipes the tears from his eyes.

“Well Buck, we’ve really done it this time.” He lays his head down on the small patch of pad beside Bucky’s head. He’s exhausted, body wrung out from trying to heal and stomach cramping from lack of food. Before the serum he could make a boiled potato last for two days, but after the serum his metabolism had ramped to 4 times that of a normal human. Without the extra calories he can hardly function, his brain feels fuzzy and his muscles ache.

He reaches out, wrapping his hand around Bucky’s uninjured wrist. His pulse is steady and strong, the soft beats lull him to sleep.

He’s not sure how much time has passed when wakes again, but it’s been long enough that his back is stiff, pressed against the unforgivable concrete. When he sits up and stretches his arms over his head it feels like every bone in his spine cracks.

He looks around the cell, but nothing has changed. He uses the spigot to drink a couple palm fulls of water. He somewhat succeeds in bringing water over to Bucky, using his palms to run the cool water on his brow and through his hair. He can’t get Bucky to drink, but wets his fingers and trickles the water into his friend’s mouth, careful to prop his head up.

Bucky doesn’t respond. His breathing and pulse are still steady, but no matter how much Steve moves him he doesn’t wake. This is beyond worrying.
Time passes slowly. Bucky’s bandages start to smell and he stops sweating. His brow is hot to the touch, but dry. When Steve can’t take it anymore he looks up and shouts, “He’s going to die! If you don’t do anything he’s going to die!”

Nothing happens for a long time and then the slot opens with a loud screech and something is pushed through. It falls on the far wall with a thud, a simple grey pack. He opens it to find an empty 1-quart water canteen, a 5-quart canteen filled with a thick, odorless sludge, 4 rolls of bandages, 1 roll of medical tape, 2-syringes (filled and helpfully labeled as penicillin), an unlabeled salve that smells strongly of eucalyptus, a box of matches, and at the bottom, a large knife.

He pulls the knife out from its sheath. The blade is large with a curved tip, and well cared for. It has a few nicks that show wear and the handle has the imprints of use, but the blade is clean and razor sharp.

He stares at the knife, the matches, the syringes, and the piles of bandages and knows exactly what they want him to do.

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“Sir, was it wise to give him a knife?”

“Oh yes, the Captain must face this obstacle alone.”

“Should we start with project Bezumiye?”

“Not yet, let us wait and see what he does, we can always retrieve the weapon after.”

“Of course, Sir.”
Chapter Three: What Has to be Done

Steve lays out his tools, setting them in a neat line beside Bucky like he’s seen the medics do a thousand times. He feels sick to his stomach, but his hands are steady. He unwraps the bandages with care, trying to peel them off without tearing any skin.

The pus has gotten worse, turning from a light green to a greenish-brown. The uncovered wound stinks like sewage and the black edges around the cut have spread. The swelling has grown bad enough to pop some of the stitches.

The redness from the infection spreads to just below Bucky’s elbow, so Steve takes a strip of bandage and ties it a hand’s span above the elbow. He jams the sheath into the knot and turns it until the skin below has turned white, before tying it in place. Just like how they learned to do a field tourniquet with a stick.

He waits.

After about ten minutes the infected part of the arm has gone pale and bloodless. He doesn’t want to wait much longer for worry about further injuring the healthy upper arm. Steve maneuvers Bucky so he is at the edge of the pad with his left arm stretched across the concrete.

He takes up the knife, ridiculously grateful for the sharp blade. He takes a deep breath, closes his eyes, and begins to pray.

‘Mary, full of grace, spiritual mother to those in need, I fervently request your heavenly intercession for James Buchanan Bucky Barnes who is ill and seeks God’s miraculous assistance…’

He repeats the prayer over and over as he secures Bucky’s arm with his free hand and knees. Steve lifts the knife, lowering it slowly a few times to test his aim at the crook of the elbow. When he feels as ready as he will ever be, he slams the knife down with all his considerable strength.

It slips through muscle and sinew with ease, but catches at the bone, the knife slipping then catching halfway through the joint. Blood leaks around the cut and makes the blade slippery. Steve dry heaves, but manages to keep it together. He clenches his teeth and lets the blade swing again. This time it crunches through the bone and skids across the concrete with a terrible wail.

Steve can’t help it. He runs to the corner with the water pipe and gags over the grate. Nothing but sour biles comes up, dribbling over his lips and chin. He can only take a moment to let the heaving stop, and rinse his mouth out with a splash of water, before he has to return to his friend.

He wipes the blade clean and then uses the matches to light the used linen. The flame is small, but steady with an added glop of the salve. He runs the knife through the flame until it is hot, and then begins short touches to cauterize the wound, careful not to leave it too long and further damage the
tissue.

After, he rubs the salve onto the bandage and carefully wraps the stump, using extra padding at the end to absorb any blood or fluid. He injects one of the penicillin shots -assuming that it is mostly likely labeled correctly- into the meat of Bucky’s shoulder.

Holding his breath, he tucks the severed arm, the used needle, and the dirty bandages into the bag and puts it in the far corner. The bag may have had future uses, but Steve has no interest in seeing the arm, and is glad to finally have it out of sight.

It takes some time to clean the area and wash the blood from his hands. He feels ill, but he knows he did the best he could, even a trained surgeon couldn’t have saved that arm, amputation had been Bucky’s only hope. Steve just hopes his friend will survive.

He’s too wired and worried to sleep. Instead, he keeps vigil, propped at Bucky’s side with his fingers around his wrist, letting the thrum of his pulse calm the rapid beating of his own.

He monitors the bandages constantly, changing them after a few hours. The pus is clear and the bleeding minimal. Even Bucky’s pallor is starting to look better. After what Steve thinks is about 12 hours he injects the second shot and finally lets himself sleep.

He wakes up sometime later, starving. His stomach is a hard knot of hunger, and his arm shakes when he pushes himself into a sitting position. He hasn’t been this hungry since the time in ’34 when he got mugged and he and Bucky had to live off cabbage soup for a week. A cabbage soup that consisted of a single head of cabbage and a pot of water.

In his shifting he knocks over the empty canteen and remembers the larger one with the weird paste. He pulls it open and pours a bit on his fingers. It has a consistency similar to oatmeal, if one used more water than oats. It doesn’t smell like much of anything, so it probably isn’t medicine. Throwing caution to the wind, he takes two deep swallows of the stuff. It tastes of nothing, the consistency leaves something to be desired, but it is hardly the worst thing Steve has ever eaten.

He puts the larger canteen away for now, deciding to see how his body reacts before he eats anymore. The smaller canteen he props under the spigot and waits an age for it to fill.

Bucky still isn’t awake, but he manages to get half the canteen into him. He drinks the other half and then fills the canteen again. By then, his stomach seems alright with the tasteless goo, and he drinks some more. Whatever it is, it’s filling. After about a quart his stomach finally seems full, and the knot of hunger loosens.

He waters some of the stuff down to an even thinner paste and coaxes Bucky into swallowing some of it. He keeps himself busy taking care of Bucky for a time, but he can only fuss so much before he runs out of things to do. He is bored and disoriented under the continuous glaring lights.

Time passes.

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“The surgery went well Sir, it looks like the Sergeant will recover.”

“Yes, the Captain is just full of surprises. Wait until after the Sergeant is awake and then implement project Bezumiye.”

“Yes, Sir.”
Steve has no way to measure the passing hours, so he measures time by Bucky’s recovery. Still, the wound seems to heal amazingly quickly. It seems only a moment for the swelling to go down and for new flesh to knit the horrible injury together. Not for the first time, Steve wonders what exactly Zola did to his friend.

After the third time Steve has slept, he wakes to find Bucky sitting up.

“Bucky,” Steve gasps, at his side in a moment.

Bucky is leaned up against the corner, his gaze fixed on the stark white bandages wrapped around the remaining stub of his left arm.

“Oh Buck.” He has to stop himself from reaching out, the guilt of what he’s done grips him harder than ever.

“What happened, the...the train?” Bucky asks, voice raspy from disuse.

“You fell and I...followed,” Steve fixes his gaze on the blank wall across from him. “We were captured, but by who I’m not sure. I think I heard Russian at some point, but I was so out of it I may have been hallucinating. You’ve been out too. I’m, ah, pretty sure you broke your arm in the fall.”

Bucky shifts his gaze from his arm to Steve and back again. “They did this?”

“No,” Steve chokes out and feels tears well in his eyes. God, he hasn’t cried since his ma died. “It got infected. They had it stitched up, but it looked like blood poisoning, maybe gangrene. Definitely some frostbite. I…”

“Oh christ Stevie.” Bucky, weak and devastated with loss, wraps his good arm around Steve’s shoulder and pulls him close. They huddle together in the corner, Steve’s nose pressed against Bucky’s shoulder as he sobs.

When he finally pulls himself together, embarrassment rushes over him and he can feel the heat of the flush across his cheeks. “I yelled at the ceiling, told ‘em you were gonna die,” Steve explains, face still tucked against Bucky’s shoulder. “They threw down a bag of supplies,” he swallows, “there was a knife.”

“Shit,” Bucky breathes out.

“Yeah,” Steve agrees and tries to pull away, but Bucky tightens his grip.

“The only thing I heard in that story was that you saved my life, and…” Bucky looks around the four blank walls and concrete stretching far above their heads, “that we are in one hell of a shit-show.”

“Language,” Steve warns, because it is such a familiar thing to say, it helps loosen some of the weight sitting on his chest.

“Who’m I gonna offend? Your virgin ears bleedin, Stevie?” Bucky teases. His grin isn’t it’s usual blinding flash of teeth, but it is a comfort all the same. “Fuck,” he looks around, “I really have to
Steve has to bite his lip to keep from laughing, good ol Bucky. “Here, I’ll, ah,” he blushes, “lend you a hand.” He really does have to help Bucky over to the hole in the floor. Bucky hasn’t moved in who knows how long and is suffering from blood loss, sickness, starvation, and dehydration. He’s weaker than a kitten, and it takes some maneuvering to get him even the few feet across the cell.

They manage it though, and Steve helps him back into the corner with the pad. He hands him the 1-quart full of water. “I still haven’t figured out what this is made of, but it is food, kind of,” Steve hedges, handing over the other canteen. It’s about half-full now.

“This looks like old man’s Johnson’s oatmeal that time he ran out of oats half way through and started adding sawdust,” Bucky grimaces, looking at the sludge at the bottom of the container.

“Yeah,” Steve winces, remembering that particular meal. “It doesn’t taste like anything really, but it’s filling. A couple swallows and I’m good.”

“Huh,” Bucky looks curious and takes a big gulp. His face goes through an interesting series of expressions before he manages to get it down. “Not much taste, yeah, but it goes down like camp eggs.”

After they’ve ‘eaten’ Bucky’s gaze keeps wandering back to his left arm. Steve can tell he’s trying to be subtle about it, but he can tell. “Bucky…” He starts.

“Stop,” Bucky barks, face fierce. “I don’t blame you. I don’t. I just,” he sighs, rubbing his brow. “It’s gonna take some getting use to.”

“Alright, yeah,” Steve murmurs.

With nothing to do and Bucky still recovering, they soon wind up curled together to make the best of the small mat. Sleep comes with surprising ease.

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They jolt awake to an unholy noise.

Steve is on his feet in an instant, arm out in front of him as if he still had his shield. Bucky is at his side a moment later, his injury slowing him down. The cell is unchanged, but someone has turned on a loud blast of chatter. It sounds like nonsense at first until Steve realizes it is a different language.

“I guess they were speaking Russian,” he has to yell to be heard over the recording.

Bucky nods, agreeing to his identification of the language. He’s scanning the ceiling, looking for the speakers or any sign of the source of the noise, but it seems to be coming from everywhere.

Over the next couple of hours the chatter is occasionally swapped out for Russian music, but the noise is continuous and the volume deafening. In an effort to drown out the noise they tear pieces out of the blanket and shove them in their ears, but it does little. They can’t really talk without shouting at one another, so they wind up curled together on the mat.

Bucky keeps looking at his missing arm, his gaze lingering over the bandages.

It tears at Steve to watch him, but when Bucky catches him looking, he gives him a shove with his shoulder and a glare. Over the din he shouts, “Stop it punk, I don’t blame you.” It shouldn’t, but it makes him feel better.
The noise goes on and on and on, until Steve notices something coming down from the ceiling. He taps Bucky’s shoulder and points up. They both stare at the haze of some sort of gas filtering down on them. They try wetting the blanket and using it as a sort of filter, covering their nose and mouth, but it is a useless endeavor. The gas leaves a sour taste on the back of his tongue. Eventually, they both pass out.

When Steve wakes back up everything is dark. After days of the bright lights, he desperately wants them back. The dark is all consuming, he can not see so much as a shadow when he waves his hand over his eyes. He very well could be blind, but he can’t imagine why their captors would do such a thing. Of course nothing of their captivity has made much sense.

He’s pretty sure he is still in the cell. He can feel the concrete wall at his back and the thin pad beneath him. The body pressed against his side is definitely Bucky, would know the shape of him anywhere. The Russian chatter is still playing, obnoxiously loud and even more disconcerting in the pressing dark. His head feels fuzzy and he has a killer headache.

“Bucky,” He calls, nudging him with his elbow.

Bucky groans, the sound only audible because he’s right next to Steve’s ear. “Wha?” He flinches suddenly, body jerking as he becomes aware of the dark.

“Bucky, hey, Bucky!” Steve shouts, pulling him close, so he can yell in, at least the general vicinity, of Bucky’s ear.

He hears what he is pretty sure a ‘Steve’ in response. Bucky relaxes somewhat, returning to their previous position of sitting side by side. The weight is comforting. In the darkness, with the blaring noise, touch is the only reassurance they have that the other is there.

Hours pass like that. They can’t sleep because of the endless noise, and though they both know the exact dimensions of the cell, sitting in the darkness makes even the smallest movement seem treacherous. Steve isn’t sure how much time has passed when he tastes the same sour bite as before. They must be pumping more of the gas into the room, because his head starts to feel fuzzy and his eyes droop.

When Steve wakes again his head is pounding and it feels like he swallowed sand. He sits up with a wince, his skull pounds in protest and he can tell through the tears in his eyes that the lights have been turned back on. The noise is still playing, it sounds like it might be a rousing speech in Russian if he understood any of it and his brain didn’t feel as if it is about to dribble out his ears.

Bucky is still at his side, groaning unhappily. His movements stiff and jerky. It sounds like he might be saying something, but the words are snatched away in the cacophony of noise blaring down at them.

When Steve can pull himself together enough to focus, the room is slightly changed. He taps Bucky on the shoulder, and when the other man finally looks at him, he points to the corner. The bag that had contained the arm and the dirty bandages is gone. The knife -which had been right beside the mat- is also missing. Their food canteen has either been refilled or replaced, because it’s full when he checks it. The small water canteen was left untouched.

The knowledge that people were in the cell while they were passed out sends a spark of unease down his spine. On one hand, it does tell him that there is a way to get in the room, so there must be a way to get out. On the other hand, it tells him that the gas they’ve been using on them is potent enough to completely knock out both of them, and with no way to measure time he cannot tell if his enhanced cells are growing used to it or not. Though he suspects not. He actually feels worse now
than he did after the first dose.

Not for the first time, he wonders what the hell they want from them.

Neither of them are doing well. Bucky looks skeletal, his eyes are sunken, highlighted by the dark bruises indicating his lack of sleep. There is something painful in that gaze, a resignation that makes Steve want to shake him. When Bucky leans forward, pressing his lips to his ear so he can hear, Steve knows he isn’t going to like what he hears.

“Stevie, god Stevie,” Bucky gasps, “You should have left me to die.”

This time, he does shake him. “Are you fucking crazy?” he shouts over the noise. “We’re in this together. We always have been and we always will.”

Bucky just looks at him, eyes wide. He’s crying. The noise carries away Bucky’s words, but Steve does not need to hear to understand the shape of those words on his lips. *Til the end of the line.*

Steve pulls him into a hug, probably holding too tight, but Bucky just leans into it. “Yes,” Steve says into his ear, “til the end of the line.”

The cycle repeats. Lights on. Gas. Lights off. Gas. The noise is the only constant.

Steve’s head feels like it is in a constant vice. He’s not sure if he’s actually getting any sleep or if he is just passing out every time they gas them.

They try to finish the food canteen within four cycles, but they are never hungry. Moving becomes difficult, every shift sends pain shooting into his brain. His thoughts are slipping. He begins to forget where he is, or why he is there.

He spends one of the times with light looking at his large hands, and thinks that they are bigger than they should be, but for the life of him he can’t remember why.

“Steve,” Bucky calls to him, and he thinks, ‘yes, Steve, my name is Steve.’

He goes whole cycles forgetting that he has a name, until Bucky calls to him. He always remembers Bucky, that name is burned into his mind, but his own seems to slip away. The noise makes it nearly impossible to talk. After awhile he forgets that he can. They communicate through touch, always leaning against one another, tapping at their shoulders to get attention. They touch each others faces, a reminder of the only other person in the world.

More cycles pass and even Bucky’s name slips through his grasp. He starts to think of him simply as Other.

The cycles go and go and go… until he is nothing at all.

***

“I think it is time to rescue our dear soldiers.”

“Rescue, sir?”

“Yes, prepare the chamber. How many days has it been?”

“364 days sir, since they were placed in the Crypt. They were quite stubborn.”
“Yes I imagine they were, let us see how pliable they are now, shall we?”

“Excellent plan, sir.”
Chapter Five: Freedom?

The silence is sudden, and horrifying.

He sits up and taps at Other until he wakens. Other seems equally worried. He sits up quickly, looking around their new world with wide, wild eyes. He wiggles the pointer finger of his only hand into one ear and then the other, as if to clean it out.

He had done the same, trying to see if his ears had stopped working, but he can hear the soft scrape of the blanket on the mat and the slide of their skin. It is strange to hear such soft noises. He didn’t realize there could be any sound beside the great voice.

He can only blame his confusion over the lack of noise for not realizing there is another man in the room. He scrambles back until the comforting, cool press of the concrete is at his back. Other follows, looking equally startled about the stranger.

The stranger is an older gentleman with short grey hair and a bald spot at the top of his head. He is dressed in a tan blazer with a white coat over it. On the lapel of his jacket is a small red pin with a yellow symbol in the middle.

He is drawn to the vibrant colors, leaning forward to get a better look. He is sure he has never seen anything quite like it.

The man has a kind face and is looking at them with concern. “Dear Soldaty, what have they done to you?” He holds out his hand, palm up. “Let’s get you both out of here.”

He looks to Other, questioning. Other glances at the man and then back at him, giving a nod of agreement. They stand as one, sides pressed together.

“We have to get lifted out of here, but there are comrades above to help us, do not worry,” the man gives a reassuring smile, “I am Dr. Fennhoff, you can trust me, just relax.” His voice is soft, pleasing.

The Doctor helps them into harnesses and they are lifted up into the sky. The straps pull uncomfortably in a lot of areas, chaffing against his bare skin, but it does not take long for them to be lifted out. There are people waiting on the surface. They are dressed in uniforms in a familiar grey, but they have the same beautiful mark of red and gold on their shoulders.

The doctor retrieves two blankets from one of the soldiers and wraps them around their shoulders. The blanket is softer than anything he has ever known and stained a deep red. He can’t help but stare at it, transfixed.
“Come along now Soldaty, we’ll get you both somewhere safe,” Dr. Fennhoff promises them.

He and Other follow. The doctor took them out of the room and gave them soft blankets. He is kind.

They travel in the back of a covered jeep, but he can see the flashes of color beyond from cracks in the tarp. He is not sure how long they travel, he stays pressed against Other and they are both lulled to sleep by the rhythmic rocking of the vehicle.

They wake when the jeep sputters to a stop, the old brakes jarring. Dr. Fennhoff smiles at them, soft and pleased. “Come along Stepka, Yasha. You’ve both been through an ordeal, we should get you looked at.”

He startles at the names, tilting his head curiously. He points at himself.

Dr. Fennhoff’s smile turns sad. “Oh my dear Stepka, yes that is your name. Well Stefan of course, but to me you have always been Stepka.”

Other points at himself, mirroring the head tilt.

“And brave Yasha, yes, Yakov for those who do not know you so well. Come along my Soldaty, I will get you sorted.” Dr. Fennhoff leads them into the building they stopped at, a great brick structure surrounded by wire fences and more comrades in grey uniforms.

They go to a room with white walls and a metal table that makes Stepka very uncomfortable but there is a large red and gold flag on the wall that helps him focus. Other, well Yasha, stays at his side as always, but he too seems drawn to the bright splashes of their new world.

“Those monsters had you for a long time, we thought you dead. I fear it will take some time for you both to regain yourselves, but we will fight that battle together,” Dr. Fennhoff promises. He listens to their hearts and their breathing. He tuts over their weights and thin limbs, checks their ears and eyes and writes copious notes in a small book he keeps in the pocket of his labcoat.

“I need to look at your arm Yasha, poor thing, I want to make sure it healed properly.”

Other is nervous about the offer. His half arm is wrapped in an old bandage, stained yellow with age and held together with strips of medical tape. He does not remember a time when it was not bandaged. He turns his head into Stepka’s shoulder, but he holds the stub out so it can be examined.

Dr. Fennhoff murmurs soothingly as he cuts the old bandage away. It seems to stick in some places, but Yasah does not make a noise as it is removed. Stepka cannot help but watch, curious about the injury that has always made him so uncomfortable. The wound, once revealed, is well healed. The skin is scarred where it had to heal over bone, and is puckered like a burn, but the wounds are old and long healed.

“Ah good, we can work with this. It may take time Yasha, but we will get you a new, proper arm. Help return you to who you are suppose to be.” Dr. Fennhoff then shows them around the building. It is a more sprawling complex than it looked from the outside. The soldiers from before live in another building behind it and train in facilities throughout. All the open space is daunting.

The Doctor tells them that they are in a special training facility for the best soldiers of the Soviet Union. Stepka and Yasha had apparently once been special soldiers, the best of the best that the Soviet Union had to offer, but they had been captured by enemies that had tried to break them. The enemy had nearly succeeded, but Fennhoff and his team had found them in time.

He tells them that it will take time for them to return to their old selves. That they will have to train
hard and remember to eat and sleep, but soon they will be able to return to the strong soldaty that they had been before.

He gives them a room, much larger than the concrete one. This one has brick walls with one of the large flags Stepka likes. There are two beds for them, much larger and softer than the mat. They even have a small dresser with uniforms and a bookshelf with actual books on it. Stepka is stunned by the generosity, of the sudden changes.

“Let me give you your medicine, and then you should sleep, it has been a hard day on both of you, I’m sure you are exhausted,” Dr. Fennhoff says, pulling two syringes from his lab coat. He gives Stepka a shot in his shoulder and does the same to Yasha. It doesn’t hurt, hardly a sting.

When Fennhoff leaves, Stepka lays in the bed and wonders why something feels horribly wrong. It takes an embarrassingly long time to realize why he is so disturbed. He crawls out of the bed and taps Other on the shoulder.

Yasha gives him a shy smile and lifts his covers. Stepka snuggles into the crook of his arm and instantly relaxes. Much better.

***

“I thought you mad Doctor, trying such a long term experiment.”

“And are you pleased with the results?”

“I am stunned. You have turned two of the greatest soldiers in the world into harmless puppies. They cannot even speak. How do you expect to use them to our benefit?”

“Ahh, that is why you must have patience. It will take time, yes, but when I am done they will be as loyal as any well trained pup. You will only need to point them in the right direction and command them to attack.”

“I will give you the time you require Doctor. I do not know if this project of yours will work, but I am curious enough to see the results to give you the benefit of the doubt. Good luck.”

“Ahh luck is not needed for this venture, simply psychology.”

Chapter End Notes

Dr. Fennhoff is a character from the Agent Carter TV show, also known as Dr. Faustus in the comics, but my interpretation is based entirely off the Agent Carter version.
Chapter Six: Training

In the morning, Dr. Fennhoff is kind enough to let them have breakfast in his private kitchen, under the assumption that the bustle of the dining facilities would be unnerving for them.

They both have a large glass of the greyish rations they’ve been consuming for as long as either one of them remembers. Dr. Fennhoff explains that it is a supplemental nutrition shake rich in protein, carbohydrates, and fat and contains all of the vital nutrients they need. He eats something different, but assures them that since he is not a soldier he does not need such specially prepared meals.

After breakfast, he takes them to one of the training facilities. It is a mostly empty room with an oval track drawn on the wooden floor, though there is weight equipment in the far corner.

“We must get you back into fighting shape, I know it will be unpleasant at first, but it will be good for your health, and after such captivity I can only imagine how nice it will be to properly stretch your legs.”

Stepka loves the track. Dr. Fennhoff is right, it is nice to stretch his legs. He moves steadily around the oval, Yasha at his side. The only sound is their steps on the ground and the soft whisper of their breaths. Though above all, Stepka can hear the thudding of his own heart, it is a soothing sound, one that he could never hear over the endless din of the crypt.

They run and run and run. Stepka keeps patting his chest, for some reason expecting his lungs to hurt, for something to seize up and cause pain, but he feels fine. His legs ache, the complaint of muscles not used to such activity, but it is a pleasant ache.

After a time, Fennhoff brings them over to the equipment and they lift weights. Stepka lifts a long pole weighted down with heavy metal circles. Yasha, unable to balance the long bar, gets smaller weights to curl with his good hand.

They even work the weights with their legs, pushing against a board loaded down with sandbags. Dr. Fennhoff shows them more physical exercises as well, sit-ups, crunches, lunges, and push-ups. Yasha can do push-ups if he puts his hand right in front of his face and balances his weight there. He shoots Stepka challenging grins as he dips easily into the exercise.

Weeks follow in this manner. A simple ease with just the three of them. Dr. Fennhoff helps them get better, gives them their shots every morning and evening and makes their protein meals. He slips in a banana once with a wink, and it actually adds flavor to the mixture.

Dr. Fennhoff cannot do such things often of course, adding to the mixture would upset the delicate balance of the nutrition. Every once in awhile though, with a wink, he gives them a shake blended with different things. They try strawberries, bananas, and once a strange fruit with a fuzzy brown covering but the flesh is bright green and speckled with black seeds. Neither of them has ever seen such a thing, but Other seems to enjoy it immensely.

Every day they grow stronger, building back muscle with their exercises and food. Dr. Fennhoff begins teaching them Russian, a language they had been trained to forget by the hateful creatures that had kept them captive for so long.

Yasha takes to it naturally, the words rolling off his tongue with ease. Stepka struggles with it, the
words seem clunky on his tongue, but he learns.

Then things start to change.

***

One morning they head to the training room and there is a man there already waiting for them. He is a tall, muscular gentlemen in the same weighted black vests that Stepka and Yasha have been wearing for the last few weeks. His eyes are so dark they look black, and the intensity of his gaze makes Stepka uncomfortable. He steps closer to Yasha, protecting his vulnerable side.

Dr. Fennhoff smiles and greets the man with a handshake. “Commander Shostakov, it is good to see you again, old friend. You’ve returned from your mission triumphant I see.”

Commander Shostakov nods in response, but his gaze does not waiver from them. “You look much healed Soldaty, it is good to see you returned to us, comrades.”

“W..W..We,” Stepka has to bite his tongue, nerves making his still struggling Russian worse.

“We feel much better, thank you, Comrade,” Yasha steps in smoothly.

“Hmm,” Shostakov steps forward. “Dr. Fennhoff has been kind to you. He has done wonders, but it is time the two of you return to proper training. I can not introduce you to the team, not like this.” His disgust is evident in his sneer. “Get them fitted,” he commands, spinning on his heel and marching away.

Fennhoff looks nervous as he straps a strange metal device on both their wrists. “I’m sorry,” he whispers, just soft enough for them to hear, before leading them back to the commander.

Stepka takes a moment to look at the device. It is a slim metal band with a single line on the underside where the Doctor closed the band, but it does not give when he tries to open it.

“Soldat, stand here,” Shostakov commands, pointing at Stepka and then at a point beside the track. Stepka walks over to the designated point, standing stiffly.

“Yakov, run,” is all Shostakov says to Other.

Yasha, shooting Stepka a confused look, starts to run. He does one lap in the same steady lope they have grown accustomed to. He starts to slow down when he has completed the circuit, but the Commander shakes his head. “Run,” he orders,” I will tell you when you can stop.”

So Yasha runs and runs and runs.

Stepka watches, feeling twitchy standing off to the side. His feet begin to ache, pain from standing in one place for so long. He tries not to fidget, but he knows Com. Shostakov catches him rocking from foot to foot.

He’s grateful that he can see the clock where he is standing, can watch the passage of time as every hour slips away. There is nothing he can do about the passage of time of course, but being able to measure it is a luxury. He loses himself in his head for a bit, boredom making his mind wander, but he snaps back into focus was he hears Other’s steady breaths turn into ragged gasps.

According to the clock, almost 20 hours has passed, the windows have grown dark and dawn is just peaking on the horizon. Bucky has run the entire time, moving in the same steady pace, but he looks tired now. Sweat pours from his brow and his cheeks are flushed. His breathing has gone rough with
a concerning wheeze, he drops to his knees.

“Soldat?” Shostakov snarls, “I did not say stop!”

“I’m tired Comrade, I can’t run anymore,” Yasha pants, chest heaving.

“Can’t” Shostakov spits. “Can’t.” He holds up something, but it is too small for Stepka to make out, but it looks like a button of some sort.

Then pain like nothing Stepka has ever known shoots up his arm. He thinks he might be screaming, but he can’t tell because he can’t think. There is just the pain, every nerve in his body howling. It reminds him of something actually, but his brain is too scrambled to pull that thought to him.

When he comes back to himself, he is curled as small as he can, laid out on the training room floor. He pulls himself up with shaky hands, and finds that Other is sprinting. He is running full out around and around the track like a man possessed.

Stepka struggles to his feet, shaking all over. It takes a moment to pull himself together, but he goes back to his spot and watches Yasha run. He can’t believe what the commander just did, and he doesn’t understand why.

Yasha continues his mad dash for another three hours before pure exhaustion trips him and he goes sprawling across the floor. Com. Shostakov walks over to him, the button held in his fingers.

Stepka doesn’t flinch, but it a near thing.

The commander leans over Yasha. “I did not tell you to stop Soldat,” he warns.

Yasha struggles to push himself up, his one arm shaking uncontrollably. His nose is bloodied from where he fell.

“Alexei,” Dr. Fennhoff barks, stepping forward.

Shostakov sneers, looking the Doctor up and down. “You are too soft, comrade.”

“He has run as far and fast as he is able, you should be proud of your soldaty.”

“Heh,” the commander snorts, looking from Yasha to Stepka. “Fine, you may stop,” he gestures flippantly at Yasha, “I will see you both at 0500 tomorrow. Then you will be running.” The look he fixes on Stepka is a blatant challenge.

He shivers at the promise, watching the commander leave the training room. He shakes himself out of it and helps Other to his feet, wrapping his arm around his shoulders so he can support his weight. “Come on,” he whispers. He gives Dr. Fennhoff a thankful look as he leads Yasha back to their room.

Yasha leans close. “Sorry, I’m so sorry,” he repeats.

“Don’t. It wasn’t your fault.”

“You were screaming.”

“I’m fine,” Stepka insists, and he is. Considering the pain of the shock, he feels fine. No lingering pain or discomfort. Yasha gives him a dubious look, but doesn’t argue.

“I have something that might help the soreness,” Dr. Fennhoff says. He heads down the hall to the
office and is back in their room just as Stepka is helping Other sit on the bed. “You have to forgive the commander, he pushes so as to make us stronger. He lost many men in the second great war and does not wish to lose more.”

“I can understand that,” Yasha says, wincing as he settles into the bed. “But I wish he’d have shocked me.”

“Yes well,” Dr. Fenhoff busies himself pulling out a tube of liniment oil and a box of salt. “That is rather the point.” He hands Stepka the salt. “You can borrow the officer baths today, add the salt to the bath and soak in it. Don’t sit too long either, after you’ve rubbed in the ointment, walk around and stretch your legs.”

“Thank you Doctor,” Stepka takes the salt.

After the Doctor leaves they follow his instruction. The oil and the salt go a long way to making Yasha feel better and his muscles seem to repair quickly. When they wake at 0400 his legs are barely stiff at all and the pain is gone, but nothing can lessen Stepka’s worry.

They get their meal from Dr. Fenhoff and report to the training room 10 minutes early. Commander Shostakov is already waiting for them. He doesn’t talk, just points.

Yasha takes up the place Stepka had stood the day before and Stepka starts to run. He takes the same pace they train at, a steady lope that eats up a lot of ground, but is easy to maintain for a long time.

He tries to keep his eye on the clock, but he speeds past too quickly to properly read it and he doesn’t dare slow down to check. Instead he lets his mind turn inward. He tries to forget about Other and to forget about the commander. His mind blanks, his thoughts just become the thump of his feet on the track, the beat of his heart, and the steady whoosh of his breath.

Time passes in a mindless blur, but eventually he grows tired. His heart starts to speed up, his breath harder to catch, his legs ache. He pushes through it. He can remember the pain of the shock, and he does not wish that on Yasha, not ever. So he pushes and pushes and pushes. He can feel the blisters on his feet rupture and thinks he is probably bleeding, but still he runs.

In the end, it is a stumble that does him in. He trips over his tired feet and goes to the ground, hard. He tries to scramble back up quickly, but Yasha is screaming before he can stand. His cry is sharp and piercing and horrible.

With a cry of his own, Stepka forces himself to run. He can tell for certain that his feet are bleeding now. He’s in pain, but he doesn’t care. It isn’t his pain that matters, it never has been. Other is in pain, and that is all he cares about.

He’s not sure how long he runs the second time, but when he falls again, his vision goes dark.

He wakes on a bed, can feel the familiar weight of Yasha against his back. “I’m sorry,” he whispers.

“Hey,” Yasha scolds, pulling him in closer. “You wouldn’t let me apologize and I won’t let you. Besides, I didn’t run myself until I passed out.”

“How long?”

“Thirty-six hours,” Yasha’s breath is hot against the back of his neck, a huff of laughter. “Over achiever.”

Stepka can’t help the smile that curls his lips as he falls back asleep.
“Do you think the Commander pushed them too hard Doctor?”

“No, not at all. They were desperate to keep the other from pain. They may grow to hate him, but his cruelty will only make them all the more loyal to their dear, kind Doctor.”

“Do you think them ready?”

“Yes, I’ll introduce them to the team.”
Chapter Seven: The Red Guard

The next morning they wake as early as usual, grabbing their breakfast from the Doctor. He gives them a wink over the cup, and Stepka finds it tastes of banana. The blisters he had ruptured the night before are already healed, the skin not even rough. His legs barely hurt, and he wonders if maybe he needed to be pushed. He never thought he could run so far for so long and do so little damage.

Commander Shostakov is waiting for them in the training room as usual, but this time there is a group of people with him; two women and a man.

“These are our new recruits eh Собака?” The elder of the woman asks, smirking. She’s almost as tall as the Commander, with wide shoulders and the sort of arms that look like she could do a great deal of damage with very little effort.

“At least they are nice to look at, better than your ugly mug Yuri,” the younger woman teases. She is the smallest of the group, barely 5ft and with a round face that makes her look like a child.

“Oy,” The other man snarks, but he does not look particularly offended. He is a large man, taller than the commander and build like truck. His expression is hard to read beneath his bushy, salt and pepper, beard.

“Enough,” The Commander barks. The group shoots to attention. He gestures to the older woman, “This is Major Lyudmila Pavlichenko, our ace sniper.” He gestures to the younger woman, “This is Lieutenant Nina Lobkovskaya, our secondary sniper and translator.” He gestures to the man, “And this is Sergeant Yuri Gagarin our infiltration and explosives expert.”

Stepka shoots Yasha a look, and they both salute, unsure what else to do. The group salutes back, so they assume they made the right decision.

“As you are aware,” the Commander addresses the other three, “these are the newest members of our group. Sergeant Stefan Orlov and Sergeant Yakov Volkov.”

“The eagle and the wolf,” Yuri huffs, a sound that may be a laugh.

Com. Shostakov clears his throat pointedly. “We are The Red Guard. It is our job and our privilege to protect our motherland. I will not accept failure. You are the best soldiers we have, I expect you to act accordingly. Major you will start training our newest members on their rifles. Lieutenant you will assist and Sergeant Gagarin come with me. Dismissed.”

The Commander and Yuri take the side door to the outside. Stepka turns to the Major, awaiting orders.

Lyudmila claps her hands once, drawing attention. “Alright, rifle training it is. Come on boys. Let’s see if there is any hope for you.” She leads them outside, where they have rarely spent any time. The ground is covered with snow, and the wind roars across base, sending up blinding flurries.

Stepka doesn’t really feel the biting cold, but the wind makes his eyes water. He knows that there is a
shooting range set up behind the training facilities, but Lyudmila walks right past it, continuing on until they are at the start of the treeline surrounding the base. Luckily the wind is somewhat lessened.

Lieutenant Nina comes up a moment later, rifles slung over each shoulder. “I grabbed the AN-94, figured we could start them on that before breaking out the Mosin.” She hands a gun to each of them. They are large black rifles with a sight on top and a 30-round magazine curving down the bottom.

“These are just to see if you can shoot at all, we’ll try the Mosin if it looks like you can actually hit a target.” Lyudmila leads them up into the trees.

They are giant pine trees, the bark strong and easy to grip, but covers their hands in sap. The sticky substance gets everywhere. The pine needles are equally uncomfortable, sticking sharply through their clothes.

The Major moves with practiced ease, finding sure-footing where there shouldn’t be, and moving from branch to branch with hardly a sound. Yasha moves with the same assured ease, taking his position on a sturdy branch to the right of Lyudmila. An impressive feat for a man with only one arm. Stepka has a little more trouble. He’s just too big, he knocks into the branches, sending pine needles scattering.

Nina laughs at him but Lyudmila sends him a rather unimpressed look. “Come on then fledgling,” she pats the branch to her other side. Stepka makes his way there and settles onto the branch carefully, it creaks in complaint. Nina settles below them, looking comfortable on a branch that should be much too small to hold a person.

“Alright boys, do you see the targets we put up earlier,” the major asks.

Stepka squints into the dark. There are trees spread out before him, most covered in snow and obscured by fog. It takes him longer than it probably should have to find the white target about 500 yards away nailed to the bottom of a tree. Once he sees that, he spots other targets, 200, 300, 350, 450 and one that looks 1000 yards away.

“Nina,” is all Lyudmila says.

The small women shoulders her rifle and takes aim. Her breathing is steady, the barrel of her gun moving smoothly as she looks from target to target in her scope. She doesn’t rush, the pull of the trigger and the deafening blast of the shot is a surprise. She barely shifts her muzzle as she pulls the trigger.

Stepka watches in amazement. She makes 6 shots and 6 hits, he can see the movement of the targets under the force of the shot.

Lyudmila clucks her tongue, “Pulled to the right on that last one, don’t rush child.”

“I know,” Nina sighs, resting the gun against her thigh, “gotta watch my breathing.”

“Hmm,” Yasha hums looking excited. “Let me try.”

“Alright pup, fire when ready.”

Yasha has a bit of trouble shouldering the rifle, it slots into his left shoulder, but he has to use the edge of his stump and his knee to balance it properly. He makes a frustrated grunt when it slips, but he finally manages to get it settled. Like Nina, he takes his time, tracking the targets in his sights to get a feel for where they are and the best order in which to hit them.
Stepka can tell the moment he decides to fire because Other stills. All movement ceases, even the steady rise and fall of his breath stops. The pull of the trigger is a slow contraction, and like before the sound of the gun is startling. Yasha fires slower than Nina, careful with his movements lest he knock the precariously balanced gun from its perch. Still, he fires six times and hits six times.

“Huh,” Lyudmila shoots Yasha a grin, “Not bad pup, not bad at all. We are going to have to do something about that arm though.” She taps her chin thoughtfully.

Stepka is next to fire and he is nervous. He tracks the targets the same way the others did, lining them up in his sights and taking the wind into consideration, but the gun feels strange in his arms. He knows he can hit the targets, that his aim is true, but the gun doesn’t feel like the right weapon. He just isn’t sure what is. He takes a steadying breath, feels the cool metal of the trigger against his finger and squeezes.

He moves through the targets, slow and steady, absorbing the recoil with ease, but the final shot goes wide and sails right past the target. His heart rate soars, as he fears the Major may activate Yasha’s punishment. Falling from this height could cause serious damage, but she only gives another hum.

“Not bad fledgling. Your long range shots need work and you sound like a hungry bear clamoring about in the tree, but certainly not the worst I’ve ever worked with.” Lyudmila drops from the tree with acrobatic style, slipping off her branch and landing silently in the snow.

Nina’s drop is just as graceful, not a needle disturbed. Yasha has a little more trouble, trying to balance the rifle on his weaker shoulder. It clatters when he lands, and his feet hit the ground with a solid thump. Stepka shoulders his gun and pushes himself far enough out to avoid the branches, landing silently on the tips of his toes.

Nina grins at him. “Like a ballerina, maybe you can be quiet Sergeant.”

“One that can’t climb, but lands like Anna Pavlova, and the other that can climb silently with only one arm, but drops like a boulder. You’re an interesting pair indeed. What unit were you with? Собака never said.” Lyudmila starts walking back to base as she talks.

They follow her, Other shooting Stepka a questioning look. Stepka shrugs, “We don’t know. We were POW’s for awhile. Doctor Fennhoff and the commander rescued us.”

“Just the two of you?” Nina asks, trotting up to them.

Yasha nods, “We didn’t see anybody else.”

“Strange, though there is no telling what those Nazi scum wanted, they were always experimenting on people. Sounds like whatever they did to you two scrambled your brains. Must have been good fighters though, Alexei doesn’t take on just anyone.” She admits the last bit grudgingly.

They practice with the Mosin next. An actual sniper rifle that Lyudmila and Nina both used during the war. It seems to be mostly made of wood, holds barely any bullets, and kicks like a mule, but both women have a fondness for the gun and show off their skills on the firing range.

Stepka had been impressed by Nina’s sharp shooting, but Lyudmila is clearly the better shot. She is twice as fast and unfailingly accurate, her shots hitting center mass every time. Yasha follows her every move, fingers twitching as if to yank the gun away and try for himself.

They eventually let them try the rifles. Yasha is left mostly alone, they give him time and space to figure out the workings of the rifle himself, testing the pattern of the shots and adjusting his sights.
Stepka gets training from Lyudmila, who walks him through the ins and outs of the weapons and gives him advice on firing. She talks about his breathing and how to fire in-between breaths. She explains the importance of not rushing on pulling the trigger and how each rifle is a little different and even if you aim for center mass that is not always where the bullet goes. For all her gruffness, she is an excellent teacher. Though after a day of firing practice she still calls him fledgling.

They head back to the facilities cold, but pleased, chatting easily. Stepka basks in the comradery, it has a familiar beat to it. They separate in the hall, the women heading for their rooms while they head to Dr. Fennhoff to receive their food and medicine.

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“I think it is time we test our new Assets, Doctor.”

“They are ready, but this is not a good target. They should not be faced with known allies, not yet.”

“If you think they are ready then it should be of no consequence if they know the target or not. Consider it a test.”

“And if they fail?”

“Then we start again.”

Chapter End Notes

Lieutenant Nina Lobkovskaya and Major Lyudmila Pavlichenko were actually real people in WWII. Russia had a whole platoon of female snipers, because they found that women made better snipers than men because they tended to be more patient. Unfortunately, I know very little about both women, there is more information out there for Lyudmila because she was known as ‘Lady Death’ and had over 300 confirmed kills under her belt, but my writing of her and Nina is really just my own interpretation. Either way, they were amazing women.

Here is some cool background on Major Lyudmila Pavlichenko.
Chapter Eight: The Paris Peace Conference

Training passes in a blur. They see very little of the Commander, which Stepka is grateful for. They spend most of their time training with the Major and the Lieutenant. Lyudmila helps him improve his aim and speed up his firing. They spend whole days jumping in and out of trees, traveling silently over the terrain and learning how to stay low and quiet for hours.

Lyudmila teaches them tricks for facing other snipers or dealing with multiple targets. Nina teaches Yasha how to move lighter. He still slams into the ground, never mastering landing on his toes, but he manages to land silently and that was the point.

Yuri trains with them whenever he isn’t doing maintenance on their unit vehicles. He’s a gruff man with very little to say, but has a passion for explosions that sparks a twinge of memory in Stepka, but it is there and gone again. Where Lyudmila teaches them to be silent, Yuri teaches distraction. Loud noises and damaging blasts that cause chaos and drag attention in the direction of their choosing.

They both thrive in training, finding their niche and settling in with the group. Nearing the sixth month mark of training, Stepka is on the track again. He likes to run, finds it soothing to get lost in the beat of it, though he has struggled to really relax after Shostakov’s challenge. It has taken some time to stop looking about every time he decides to slow down.

He shakes the thought away as he slows to a trot, looking around for Other. He was doing weights when Stepka started running. Dr. Fennhoff had put together what he called a very rudimentary prosthetic that would get changed in time, but for now Yasha tries to practice with it. The prosthetic is a simple thing that slips over the remainder of his arm and ends with a metal hook like device. It is mostly useless, but works well to help balance the rifle.

Yasha is nowhere to be seen, but Stepka has a pretty good idea of where he is. He finds him where he expects, just outside the training building, leaning against the wall. He’s standing next to Lyudmila and they are both smoking. The scent is overpowering, Stepka steps further outside to let the winter wind blow it away.

Yasha grins at him and offers his cigarette.

Stepka waves him off.

“Evening Fledge,” Lyudmila greets, taking a drag on her own cigarette, the end glows red in the dreary landscape. “Terrible habit,” she sighs look down at it. “I caught quite a few snipers because they couldn’t wait to light up.”

“Then why?” Steve asks curious.

“I picked them up in America, did a tour after the war ended. They are a pretentious hedonistic group, but they make a good cig.” She shrugs. “Have either one of you spoken to Собака? We finally have orders.”

Yasha straightens. “Really? I haven’t heard, what’s the mission?”

Stepka is interested in the mission as well, but another question has been nagging him. “What does that mean, Собака?” She always says the word in a way that implies it is not a very nice word, so he
never asked Dr. Fennhoff.

Yasha shoots him an exasperated look, but Lyudmila just laughs. “It means dog, sort of. He calls me Осёл. Which means donkey, mostly he’s calling me a stubborn mule.”

Stepka had heard the Commander call her that whenever they weren’t doing anything official, he thought it might be an insult, but didn’t dare ask. Yasha and him like to stay as far away from the Commander as they can. “Why?”

Lyudmila shakes her head, tossing the last of her cigarette down and crushing it under her boot. “Because he’s a Captain and I’m a Major, but he is our Commander. It’s petty, but we like to pick at one another. Don’t get your feathers in a ruffle Fledge. We have a brief at 1600 in the conference room, see you then.” She leaves without a backward glance.

Yasha shoots Stepka a look.

“What?”

He shakes his head, and wraps his arm around his shoulder, pulling him close. “You’re hopeless. Didn’t you notice they don’t like each other?” Stepka buries his face in Other’s shoulder, hiding his blush.

***

The conference room is just an oval table and chairs with a rusted filing cabinet in the corner. They are all there early, filing in to their usual seats. The Commander sits at the front of the room beside Dr. Fennhoff, followed by Lyudmila, Yuri, Nina, and the two of them at the back near the door.

The Commander draws the attention of the room with a clearing of his throat. “The Paris Peace Conference has been in session for three weeks. The gathering has attracted people of power from around the world. The conference itself is heavily guarded, but security lessens with distance from the conference. Our mission is to intercept information from a convoy heading to the conference in a week. The convoy also contains three known war criminals that need to be dealt with before the information can be retrieved. Major Pavlichenko, Sergeant Orlov, and Sergeant Volkov will be acting as our snipers and deal with the criminals. Sergeant Gagarin and Lieutenant Lobkovskaya will be setting up the distraction. I will act as pilot and back-up.”

He pulls out a map and spreads it across the table. It is a detailed depiction of Paris and the roads leading in and out. He taps at a red dot outside the city center, “Now, this is it the plan.”

***

The Commander lands their small plane in an clearing 50 kilometers outside Paris. They march on foot for 10 kilometers to the truck hidden for them by an operative in the area. The truck is old, but the bed is covered and it starts with ease. The Commander drives with Yuri in the passenger seat, while the rest of them shove into the back.

Stepka and Yasha are practically folded in half to fit under the cover. Nina winks at them, not even needing to duck to fit in the confined space.

The drive is long and unbearably hot inside the metal space, but they don’t say a word. After what
seems like hours, they drop Stepka, Yasha, and Lyudmila at their designated point on a forested hill. The hill overlooks the convoy’s route and is far enough from the convention to not attract security.

The three of them set up in the trees, climbing up the strong oaks a couple yards apart from one another, but still close enough to communicate. They wait in silence, rifles loaded and ready.

They hear the convoy long before they see it. The rumble of the engines is loud in the countryside. Dust kicks up before the first car crests the hill and starts it’s way towards the ambush. Stepka watches the approaching cars through his scope. He rests his finger against the side of the trigger well, barely resisting the urge to tap.

Like planned, the distraction goes off without a hitch. Yuri and Nina had dug a series of low-level explosives along the roadway. They kick up smoke and dirt and put holes in the ground, but don’t do much damage. As expected, the trucks ground to a halt. Soldiers jump from the cars, shouting orders and running about in confusion.

Stepka spots his mark, exiting the middle car and instantly commanding attention. He saw a picture of him back at base, but it is different to see him through the scope of a rifle. He is an older gentlemen, face wrinkled with age and grey/brown hair receding.

Stepka spots the go ahead gesture from Lyudmila and moments later two shots fire, and two of the targets are dead. His target jerks down the instant he hears the noise, moving quickly to get behind cover. Stepka still has him in his sights, he can take him down, but he hesitates. Something about the man seems familiar. He doesn’t want to shoot him.

His hands shake, he can’t, he can’t.

A third shot rings out. Blood blossoms from Col. Chester Phillips’ head and he falls down, dead. Stepka jerks to the right, looking at Other. He gives a stiff nod, he’d fired the shot.

They don’t have time to linger, the soldiers are rallying. They jump from the trees, sprinting to the old country road behind the treeline and meet up with the truck. They shove in the back and are off.

Stepka feels a horrible, sickening knot in his stomach, and it does not lessen. Even when they are in the plane and flying back to base, it only seems to get worse. They completed their mission, but Stepka hadn’t fired. He shoots a look to the pilot’s seat, but quickly looks away. He dreads what the Commander will do.

They don’t cheer as they unload from the plane, the mood is oddly quiet. Shostakov gives them a nod and a soft, “Well done,” before dismissing them.

Lyudmila takes them to the armory so they can clean and return their weapons. She doesn’t talk to him, doesn’t mention his failure. When they are done and Stepka and Yasha are safely back in their room, he feels like he is going to shake out of his skin.

“I’m sorry,” Stepka blurts.

“It’s fine, we got him, it’s fine. Mission complete,” Yasha soothes, pulling Stepka to curl up with him on the bed.

“I thought I knew him, and I didn’t shoot.”

“Who? The Colonel. The Commander said he was a war criminal, had killed thousands of innocent people, maybe you saw him on the battlefield...before,” Yasha suggests, pressing against the back of Stepka’s neck, offering comfort.
“But I didn’t want to shoot him.”

Yasha sighs, his breath ruffling Stepka’s hair. “There’s nothing wrong with not wanting to shoot someone.”

Stepka stays silent and thinks about that. In time, he sleeps.

***

The next morning is like every other. They grab breakfast and medicine from Dr. Fennhoff and do morning training with the rest of the group. Stepka lets his nerves release as the day goes past. He wonders if Lyudmila had kept his failure from her report.

Just has he has finally relaxed, the Commander calls Stepka and Yasha into his office. “You didn’t shoot the Colonel.” He says before they even manage to close the door behind them.

Stepka says nothing, it hadn’t been a question.

The Commander sighs, running his hand over his face. “I can not have disobedience in my unit, Sergeant.”

“Yes, Sir,” Stepka says, holding attention by sheer force of will. From the corner of his eye, he can see Yasha shift his feet,

“Report to medical, both of you, now,” he orders.

“But, sir…” Yasha starts. He’s cut off when the cuffs are activated. Stepka and Yasha both fall to the floor, screaming as electricity shoots through their systems, alighting their nerves.

By the time the energy is cut off, they are both panting. “Medical, now,” The Commander orders, he doesn’t bother raising his voice.

They get up as quickly as they can, offer a rather sloppy salute and leave the room. “Shit,” Yasha curses halfway to medical. Stepka quiets him with a look.

Dr. Fennhoff and a host of doctors they don’t recognize are already waiting for them in medical. Dr. Fennhoff gives them a concerned look. “Are you alright, boys?”

“Yes, sir,” Stepka answers, forcing his shaking limbs into some semblance of control. “You wanted to see us?”

“He claps his hands, a smile curling at his lips. “We’ve finally designed a proper solution to your arm, come this way Yasha.’’

Stepka is led to an observation room, above surgery, while Yasha is led away to get prepped. Stepka is not sure what kind of punishment this is. He knows Yasha will pay for his mistakes, he just doesn’t know how, and that frightens him more than anything.

They bring Yasha in strapped to a gurney. His eyes are wide, darting from side to side, but he can’t turn his head. Stepka can see the rapid rise and fall of his chest from the second floor. He presses himself against the glass to try and get a better look, maybe catch Dr. Fennhoff’s attention, but he does not see the doctor downstairs.

“Stepka,” Fennhoff calls to him.
He spins around to face him. “Doctor please, I’m so sorry. He’s scared, you can’t let them hurt him Doctor. It wasn’t his fault!”

“Shh,” Fennhoff shushes him, stepping slowly into the room. He has his hands clasped together, and is running his fingers over his ring. It makes a beautiful sound, soft and melodic, drawing him in.

Stepka feels the tension in his shoulders drop. “Doctor?” he asks, confused.

“Shh Stepka. You must focus. Listen to my voice and focus.” The ring continues it’s song.

He tries to shakes his head, to clear the haze in his thoughts, but Dr. Fenhoff steps closer. He leads Stepka back to the window. “Now watch, and focus,” the doctor soothes.

Stepka looks down at Other on the gurney. The surgeons are cutting into him, fresh blood spills across his shoulder, bright and beautiful. Other is screaming, struggling against his bonds.

Stepka feels his own should ache, an echo of shared pain. His heart speeds up, but Dr. Fenhoff lays a hand on his shoulder. “Focus, Stepka,” he whispers.

Stepka lets his mind wander, lets his thoughts fill with haze. Below Other screams, and he does nothing.

***

“The captain failed his mission.”

“I told you he was not ready to deal with a known face. It is a delicate process.”

“He will be punished?”

“Not in the way you think, neither the Captain nor the Sergeant take pain to themselves to be a deterrent. You must hurt one to punish the other.”

“Then you will punish the Sergeant, how?”

“To kill two birds with one stone, I thought we might implement the new neural prosthetic you designed.”

“Excellent”
Stepka does not remember Other’s surgery, it a blackness in his mind splashed with blood and screams. Stepka avoids that blackness, cringes away from even thinking about it, but it does not stop the devastating guilt he feels.

Yasha returns from surgery with a new prosthetic arm like nothing anyone has ever seen. It should have been a gift, not a punishment, but he returns from surgery ghostly white with dark circles beneath his eyes. His entire left side is a bruise.

The new arm is made of interlocking pieces of metal that shine silver in the light. Though Yasha’s arm had ended at the elbow, the prosthetic goes up to his shoulder, merged uncomfortably into the flesh. He has a painful looking gash running along the seam in the front and even worse in the back, the scaring extending passed his scapula and over his spine.

Yasha can only stare blankly at the new arm. He seems to be in a constant daze, flinching when anyone but Stepka gets too close. Dr. Fennhoff tells them that the arm is still healing, nerves and muscle reconnecting as swelling goes down. For now the arm only responds with twitches of the fingers, the inner servos whirring softly.

There is no time to recover. Com. Shostakov immediately pulls them back into training. The other members of the Red Guard shoot them curious, worried looks, but do not dare ask. Once Stepka catches Lyudmila’s gaze and it is filled with guilt. She turns away quickly.

Their next mission comes two weeks after the last. Stepka knows nothing of the man they have told him to kill. The person in his scope wears no uniform, just a middle-aged man taking a walk. He doesn’t hesitate.

The next mission is a convoy moving down a mountain path, he and Yasha set the charges and watch them get buried beneath the snow.

With each mission Yasha gains better control over the arm. In the cold, the skin around the metal goes cold and white, but he long ago lost feeling in the area. His prosthetic moves as if it were his own arm now, though he occasionally forgets the strength of the limb.

They both grow quiet and complacent, following orders. They stop asking questions. The punishments seem to be over. Then comes the mission of Solomon Mikhoels.

***

The room is dark and silent, the sort of night where even the smallest noise sounds like a gunshot. Yasha moves with practiced ease, keeping his metal arm still to prevent the sound of the servos alerting anyone to his presence.
He tucks himself into a shadowed corner of the room and waits. Mentally he reviews his mission. He is to take Solomon Mikhoels back to the agreed upon location. Stepka is running extraction, stationed in a car a block over. The Commander will wait for them at the checkpoint. No witnesses.

The click of the lock seems loud, startling him out of his review. The door slips open on squeaky hinges. Solomon steps into the room, laughing and heedless of the intruder. “What a night,” he chuckles, dumping his accoutrements at the door.

Yasha moves forward quickly, syringe in hand, ready.

Solomon turns, eyes wide as he takes in the assassin in his living room, but he does not have time to make a sound, the needle slips into his neck and he is out.

There is a gasp at the door. Yasha turns, dropping Solomon to the ground. There is a child at the door, a little girl in a dress, she couldn’t be more than five. He rushes forward, metal hand clamping around her mouth before she can scream.

He has a spare syringe, he uses a quarter of the dose and lowers her to the floor with care. No witnesses. He stares at the child, feels the ache in his arm, the heavy metal weighing him down. The constant pull of the metal bolted into his spine. No witnesses. He takes a shuddery breath. They’ll know. They always know.

He grits his teeth and hauls Solomon over his shoulder. “I’m sorry, Stepka,” he whispers. He leaves the little girl on the ground.

The rest of the mission goes as it should. Stepka drives them to the check point, the Commander meets them and takes Solomon to the next location. They head back to base with Nina. Yasha is so worried he throws up the grey gruel of his dinner in the toilet.

Stepka, of course, knows something is wrong. He places his hand over Yasha’s flesh shoulder, his grip is strong and warm. “It’s okay.”

Yasha shakes his head, can feel the tears at the side of his eyes.

Stepka gives his shoulder another squeeze, “It is okay, I know. It’s okay,” he assures him.

That night they curl around each other until it is impossible to tell where one ends and the other begins. They share breath in the night, faces leaned in close. Neither sleeps.

***

Stepka does not fight when the Commander comes for him. He knows better. Yasha seems primed for protest, but he too holds his words, remembering the dual shock they had received the time before.

Stepka is lead into the surgical room. He can’t see through the one-way glass of the observation room, but knows that Yasha is on the other side. He tries to give him a reassuring smile, but the false expression slides off.

He is afraid.

***

Dr. Fennhoff approaches them, a grin twisting his usually genial features. “Excellent,” he breathes, looking them over.
Stepka stands at attention. He is in agony, pain radiating all along his left side where the new prosthetic is fused into his flesh. He does not look at it.

Yasha stands at his other side, two-halves of the same coin. Their arms carry the same design of interlocking silver plates, a new red star etched into the shoulder. They both wear black tac vests and black cargo pants. The only difference is in their hair. Time has grown it out to shoulder length, but Stepka’s is a few shades lighter.

“Perfect,” Dr. Fennhoff says, approaching Stepka first and slipping a mask over his nose and mouth. He moves to Yasha next and does the same. Stepka can’t resist a quick look. The black mask hides all but his eyes. The dark circles around them act as highlights, the dead eyes above the horrible black muzzle.

“Freeze them.”
Kudrin is one of five people on the planet that knows that Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes are still alive. A secret he has just learned mere moments ago. He is both stunned and irritated. Access to the Captain would have made his research into the super soldier program much easier, but pushes that thought away. He will have access now.

His recent success with the Red Room Black Widow program has granted him rights to the Winter Soldiers and their secrets. He had of course known of the Red Guard and their service to the Soviet Union in removing those that stood in the way of their county’s greatness, but he had never guessed at the secrets hidden within.

Now he follows the head of the cryogenics program into the depths of the base, hidden deep in the mountains of Siberia. “The process is still very experimental, we haven’t had much luck bringing those out of cryo that don’t have some form of the super soldier serum,” the doctor explains. “In a regular person the cells take on too much damage, but the serum repairs the damage fast enough to allow for an effective freezing and defrosting. The Captain’s cells regenerate faster than the Sergeant’s, but that was expected.”

“Hmm,” Kudrin hums, as a scientist himself he does find the lecture interesting, but beyond the surface he feels like a child on Christmas morning, he just wants to open his presents.

The man shoots him a knowing look, and leads him into the cryo room. The whole room is refrigerated, a fog settles around their feet and his breaths come out in white puffs.

There is a series of cryo pods lined up against the wall, but only two of them are occupied. The pods are grey with a small window near the top. He can see an outline of a face, but it is obscured by the ice along the edges.

“How long will it take to wake them up?”

“It takes about six hours, we have to bring them up to temperature slowly and give their cells time to heal. There is also Dr. Fennhoff’s instrument which will take another hour to wipe them.”

“Wipe them?” Kudrin asks.

“Yes, ah,” the doctor leads him to an adjacent room that contains two chairs. Well, chairs in the loosest sense of the word. They are great metal monstrosities, covered in wires and restraints. “They lost their memories through a series of processes, first inhaling a mind altering gas combined with a form of sensory deprivation. After they were removed from isolation they were injected with a drug cocktail designed by Dr. Fennhoff and were routinely hypnotized. The process took some time, but they became malleable to the Doctor’s orders. The machine was designed to act similar to the hypnosis process that allowed him to control them.”
“Ah,” Kudrin holds up the small black book he had been given. “And that is where this comes in.”

“Yes, they were programed, if you will, with words that make them loyal to the person who says them. If you’ll come into my office I can give you more detailed information on the process.”

Kudrin follows him as others get to work on the thawing process. The long wait will be a chore, but he is interested in seeing the details of the late Dr. Fennhoff’s greatest work.

When the soldiers are finally at the end of their wipe he is led back into the instrument room. The soldiers are both strapped into their chairs, muscles straining as they push against their restraints. They have mouthguards shoved between their teeth, but they do nothing to silence the screams.

Kudrin watches, unmoved. He opens the book, flipping to a page seemingly chosen at random. Ten words are written in a list down the page, no other explanation given. He runs his finger over the first word on the list.

“Longing.”

“Rusted.”

“Seventeen.”

“Daybreak.”

“Furnace.”

“Nine.”

The straps disengage, the helmets lifting away.

“Benign.”

“Homecoming.”

“One.”

“Freight car.”

He closes the book and tucks it back into his pocket. “Good Evening Soldaty,” he greets.

They turn their gazes to him as one, matching blank looks. “Ready to comply,” they echo.

Kudrin feels a moment of unease, looking at these two great heros reduced to puppets, but he shakes it off and gives a bark of a laugh. “Dr. Fennhoff was a mad man, but you cannot deny his success.” He gestures for them to follow him, “Come along Soldaty, it is time you are introduced to Red Room.”

The Red Room is Kudrin’s life work, a culmination of his research finally given shape. The facility is located in the Maryina Horka Forest in Belarus. The buildings were once warehouses used for storage during the great wars, but have since been converted to a girl’s home for orphans, or at least that is what it is on the surface.

The soldiers say nothing during the long trip. They sit in silence, side by side with their black flack vests and metal arms. They’ll be perfect. He leads them through the gates to the first of two buildings. “Our mission is for the benefit of our countrymen, the capitalist pigs wish to challenge the strength of the Motherland, so we will bring them down from the inside for their arrogance.”
The soldiers watch him, gazes intent.

Kudrin takes them to the window that overlooks the enclosed courtyard used for training. There is a class in session now. Most of the girls stand on the outside of the square, standing at attention. There are two in the center, fighting fiercely under the instructor’s close watch. “This is the next generation,” he grins, proud of his pupils. “These little girls will succeed where grown men have failed, because they will be unexpected. No one expects the knife to come from the demure maiden.”

He leads them further into the building, down to the smallest of the communal living quarters. There are only six beds in the room, three on each side. “I have had some success in an enhancement serum, but only six of the girls survived the process thus far. They require training at a rate that you both are uniquely qualified for.” He turns to face them. He feels a spark of nerves beneath their dead gazes, but also a spark of promise because there is threat in their every movement. It is like watching a predator stalking its prey and knowing that death is inevitable.

“Your mission is to train the serum enhanced of the Black Widow program. Failure is death, understood?”

For an instant their eyes dart at one another, but they both give a nod and, “Yes, sir.”
Natalia stands at attention beside the fighter’s pit. Her hands are clasped tight behind her back, but she cannot help the twitch of her fingers. Tap. Tap. Tap. She is bored.

The girls in the pit are two of the older students, close to fourteen, and they are not Black Widows, not like her. Their movements are sloppy.

She watches one miss an arm bar, the other doesn’t get the right grip for a throw. Natalia resists the urge to sigh. She risks a glance at the instructor, but Matron has the same mixed look of disinterest and disgust that she always wears.

Finally, one of the girl dives in, arms slipping around the other’s neck. She tightens her grip, arms curling around her opponent’s head. She looks at the Matron for instruction as the other girl struggles, flailing uselessly.

The Matron’s lip curls in a sneer and she gives a little wave of her hand. The girl twists her grip, the sound of the neck snapping audible in the courtyard. The winner steps back and offers the Matron a bow before returning to her place in the square.


They scramble out of her way, moving with intent towards the dining facilities. Two of the youngest girls gather the body and run off to the furnace. Natalia catches them out of the corner of her eye, she is the youngest and smallest of them. That used to be her duty, but no longer. She is a Widow. The other students give her a wide berth where she had once been shoved. They all know what the red hourglass on her shirt means.

The dining facility is its usual chaos. The girls do not speak, but there is a mad rush to gather their trays and hurry to sit. From the moment the matron had dismissed them, they have ten minutes to get their food and eat what they can.

Natalia shovels the food in her mouth without tasting it. She had never minded the rush of the food before the serum, but now she is always hungry, her enhanced body starving for the extra calories. She empties her tray with time to spare, and is the first to place it in the cleaning bin.

The two young ones from before are just running through the door. She’d be surprised if they got more than a few bites, but she ignores them in favor of heading outside. The air is cool and crisp and she has just a moment in the silent courtyard where she is completely alone. It does not last long.

The girls exit in mass, but one of the Matrons, her shirt marked with the red hourglass, summons her over. Natalia sprints to her side, not daring to dawdle. She falls into attention in front of her. An instant later, the other Widows fill in at her side. They are all older and much taller than her, Natalia’s only competition.

“To the court, now.”

They don’t ask questions, they just run. The court is in the second building, an indoor obstacle course that has failed more in the Red Room than even the Black Widow Program. Natalia pumps her arms and legs as fast as she can, enough that her lungs burn, but the older girls outpace her with
embarrassing ease.

She nearly slams into the last girl when they make it into the court. She’s moving too fast to stop with any dignity. She stumbles with a soft umf and has to scramble to fall into attention at the end of the line.

Standing in the judgement circle is a man Natalia has only had the honor of seeing once. They all call him Father, the head of the Red Room. He had also been the one to give little Natalia Romanova a chance at the serum.

“Father!” They greet as one, with the most enthusiasm they are capable of.

Kudrin smiles, looking pleased. “My dear children, you honor me with your dedication.” He gestures behind him where two men are standing at attention side by side. “These are the Winter Soldiers. They will be assisting in your training from now on.”

Natalia is ashamed that she ignored them at the sight of Father, because they are not the sort of men that should be ignored. They are huge men, over 6 feet tall and well muscled. They look even more intimidating dressed as they are in black combat boots, black cargo pants, and a black flack vest weighed down by a multitude of knives.

Natalia finds her eyes drawn to their left arms, the limb seems to be made of interlocking plates of metal with a red star on the shoulder. With their matching long hair - down to their shoulders - and the scruff around their jaws it almost seems like the same man duplicated. There are differences of course, one of the soldiers has lighter hair and is a little taller, but there is just something about them.

Natalia mentally shakes off her trail of thought to catch the end of Father’s speech.

“I expect the best from you, my dear Widows, do not fail me,” he says.

“Sir, yes, sir!” They shout as one, giving a salute.

Father gives them a smile before leaving the room.

One of the Matrons, who had been lurking in the far corner, comes forward. “You will show your skills to your new trainers,” she snaps, and gives a sharp blow on the whistle around her neck.

They about face and the girl at the front of the line takes off. The first obstacle is a 15 ft vertical wall, with a series of ropes to climb up. Being at the end of the line, Natalia is the last to the wall.

She may not have the height of the other girls, but she sprints at the wall, using her momentum to jump up and grab high on the rope. Her feet slam into the wall, but she holds on, pulling herself up.

At the top of the wall she jumps, landing with a roll that gets her right back on her feet. From there she runs at the diagonal steps, leaping from step to step and lunging at the rope at the end, climbing ten feet to the platform.

She is only a step behind the other girls, but the next obstacle is her worst. She finds her handholds as she flips around to climb up the angled climbing wall. The slope forces her to go backwards, making the hunt for a hold all the more difficult. It slows her down, and she’s panting by the time she swings down to the next platform.

With a growl, Natalia takes a flying leap at the rope ladder. She keeps hold and hurries up the rope. From the top she has to swing to another platform and push weighted walls up and run under them. She overtakes a girl on the third wall, and can’t quite hide her smirk.
She carries herself across a pit of sharpened spikes using a set of bars and swings her way to the last obstacle. Another girl has failed to get up the curved wall on her first try. Natalia shoots past her too, barely grasping the top of the wall, but holding on long enough to haul herself over the lip. She scrambles down the ladder and gets in line with the rest of the girls, back where they started.

The last girl to finish, spares a glance at the Matron and then quickly goes back to start the course all over again. Before they were Widows, the last girl to finish was usually shot, but they’ve proved themselves by surviving the serum. Now the last person just has to run the gambit again. This is the first time Natalia isn’t last. She shoots a look at the soldiers and wonders if they have seen their files.

They are staring at the girls now, blank-eyed. Natalia takes a treacherous moment to wonder how good of trainers could they possibly be. The one with the darker hair hums, a noise that gives nothing away. “Can they shoot?”

Matron looks the girls over, “Yes, we have a range below the building. Would you care to see them in action?”

Both soldiers nod.

“Range!” Matron shouts, and they’re off.

Natalia takes the stairs two at a time, sprinting after the other girls as they barrel towards the range. They are always running. She nearly slams into a wall, taking a corner too fast, but catches herself and moves a little more calmly to her range station.

The Matron and soldiers stroll in a moment later. Matron goes to the armory and calls them over to get their guns. They are issued the small handgun they usually train with. It is less accurate than some of the larger models, but is much easier to conceal.

The range has ten stations with paper targets situated 50m from the shooter. Natalia stands at the sixth station and takes aim. She fires eight rounds in quick succession and puts her pistol down to wait for review. While her size is a problem for the physical exercises, it has no effect on her shooting.

The blond soldier comes by and pulls her target close to get a better look at it. The eight shots are so close together it looks like the result of one large shot. They are perfectly centered in the chest.

The soldier gives her a curious look, or at least she thinks it’s curious, his expression doesn’t really move. He nods and moves back to the other soldier.

The day continues like that. They run up to the atrium and are put through a series of fights with each other. Natalia has to fight three times, she wins one, but losses the other two. By the last fight her left wrist is sprained and her right ankle hurts, but she doesn’t let the pain show.

They hurl through the outdoor obstacle course afterwards and Natalia is dead last. She’s sweating and panting by the time she gets through her second run. She has to sprint to keep up with the group, stumbling into the rifle range once everyone has already started. She doesn’t have time to let the shaking in her arms go down before she is firing at the 350m target.

Her grouping isn’t a tight as with the pistol, but she’s proud to see all 10 shots in the central zone of the target. The blond one checks her target again and gives her another of those indecipherable stares.

They eat supper in their usual rush, but Natalia is so exhausted she only manages a couple of bites before their ten minutes are up. She’s worn out, and falls into her bunk with an exhausted sprawl. It’s
all she can do to offer her wrist to the Matron so she can be handcuffed in place. The cold metal doesn’t hurt anymore, her right wrist long ago developing calluses.

It is around fifteen minutes after the Matron has left that the first girl speaks up. “What do you think of the soldiers?” Galina asks to the room in general. She is the oldest of the girls and at the first bunk furthest from Natalia.

“Weird, I don’t think the taller one ever spoke,” Anya pipes up, second youngest.

“Think someone cut his tongue out,” Yelena says, sounding gleeful.

“Nah, his jaw would set different,” Eva snarks.

“Do you think they were pleased with us?” Irina asks, soft and hesitant.

“Well we’ll know tomorrow, maybe they’ll fail someone,” Yelena challenges, and Natalia can feel her gaze.

She doesn’t say anything in response, she has long since learned it isn’t worth it to argue with Yelena. She throws her blanket over her head and pretends to sleep.

The next day, Natalia isn’t sore at all, a wonderful side effect of the serum. They have to wait for Matron to unlock them, and then they are rushing through the day again. They hurry through breakfast and go for a 10 kilometer run, before class time.

Natalia spots the soldiers running with them. They don’t seem to be running that fast, but the steady loping steps of their stride carry them past the girls with ease. In the class however, as they recite Cinderella, the soldiers are nowhere to be seen. She can’t blame them, while she enjoys practicing her english and not running, she has seen this movie enough times to hate it. The only show she hates more is Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.

She knows that the point of the shows are to teach them how to be demure maidens like the capitalists expect of their women. That doesn’t stop her from loathing the idea of playing the weak kitten. She looks forward to seeing the look on her targets’ faces when she sticks the knife in.

After class, they are separated into two groups of three. Yelena, Irina, and Natalia are placed in a group led by the blond soldat. The other group stays in the atrium while they are taken to one of the empty training rooms.

Soldat takes one of the many knives out of his vest. It is a slim black blade with a metal handle. Natalia has a moment of fear, remembering Yelena’s words from the night before.

He gestures for Yelena to come forward. “Take the knife,” he says, the first words any of them have heard him speak. His voice is scratchy, but strangely...kind.

Yelena doesn’t hesitate, she charges him, ducking a swipe and moving under his guard.

He steps back smoothly, and slashes the back of the knife across her neck. “Dead,” he says.

Yelena jerks back, startled. She touches her neck, eyes wide, but there isn’t a scratch on her.

He points at Irina next. Irina, always the most cautious of the group, hesitates to attack. She stutters forward, and in a moment he has her on the ground, blade tip at her sternum. Irina is shaking, but he offers her a hand and tugs her up.
Natalia is last. She jumps around the outside of his arm, pushing his elbow away. Using his thigh, she vaults onto his back and locks her arms around his throat. He shifts the knife to his metal hand and presses the flat of the blade across her ribs.

“Tch,” she growls and hops off. She’s unharmed, but her shirt is sliced. The move would have killed her.

“You will grow stronger, but you all must get used to fighting a larger opponent,” he says. Soldat flips the knife over and hands it to Natalia, handle first.

She takes it cautiously, waiting for the trap, but he only steps back falling into a lose fighter’s stance. She stabs forward when he gestures for her.

He dodges to the side and knocks both of his fists against her wrist. The shock of it knocks the knife from her hand. She pulls her hand back, startled, not because it hurts, but more because it doesn’t. With that metal hand she is certain he could smash her wrist to pieces, but it hardly stung.

He picks up the knife, flipping it easily. “Try.”

He lunges at her at half speed, making it easy to dodge to the side and knock her fists against his wrist. She uses her full strength, and the knife is knocked from his hand.

He nods, something about the set of his lips making him look pleased. He grabs the knife and flips it a few times, before gesturing Yelena forward. They go back and forth practicing the move, he speeds up with every practice, until they are dodging at full speed. Natalia notices that he never lets them try on each other. Which is probably for the best or someone would almost defiantly wind up with a cut or a broken wrist.

He walks them through more exercises, showing them how to use bone and joint manipulation to force their opponent to drop the knife. Each move follows the same process, he starts slowly and speeds up as they get used to the new technique. Not once does he cut them or break a bone. When he dismisses them for lunch they shoot each other questioning looks before running off to grab their food.

After lunch, they switch instructors. The darker soldat, takes them out to the rifle range. This time he sets the targets at 500 meters, further than any of them have ever shot. He has them fire three practice shots.

Irina gets one shot near the bottom of the target and two miss completely. Yelena gets two shots in the shoulder. Natalia gets two at the bottom, with the third in the center.

Soldat doesn’t get angry at their less than stellar performance, instead he shifts into the kneeling position. The rifle butt slips into the curve of his shoulder like it was made for it. He takes a breath and on the end of the exhale, fires. On another breath he fires again. Breathe and fire. When they approach the target, all three shots are in the center, one on top of the other.

“You cannot hit the target if you don’t have the rifle firmly planted. Fire on the exhale so the rise and fall of the chest doesn’t interfere with the shot,” he instructs them. Like the other Soldat, his voice is soft and husky with disuse.

Natalia has been given instruction on firing many times before. It wasn’t like this was the first time she’d been told to watch her breathing, but she follows his instruction all the same. She folds her leg under her, resting her elbow on her knee. She rests the rifle against her shoulder and takes aim.

Soldat comes up behind her and taps the butt of the rifle with his metal fingers. She jerks in surprise,
but all he does is shift the rifle until it rests in the crook of her shoulder. It sits better. She takes aim along the sights again, hyper aware of the soldat at her back. She fires three times, careful of her breathing.

“Good,” he murmurs, looking out at the target as if he can see her shots.

Irina and Yelena fire again. He makes adjustments to their position and holds. When they approach their targets, all of them have improved their aim.

He just nods, and sets the targets further back. They continue that way until the sun starts to set. They fire, he makes changes to their posture, and they fire again. When he is satisfied with their shots he moves the targets back. There is no punishment for any missed targets, he hardly even speaks. When it grows too dark to see the targets, he dismisses them for supper.

At night after they are settled in their beds, Natalia hears the stories of the other team. They had learned the same things, and had enjoyed the same lack of harm. She wonders if this is a promise of change, or the calm before the storm.
Natalia charges Soldat at full speed.

He lashes out, blade glinting.

She ducks, cracking her fists against his wrist. He drops the knife, but his metal hand flashes out to grab it.

She uses his thigh as a vault, swinging around his shoulders and looping the garrotes around his neck. He catches it with his flesh hand, keeping the wire from digging into his throat.

He flips the knife around, but she is already twisting away, putting distance between them.

His lips lift in a smirk as he moves forward, knife held with the blade along his forearm. He lashes out, slicing without hesitation.

She leans back, dodging out of the way, but he’s moving too fast. The blade slashes out and she leans too far, falling flat on her back.

He flips the knife, stabbing down.

She rolls to right, striking out with her foot and kicking him in the side of the head.

He shakes his head, turning the knife again, but she is already up and moving.

She uses the wall as a launching pad, flying at him with the garrotes at the ready.

His metal arm flashes out, grabbing her by the front of her shirt. He slams her to the ground, air knocking out of her. Then the blade is at her neck.

She glares at him.

He huffs, his version of a laugh and straightens.

She contemplates pushing his offered hand away, but she takes it with sigh, letting him hoist her to her feet. “Tch, Batya, I thought I had you.”

“You always leap without looking Kotenok,” he scolds.

“It was a good match,” blond Soldat comments, clapping his hands as he approaches them. His metal hand makes the clapping sound like a hammer strike.

Natalia rolls her eyes, unimpressed. When she first met the Soldaty she thought of them as two halves of the same whole. They still are in many respects, but blond soldat is certainly the more
optimistic of the two. She likes to call him Papka, papa, when no one is around. He scowls when she uses it, but she knows he is secretly pleased. Just as the dark soldat likes to be called Batya. She knows to be careful with her endearments though, the walls have ears.

She still doesn’t know how either one of them don’t have names. They are simply the Soldaty, or the Winter Soldiers, they have nothing else to answer too.

Papka ruffles her hair, it has grown long over the last year. The Matron stopped letting her cut it short because ‘the capitalist women do not hack their hair off like a feral boy.’ While Natalia supposes that this is probably true, she is still a long way off from being sent on her mission. Galina and Eva were sent off as adopted daughters of politicians in advantageous positions, but they were sixteen and fifteen. Natalia is only nine.

“I don’t doubt that you will be able to take me down one day, Kotenok, but you still have to grow into those claws,” Batya chides.

He always calls her that, kitten, she glares at him.

He ignores her gaze, clapping her on the back hard enough to make her stumble. “Scat, Kotenok. go eat.”

She shoots him a scalding look, but runs off for the dining facility. The ten minute limit had lifted a few months ago, the Red Room is practically deserted now. Most of the non Black Widows have been sent on assignment, only a final class of ten remain. Of the Black Widows, there is only Yelena, Anya, and herself left. Irina had failed out a last month.

Natalia is not sure what she did to fail out, only that one of the Matrons shot her and the Soldaty had not been pleased. They had all been on their toes that week, the Soldaty were radiating rage, but they never struck out at the Widows. Natalia, as always, is amazed at their control.

She brushes thoughts of the others away and eats her lunch, scarfing down her food out of habit.

![Image](image)

The tick tick tick of the clock is distracting, but Natalia forces herself to shut the noise out. She can’t panic. Panic means death.

She looks over the mess in front of her, the endless tangle of wires. She pulls the green one towards her, pulling it taunt. Holding her breath, she snips the wire.

The clock gives a tick tick tick… and falls silent.

She lets out a breath, the tension in her shoulders relaxing. “Боже мой” she sighs, wiping the sweat from her brow. She stands and turns to face the observation window. The Matrons give her a nod. The Soldaty hold their usual stoic features when around others, but she can see their relief in the relaxing of their eyes.

She gives them all a salute and marches out the door. Test passed.
It is freezing. Natalia thought she had long adjusted herself to the biting cold of her motherland, but the Moscow wilderness digs its claws in. She’s cold to her bones.

The metal of her rifle stings even through her gloves. She shifts her grip, stretching her cramped muscles. The gun gives a slight creak and she freezes.

There is a flicker of movement in the foliage to her right and she shifts her scope, ever so slowly to get a look. Through her crosshairs is the spotted coat of an Amur Leopard. She lets out a breath, preparing to fire. Such an elusive creature, she knows she would be praised for bringing one back.

She starts to squeeze the trigger, and stops, there is movement behind the leopard. A streak of fur, and a cub bounds from the foliage, rubbing against its mother’s flank and flicking its tail playfully. The mother gives a scolding cry, swatting her cub on the ear, before they continue on.

Natalia lets them go.

It is over three hours later when a rabbit moves into range. She fires without hesitation. The animal is small and its white fur makes it near invisible in the snow. She considers it a good shot and takes it back to base.

Yelena teases her for the small catch, but at least she did not have to haul a wild goat over a mountain.

The man on the chair is sobbing. His hands are tied behind his back, and his eyes are covered, he has no idea what is coming.

Matron hands Natalia a pistol. She can tell by the weight that there is only one bullet.

The man continues to cry, she can see his tears staining the cloth over his face, snot dribbled from his nose.

They did not tell her why. What the man had done to seal his fate, but she supposes it doesn’t really matter.

She levels the gun, aiming for his head instead of the torso as they were trained.

The click of the hammer being pulled back sounds unnaturally loud.

The man keens.

She fires.
The whistle blows and she’s off. The snow slows her down, making her tracks obvious, but her first goal is distance. She can plan later, first she needs to put more space between her and them.

When she reaches the gorge Natalia picks out the less rocky of the paths and hurls herself down it. Speed is her friend, jumping from ledge to ledge, she makes it to the bottom in record time.

She uses the rocks along the river to obscure her tracks. The ice is thick, but for the center where the current keeps a small stream going. She slips, and the water seeps into her boot. It is so cold it burns, she hisses out a curse, and moves on.

When the sides of the gorge start to even out, she heads up the side, The rocks tear into the skin of her hands, leaving blood behind, but she can’t pause to hide the evidence.

She runs through the woods on the other side, trying to avoid leaving her prints in the snow. She is forced to take to the trees, clawing up the bark into the high limbs and leaping from tree to tree in desperate sprints.

She knows from multiple trips into the woods surrounding the compound that she is about 15 kilometers from base and it took her about an hour.

She runs out as far on the limb of the tree as she can before it starts to creak and hacks off the branch with the only weapon she has on her -a six inch knife. She moves from tree to tree, collecting limbs, and unfortunately, leaving a pretty glaring trail.

It’s a struggle to haul her collection deeper into woods, where the looming pines have blocked the snow from the forest floor and gives her time to set her traps. She doesn’t have time to make any particularly strong rope, but she weaves pieces of bark and young saplings, getting enough length to set her sharpened branches up.

She sets the traps in a random zig-zag around the woods before continuing on, always moving. She does not stop until it grows too dark. Under the new moon, there is no light to guide her, so she takes shelter in the boughs of an old pine. The sap sticks to her palms, and she has a riot of pine needles caught in hair, making her want to scratch every inch of her skin, but she ignores the discomfort.

She settles into the branches, and waits.

Only because every ounce of her concentration is focused does she hear the rustle of the underbrush. At first she thinks it might be an animal, a deer or a lone wolf making their way through the forest, but then she hears the telltale hum of servos. They’ve found her.

She is not sure which Soldat she sees first, in the dark she can’t see the usually distinctive color of their hair. The one she can see has a black mask she has never seen before covering his nose and mouth. It looks like a muzzle you would put on a fighting dog. She feels a stutter of fear in her heart.

Soldat looks up, his eyes gleaming in the dark.

She can’t hesitate, she grips her knife and leaps from the tree.

He spins around, metal arm blocking the blade, and slings her to the ground.
She rolls out of the way, and runs.

For such a large man, Soldat moves near silently between the trees, only the whir of his arm gives him away.

She barrels head first into the other. She snarls, having forgotten where one is the other is sure to be close by. She ducks under his arm, elbowing him in the kidney as she hurls by.

She hears a huff, then a hand is in her hair, yanking her back. Cursing her long locks, she goes with the pull, flipping onto his shoulders. She strikes his head with her fists clenched together, but it does nothing. She fights dirty, digging her fingers into his eyes. Soldat growls and flings her away.

Natalia scrambles away, moving deeper into the woods. She ducks beside a tree, and leaps into the branches of another. She throws herself up, darting from limb to limb. A moment later, she hears a muffled snarl. She smirks, one of her traps worked.

She doesn’t think the Soldaty can follow her into the smaller branches of the trees, but she catches sight of one just below her. The next tree is a dangerous leap away, but she risks it.

Arms stretched to their limit, she barely catches the edge of a branch. “Oof,” she huffs, pulling herself up by her straining fingertips. Halfway up she’s yanked down, a hand at her back.

They fall out of the tree in a tangle of limbs, but he doesn’t let go. The Soldat has her arms locked behind her and the cold press of metal fingers around her throat. There is a moment of stillness, they are both on the cold floor with pine needles falling about them, breathing hard. The air is filled with the scent of blood and ice.

She takes a breath, as deep as she can with the threat of strangulation. “I yield.”

The Soldat pulls away, helping her up with the same arm that nearly took her head off. “Good,” he comments, and Natalia recognizes the deeper tones of Batya.

“You caught me,” she growls.

There is a huff behind her, and she spots Papka walking up to them. “Of course we did.” He has a hole in his vest across his collarbone, the blood looks black in the night.

“You lasted longer than the others,” Batya assures her.

Natalia knows this is true, it is late enough that it's early, and Eva had been brought back from her run before the sun even set, but still.

Batya gives her a clap on the shoulder. “Come along Kotenok.” They return to the compound side by side.

No one ever matches Natalia’s record.

They do not ask her questions, but that isn’t the point.
She is strapped to a chair, arms wrenched behind her back. She doesn’t recognize the soldier that looms over her, he isn’t a member of the program.

His face is blank, not so much as a twitch. He presses the knife to her side, dragging it slow. The cut burns, blood welling.

She doesn’t make a noise.

There is a clock behind her. She can’t see the passage of time, but the noise burrows into her brain. The tick tock tick, she thinks of the bomb.

Natalia doesn’t make a sound, even when they work the slivers beneath her nails. Everything hurts, her broken toes, her broken fingers, the slices along her side, but the man makes a mistake. Gives her the tools she needs to unlock the cuffs.

She snaps his neck.

After she has passed the tests, the Soldaty splint her broken bones and clean her cuts.
Texas is unbearably hot. After Moscow, Natalia feels like she is going to melt into a puddle. Of all the things they trained her for at The Red Room, heat wasn't one of them.

Batya seems equally unhappy about the heat. He grumbles under his breath, tugging at his heavy vest. Papka seems to be in a daze, he has barely spoken since the plane landed. His eyes always seem focused on something very far away.

Batya continues shooting him worried looks, but, like usual, they don’t need words to communicate. They stay close, pressed side to side as if they could merge into one person.

Natalia has to ignore them both for now, she can not risk being distracted, not now. This is her first mission out of the Red Room. She had graduated from the program a week before, but this mission is, in truth, her final test.

She sets her rifle on the window sill, and flicks out the legs of the tripod to steady it even more. The white painted metal of the gun seems strange in the urban setting, but it blends beautifully with the sheer white curtains.

Below her is a riot of people, all cheering excitedly as the parade marches on. She looks to her watch 12:25, soon. She takes a deep breath and focuses her sights on the entrance to Dealey Plaza.

Batya sets his rifle on the window beside her, but he is only there for backup. Only there if Natalia misses.

She can hear Papka behind her somewhere. She imagines that he is keeping an eye on Oswald. He has agreed to do his part for the greater good of the Motherland, but she doesn’t trust the crazed man any more than the Soldaty do.

Her watch gives a warning chirp and she focuses back on the parade of cars coming through. In the far back she can just make out the black Lincoln limousine entering the plaza. It is a convertible model, her target is sitting on the top of the backseat, waving cordially to the crowd. She can not make out much of his features, not from so far away, but she knows he is her target. She thinks, oddly, that he looks quite young.

At 12:30 exactly, she lines up her shot and fires. The crowd doesn’t react at first, probably not aware what the noise had been, but she see the people in the car turn. The man has his hands up around his throat, she thinks she sees blood, but she won’t risk it. She fires twice more. The shot hits for sure, her target falling in a spray of blood and brain matter.

She disconnects her rifle, tucking it away in a waiting violin case, and hiding it beneath an actual
“Good girl,” Batya whispers as they are out the room. They leave behind Batya’s rifle and Oswald, ready to set the stage.

Their escape had been planned weeks in advance. There is an electrical repair van waiting for them on the ground floor a few blocks away. They hop in the back and are out of the city before the blockades can even start.

They catch their plane in a small airport outside of Dallas that will take them to Mexico and from there a rather meandering path back to Natalia’s new base in St. Petersburg.

She sighs when they are finally up in the air, leaning her head back against the netting along the wall.

“You did good, the Red Room will be proud,” Batya gives her a sly look, “Happy Birthday, Kotenok.”

She gives him a playful glare, though he is right, she turned sixteen today. She celebrated her entrance to womanhood by assassinating a U.S. president. How fitting.

Papka still has that dazed look he’s been wearing since they flew out to Dallas, but seems to come back to himself enough to give her a hint of a smile. “The training program is done now.”

Batya nods, his expression twisting like he is not sure what to settle on. “That’s it then.”

“The Burning,” Papka says through gritted teeth. It takes Natalia a moment to realize the shaking in his shoulders is a shiver of fear.

“The burning?” she asks, confused. If the training program is over, and she supposes it must be as she is the last of the graduates. She doesn’t understand what they mean by burning, however, only failures are burned. Their remains tossed in the furnace.

“Not that,” Batya says, as if reading her thoughts. “You are our last trainee. It’s time we move on.”

“What!?” Natalia barks, jumping to her feet. “But you can’t move on, we… we’re a team.” Her voice sounds strange to her own ears, raspy. There is heat behind her eyes.

“We were your trainers, Natalia,” Papka says flatly. He looks worn, his features settling into the same blank mask he had worn when she first met the Soldaty.

“Training’s done, kid,” Batya sighs, accent strange.

“Time to move on,” Papka adds.

“But,” Natalia blinks rapidly and is ashamed to feel the hot burn of tears trailing down her cheek.

“They will give us another mission, and that’ll be it.”

Natalia wipes her tears away with her forearm. She’s not sure how well she manages to control her expression into blankness, but she holds her head high. “It was an honor. Perhaps our paths will cross again.”

“It was an honor,” they say at the same time. They shoot each other a look and then Batya says softly, “I hope not Kotenok, I really hope not.”

Natalia is proud that she does not let the breaking of her heart show on her face.
The Soldaty must have known in advance of the separation, because when they land in St. Petersburg they go their separate ways. She heads to a flight that will take her to her next mission, and they are off to only god knows where.

But she knows, *knows*, that this will not be the last she sees of the Winter Soldiers.
Natalia laughs at whatever insipid joke her ‘date’ is telling. She isn’t really listening, taking her cues from the hanger-ons surrounding them. It’s been three hours of this madness, and with no end in sight.

She’s tried to lure the man from the party so she can get to his suite, but he keeps allowing himself to be distracted. She is beginning to suspect that she might not be right type of bait for this trap.

Her concentration focuses back on the conversation when she hears an interesting bit of information.

“Did you hear about the Starks? I just can’t believe it,” one of the ladies is saying.

“They say it wasn’t just a car accident?”

“I’d hardly be surprised if it was something else. Howard was a weapons manufacturer, he had enemies.”

Natalia’s date gives a forced laugh. “So what, you think an assassin got him? Howard was a drunk. He probably just partied too hard, like always, and Maria paid for it.”

Natalia had, in fact, heard about the Stark’s car crash. It had been all over the news, but she has been on assignment for weeks and hasn’t heard if the crash was their doing. It is certainly possible. Howard Stark was one of the founding members of SHIELD, the only person Red Room wants dead more is Director Carter.

She wonders about the man’s word choice though. His laugh was obviously fake, he knows more about what is happened then he is letting on. Hearing assassin brings up memories of long ago and she shoves them away. She can not afford to dwell on times long passed.

The conversation shifts again and she decides enough is enough. She leans into her date, giving him a one arm hug as she murmurs about getting a refill of champagne. He hardly notices her departure, he certainly doesn’t notice her lifting his room key from his pocket.

For appearances sake, she wanders over to one of the drinks table. She hands over her champagne flute and orders a Vodka on the rocks.

“Finally escaped them huh. I’d be drinking the hard stuff too if I had to deal with that crew,” a voice says from behind her.

Natalia turns to face the speaker. She isn’t sure who she was expecting but it is not the boy standing behind her. He’s just a kid, looks about sixteen. He is in the same dress shirt and black vest as all of the wait staff, but his tie is nowhere to be seen and his collar has two buttons undone.
She can’t help it, she laughs. “Yes well,” she holds up her glass, “much better than cheap champagne.”

He smiles, blue eyes lighting up with mischief, “It is cheap, I think even I could afford a bottle.”

While Natalia is well aware that most of the wait staff are college students looking to make a few bucks over the holiday, she’s pretty sure this boy is just as likely to pick pockets as he is to serve hors d’oeuvres. She holds out her hand, “Natasha.”

He makes an exaggerated bow over her hand, pressing a quick kiss to her knuckles. “Clint,” he offers as he straightens.

She rolls her eyes at his antics. “Nice to meet you Clint.” He gives the name with an open ease, she is pretty sure Clint is his real name or close to it. Like Natasha is to Natalia she always feels quite comfortable switching between the two.

“Pleasure’s all mine,” he winks. “So,” he shoots the group she just left a look, “are you the Senator’s lawyer or something.”

“Lawyer?!” Natalia huffs, surprise making her louder than she intended. She gives herself a once over. She’s in a black dress, low cut back and dipping front, showing off her diamond necklace - doubling as a garrote if need be. The dress goes down to her ankles, but has a slit up the right side - conveniently located to reach for her garter holster. Her hair has been twisted up into a loose bun, held up by two steel reinforced chopsticks. Her entire wardrobe was put together to play the Senator’s arm candy for the night.

Clint shrugs, “I don’t know, you look really smart and kinda scary. With the black dress and the red hair.” He gestures at her to emphasize his point. “You just look like you’d be a good lawyer, bet you’d scare the hell out of a jury.”

Natalia is pretty sure her mouth is hanging open. She closes it with a click. “Umm, thank you,” is all she can think to say. “But I’m just the Senator’s date.”

Clint shakes his head, “I doubt you’re ‘just’ anything.”

She rolls her eyes at him again. “You are a terrible flirt.”

He grins, all boyish charm, before tilting his head. “Wait, you said you were the Senator’s date? I thought...huh.”

Natalia looks over to where the Senator is in deep conversation with a young man she doesn’t recognize. “Yes,” she gives him a wink, “I don’t think I’m much his type. Now you maybe…”

Clint scrunches his face up, “Oh eww, he’s old.”

Natalia sputters a laugh, startled into it again.

He grins, looking pleased with himself. “Come on, you want to go sit in the gardens?”

“Don’t you have to work?”

“Naw,” he drawls, and offers his arm. He leads her out onto the veranda. The night air is cold, there is snow settled on the bushes that make up the simple garden maze, but it is nothing like Moscow in January. She takes a moment to think that following this boy outside could be dangerous, but pushes the thought away. She is more than capable of taking him down, and the mischievous glint in his
eyes implies boredom at the party more than any nefarious purposes.

Clint brushes off the snow and lays his jacket down on the ground. They sit side by side, legs dangling off the ledge. In the distance, fireworks light the sky, other late night party goers still celebrating the new year.

Clint leans back and pulls out a silver flask from his back pocket. He takes a swig and then offers it to Natalia.

She waves it off, still sipping her vodka. “You’re a bit of a wild one aren’t you?” She says.

He shrugs, “What can I say, I was raised in a circus.” He grins, like it is some shared joke then points at her with the hand holding the flask. “Bet you’re a wild one too.”

“Well that would be a terrible bet.”

“Oh, why?”

“Because,” Natalia grins, “I’d lose it.”

Clint laughs, and returns his focus to the spectacle in the sky. They sit in companionable silence, watching the occasional flashes of fireworks and sipping on their drinks.

After a while, Natalia stands. “I think I’ll call it a night. Thank you for the company.”

“Anytime,” Clint smiles, up at her. “I think I’ll sit out here for awhile longer.”

“Don’t you have to work at some point?” she teases.

“Already did it,” he says with a wink.

Natalia wonders what rich idiot is now missing their watch or wallet, perhaps both. “Well, good night then,” she says and heads back inside. She had lingered longer outside than she intended. The party is winding down and the Senator is nowhere to be seen.

With a curse under her breath, she heads upstairs to his room. Luck is in her favor, because whomever he ran off with, they aren’t in the Senator’s room. She uses the key she lifted off of him and slips into the room.

She finds the hotel safe in the back of the closet, and opens it with ease. It’s empty.

She hunts through the room, looking for the document she was sent on this mission for in the first place. There are no more safes, not even a locked briefcase. She curses again, and is forced to leave without the documents. She isn’t sure if their intel was bad and he simply doesn’t have it, or if he didn’t bring it with him to the party. Either way, Red Room won’t be pleased.

Another city and another party. This one a charity gala at a local art museum that has a lot less
alcohol than the one on New Year’s Eve. Though Natalia does appreciate that she isn’t playing anyone’s date tonight. No, tonight she is playing one of the waitstaff. The black slacks and cheap vest are an interesting change to her usual attire, though the brown wig she has to wear to cover her notable red hair, itches terribly.

She offers her tray of champagne flutes - possibly even cheaper than the last party- as she makes her way around the room. The guests are completely oblivious, most paying no more attention to her than one would a table.

She moves through them with ease, she picks the pockets of three different people before she finds what she is looking for. She plucks the security badge out of the Museum Director’s wallet, before slipping the wallet back into his jacket.

She makes another circuit around the room before abandoning her tray on one of the tall tables and heads out of the gallery. She smiles at the few guests she passes in the hall. No one stops her, nothing says ‘I know where I’m going’ like a uniform.

The badge gets her down into the antiquities storage room with a beep and a click. “Боже мой,” she grumbles, turning to face to room. The antiquities storage is in the basement of the Museum and judging by the sprawling warehouse-esque room before her, it takes up the entire floor of the museum.

The basement is actually clean and looks well organized, the problem is she has no idea how it is organized. Her handlers sent her in for a renaissance era journal from a relatively unknown philosopher. She has no idea what they want with the journal, but she doesn’t much care.

Looking at the rows and rows of antiques, she decides to just start at the first row and keep an eye out for either old journals or a renaissance section. When she makes the turn to the third row, she spots a figure among the shelves and freezes.

The person, most likely male, freezes as well. He is dressed all in black with a mask over his face. He couldn’t look more like a cat burglar if he tried. Normally she would just let him be, she has no interest in another thief, but the small leather book he’s clutching to his chest looks suspiciously like the photo of her target.

He turns and bolts, and she follows. He has a head start and manages to scramble up into the large air vents before she can stop him.

“Air vents, really,” she snarls, not interested in following after him into territory that is unknown. Luckily, she knows where the vents go.

The only vent exit large enough for him to squeeze out of is the one on the roof. When the grate comes clattering off, she is already there waiting for him. She grabs him by his shirt and drags him to the ground, knife at the ready.

She pulls his mask off, already snarling. “Who are you working f…” She trails off when the man’s face is revealed to her. It isn’t a man, it is a boy, the boy from the party. “Clint?” She says, startled.

He squints up at her, then his eyes go wide. “Natasha?”

She thinks back to the party, his mischievous looks. His words.

‘Don’t you have to work at some point?’

‘Already did it.’
She thinks of the empty safe. “You distracted me.” She wants to kick herself, distracted by a boy, how embarrassing.

“Sorry,” he grins, unrepentant.

He seems completely unconcerned with the knife she has pressed to his throat. Red Room has a no witnesses policy. She should slip the blade into him and be done with it. It would be fast, mostly painless. A gift, considering what could await him in this business. She looks at his boyish face, eyes wide but unafraid. He’s just a kid, never mind that she had killed the president of the United States by the time she was his age.

Making up her mind, she slams the handle of her knife to his temple. It won’t knock him out for long, but she only needs a moment. She grabs the book from his pocket, checks that it is the right one - it is - and leaps off the roof.

This, Natalia thinks glumly, is a shit show.

Red Room doesn’t much bother themselves with Advanced Idea Mechanics. A.I.M. does their thing and Red Room does theirs. Their paths only crossing to occasionally trade information, but A.I.M decided to steal a weapons prototype and Red Room wants it back.

They didn’t have time for a deep cover operation, or the manpower to put together a full frontal assault, so they sent their Black Widow.

She played the ditzy secretary for a visiting CEO, to full of himself to realize she wasn’t one of his usual staff. Getting in went smoothly. She found and secured the prototype, even managed to launch a nasty little virus into A.I.M’s servers. It was on her way out that the alarm sounded.

Personnel in ridiculous, bright yellow suits swarm out of every corner of the building. She runs for it. She manages to make it outside the complex, but they are locking the facilities down. The fence surrounding the place is fifteen feet tall and electric. Every twenty feet is a guard post containing three armed guards and one, very large, machine gun.

The weak point is the gate. Her eyes settle on a military style jeep parked beside the building. She grins.

She shoots two incoming guards as she runs for the Jeep. The swarm of people and the alarms have actually worked to her advantage. They are on alert, but they are confused, like ants when you kick over the hill. The keys aren’t in the car, but this model of car is pathetically easy to hotwire. She takes the cords from beneath the dash, stripping the tips of the ones she needs and twisting them together with a zap.

As the car roars to life she hears a thud and a gurgle. She looks up to find a dead A.I.M guard at the side of the Jeep. He has an arrow in his heart. “Hawkeye,” she gasps, recognizing the distinctive marker of Shield’s newest assassin.
She looks around for the shooter, but the complex is surrounded by forest, there is no telling where the sharpshooter is perched, and she does not have time to linger. She revs the engine and makes for the gate.

The guards try to stand in her way, but they leap away at the last second and she zooms right past them, slamming the gates open.

Her handler’s are pleased with the quick extraction. She doesn’t tell them about the arrow.

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Natalia sits on the third floor of an abandoned building and waits. It has been a long time since she has played sniper. Her particular skills have always been more useful for infiltration and information gathering. Her assassinations tend to be up close and personal, but here she sits.

Her rifle is propped on the window sill, sights fixed to the building across the street. Though her focus is drawn to the receiver in her ear. She had planted bugs in the building the day before, and right now everything is silent.

The group she is watching are black market arms dealers that have been bragging about acquiring vibranium from Wakanda. Red Room has been keeping tags on them, and tonight they are suppose to make an important trade with what they are certain is an undercover Shield operative.

If Natalia can confirm that the trade is for Vibranium, she is to wait until the trade is complete and then kill the Shield agent and steal the precious metal.

Her coms buzz with static as the door across the street is open and the dealers make their way in. She can only see a hint of them through the windows, but there is a strange muffled noise being picked up.

“I’m ready to get this over with.”

“No kidding, think they’ll pay up.”

“They’d better or Miss Grant here is not going to have a good day.”

Natalia hears a scuffle then a sharp cry and a whimper. The trade isn’t vibranium, it’s a kidnapping. She knows from the news that the young daughter, Katherine Grant, of a pharmaceutical executive had been kidnapped, but hasn't heard anything else on it.

She should leave. There won’t be any vibranium here, her mission is a bust for now, but she doesn’t budge. If Shield is really involved then the girl should be fine, but still. She stays.

Fifteen minutes later she spots two dark figures enter the building. She can’t make out any features with the broken streetlights, but she can see Shield training in the way they move.

There is a rustle in her ear and a, “quick, they’re here.”
“Ahh if it isn’t the Agent and his sidekick,” one of the goons greets when she hears the door creak open. There is a sharp cry, and she can imagine one of them yanked the girl back from running to her saviors.

“It’s going to be alright Kitty,” a young man says, and she recognizes Clint’s voice. Natalia resists the urge to sigh, this boy.

“It will be alright, if you brought what we asked,” what must be the main Goon says.

“We did,” a deeper voice says, a middle aged gentleman that must be the Agent in charge. He sounds familiar, but she can’t place him.

There is a clunk and a clink, the sound of a briefcase being put down and opened. One of the goons makes an appreciative noise. The lead Goon whistles, “Excellent.”

She can see him through her scope now, a briefcase loaded with cash sitting in front of him. She hears the click of the gun even as she watches him raise it. “Now we are going to take our money and Miss Grant, and you are not going to follow.”

Natalia curses under her breath, greedy bastards. She adjusts her scope to find the goon holding Katherine. The Shield Agents are standing a good fifteen feet away, and she knows there is another exit right behind the goons that leads to their getaway car.

The man holding Katherine is a mass of muscle. He has her hauled up in front of him, his grip around her throat so tight that her toes barely touch the ground. The girl can’t be more than nine years old, but even through the scope of her rifle Natasha can see her slamming her elbow repeatedly into the gut of the man holding her. If the man was less of a block of walking muscle she would probably be doing some real damage.

She takes aim, with the man so large, his head is an easy target. She can only hope the Shield boys are ready. She takes a breath, lets it out, fires. His head explodes it a mess of blood and bone, and she has a moment of sympathy for Katherine being so close. She turns the rifle around to the lead Goon, who has ducked, with his hands - and gun- uselessly over his head. He is still in sight of the window. She shoots him too.

She can’t see the rest of the crew, but if the Shield Agents can’t take them out after that help, there is no hope for them. She keeps Katherine in her scope just in case.

She hears a strange swish and thwack. One of the goons falls into view of the window, an arrow in his heart. Hawkeye! So Clint’s handler is the renowned archer. She’s pleased to know that the kid at least has a trainer that knows what he is doing. Hawkeye has only been a member of Shield - according to Red Room’s intel- for about 6 months, but he has already made a name for himself.

She should leave now. She has given away her position, but she can’t help but risk getting a better look at the mysterious archer. There is a series of thwacks through the microphone, a noise she now recognizes as arrows hitting their targets. She is rather impressed by the soft noise, she can see how it would make an excellent sniper weapon.

“It’s alright Katherine, come here. Close your eyes,” the older Agent is saying. He passes in front of the window to draw the shaking child to his side. He is looking right at her window across the street, which is the only excuse she can give for not immediately realizing that he isn’t holding a bow.

Clint comes into view next, closer to the window and looking out at her window as well. There is a bow in his hand and a quiver on his back. Natalia can’t believe it, she has to cover her mouth to keep
from laughing out loud.

“Get away from the window Barton,” the older man warns.

She can see Clint rolling his eyes from across the street. “They were helping, calm down Coulson.” In a whisper, almost too soft for the microphones to pick up, she hears, “Thanks Natasha.”

The Agents take Katherine, leaving in a black sedan that appears at the curbside. They don’t even try to enter her building.

The next day she sees the reunited family on the television. It makes her smile.

Clint is standing over her, arrow poised.

Natalia knows she could get out of this. For a sniper, he is standing much too close. She would probably still take the arrow to the arm, but the damage would be minimal. All she would have to do is sweep his legs out from under him, but he has a full quiver and a gun still holstered at his side. The only way to ensure she makes it out of this one is to snap his neck. For the first time, she isn’t sure she can.

The bow is steady in his hands, the tip of the arrow poised. He has beautiful form.

“It’s alright,” she finds herself saying.

“No,” he shakes his head and steps back. He doesn’t lower his bow, but his shoulders slump. “I can’t, it’s not alright. You saved Kitty.”

Hearing him say the girl’s nickname she thinks of her own, of Batya calling her Kotenok. “You have your orders?”

He nods. “Shoot on sight. They say you’re the Black Widow.”

He says it like she is the only one. She supposes it is true enough. She is the last. “I am.”

“How?” he asks, looking baffled. His face is much too expressive. “The Black Widow has been in operation since the 60’s. You can’t be much older than me.”

Natalia gives him a dubious look, she’s pretty sure he is older than the sixteen she originally guessed, but if he is older than twenty she’d eat her nonexistent hat. “I was born in 1947,” she says.

He gives a surprised whistle, not even doubting her. “Oh.”

“So you see, I am exactly what Shield says I am. I have red in my ledger. It’s alright, you have your orders,” She holds her arms out, giving him a larger target, though she knows now that he could get her through the eye with that bow at 500 meters without breaking a sweat.
“No,” he shakes his head again. “I could...I...I could take you in.”

Natalia takes a step back. “No. Just shoot me and be done with it Clint. I know you won’t miss. I have no interest in spending the rest of my very long life in a Shield detainment facility being questioned and experimented on.”

“They wouldn’t,” Clint lowers his bow, making up his mind. “They won’t. I’ll talk to Coulson. He recruited me, he can recruit you to.”

Natalia laughs, mirthless. “Oh, how young you really are. Clint, Shield doesn’t recruit Soviet assassins.” She could just imagine what Red Room would do if she ‘recruited’ a Shield agent, someone like Clint maybe. They wouldn’t kill him, not right out. They would torture him, get every ounce of information from him they could. Then, if they thought they could use him for their own purposes, they would twist him into something else. Take every ounce of that innocence from him and twist it into something dark, something like her. No, Natalia knew such a thing wasn’t possible.

“Coulson will, I swear it,” he sounds so earnest. Natalia can only imagine where they recruited him from. How could they take someone like him and make him a deadly sniper without taking that away?

This is a terrible idea, she thinks. She sighs and lowers her arms. “Alright, introduce me then.”

Clint grins wide and ecstatic. He gestures for her to follow him, turning his back to her after not even bothering to take her weapon.

Natalia is tempted to throw her gun at the back his head, the young idiot. If she does somehow get out of this, she swears she will train some caution into him.
Clint takes her back to his extraction point, where the Agent from the kidnapping case is waiting. He is younger than she expected, based on his voice, maybe mid-thirties. Though he has the serious, worn expression of a seasoned agent.

He takes one look at the two of them, Clint grinning like a dog that finally learned to fetch and Natalia following behind. He sighs, “Barton…”

“She defected,” Clint interrupts.

A lie, since she said no such thing, though she supposes it might as well be the truth now.

The Agent, Coulson she recalls, gives her a dubious look. “Is that true?” He asks, as if he would believe her.

“I’m tired,” she answers, and it is probably the most honest thing she could say to him.

Agent Coulson looks up to the sky, as if asking for guidance, or patience, a look she imagines Clint causes often. “Alright then, but you aren’t coming in awake.” He pulls a case from his jacket and pops it open to reveal what looks like a wide pen, but she recognizes it as an hidden syringe.

This is it, she thinks, he is going to put her to sleep and she will wake up in interrogation. But she had not been lying, she is tired. She lets him inject her without fuss. She sleeps.

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Natalia wakes up chained to a chair. That isn’t much of a surprise, but she is unharmed, she doesn’t even have a headache, and that is a surprise. Normally in such a situation she would pretend to be more groggy than she is, but she doesn’t bother this time. She snaps her eyes open and takes in her surroundings.

She is in an interrogation room like a thousand other interrogation rooms. The walls are a plain white and the floor a grey tile with a tilt leading towards the drain in the center of the room. There is a metal table bolted to the floor in front of her and her chair is the same metal design, also bolted to the floor.

Her right ankle has been cuffed to her chair leg and her wrists are chained with a longer pair of cuffs, with the chain looping through a bar at the edge of the table. On the wall in front of her is a large one-way mirror. She has no doubt that at least one person is watching. A simple, but effective setup.

Somebody must have been watching, because fifteen minutes after she wakes, the door opens. The first man to walk in is Agent Coulson. The next man is an Agent she doesn’t recognize. He is a middle-aged black man with a patch over his left eye. While Coulson’s face seems set in a mild expression of interest as he takes his place leaning against the wall, the other Agent seems to inflict the full force of his displeasure through his one-eyed glare.

“So you’re the Black Widow,” the Agent says, taking the seat at the other end of the table.

“One of them,” Natalia answers, just to see what he will do.
If possible, the glare intensifies. “There are more of you?”

She stares at him, lets him stew, and then shakes her head. “No, not anymore. I am the last.”

“What happened to the others?” Coulson asks.

Natalia takes her time deciding what to tell them. The information is heavily classified, but mostly useless to them. She decides to tell them what she knows. “The Black Widow Program started with 28 girls, all were given a serum, a lesser version of the super soldier serum. All but 6 died within the first week.”

She pauses. It has been a long time since she thought of those days. She remembers being in pain, writhing in agony on her bunk as they carried the others away in bodybags. She remembers waking after the fever finally broke, how many empty beds there were.

Natalia pushes those thoughts away and continues, “Of the 6 of us, one, Irina failed out before graduation. Eva and Galina died in the ‘60s during Vietnam. Anya, as I’m sure you know, was killed by your Director Carter during that mess in Belgravia. Yelena disappeared in the early 70’s. I was never informed how she died.” Honestly she hadn’t asked. While Natalia had not been particularly close with any of the other Widows, she had always had a rivalry with Yelena.

The Agent looks surprised. He hides it well, but there is a slight lifting of the brow above the patch that he can’t hide. She would be surprised if she was in his position as well, this is more information about Red Room than Natalia has ever given, and knives weren’t even involved.

“And what is your name? Agent Barton said you introduced yourself as Natasha,” the Agent asks.

She wonders if they have any idea what her real name is. She has used so many different aliases over the years, she is sure the original is probably lost to time. She likes the idea of Natasha, of changing to suit her new life, no matter how short it may promise to be. “I like that,” she says, honestly. “You can call me Natasha, Natasha Romanoff.” It is close to her real name, as close as she has ever gotten outside of the program. She likes the ring of it on her tongue. “And who are you then, Agent?” she asks, just to see if he will answer.

“Assistant Director Nick Fury,” he answers without hesitation.

“Assistant Director? So you’ll be replacing Director Carter? I imagine it is time for her to retire, though I suppose spies never really retire, do they?”

“And what are you doing Miss Romanoff,” he leans forward. “Are you trying to retire? Sell your secrets and run off to Bali?”

She snorts. “Hardly. Like I said, spies never really retire, they get old and they get killed.”

“You are hardly old enough, Miss Romanoff, to be throwing in the towel.”

“What makes you think I am? And I’m older than I look.”

“So I’ve heard, tell me, how old are you then?”

Natasha is certain that they have received this information from Clint. “I was born November 22, 1947. You do the math.”

Neither Agent looks surprised, just a confirmation of what they already know then. From there, Fury pulls out a file, slapping it on the table and flicking it open. The first picture is of a man shot through
“Was this you?” Fury asks.

Natasha takes her time looking at the photo and the name, but it isn’t familiar. “No.”

They continue like that for awhile. He flips through the pictures and she tells them if it had been one of her missions or not. Sometimes they ask her more questions about the mission, but mostly she thinks they are just checking off a list of unconfirmed assassinations.

She stops him when he flips to an image of multiple targets, headshots each one. “This wasn’t me,” she says, reaching out for the picture. Surprisingly, he pushes it towards her. “Who do you think did this? You knew it wasn’t me.”

It is Coulson who answers. “We call him the Winter Soldier.”

“The Winter Soldier?” she repeats, making sure she heard him right. He nods. She looks back at the image, it was definitely the Soldaty. She has never witnessed a pair that could work so in sync before. The men in the picture didn’t even have time to duck before they were taken out, the clean efficiency of the Winter Soldiers is obvious. Fury’s choice of words though ‘soldier’, he thinks there is only one.

She pushes the image back towards him. Fury takes it, giving her a look that clearly implies he expects her to explain. She stays silent, she’ll share her secrets, even Red Room’s secrets, but she will not betray the Soldaty.

They continue to show her pictures, but she is distracted, her mind stuck in time long passed. They must notice her distraction because they stop the questioning. Instead of inflicting pain to focus her as she would expect, they take her to a cell.

As far as cells go, it isn’t bad. There is a cot pushed against the wall and a small partition containing a toilet, sink, and spigot that serves as a shower. She sprawls on the cot, and lets her mind wander.

The following days proceed in much the same way. She is taken out of her cell and placed in the interrogation room where either Agent Fury or Agent Coulson asks her questions. They ask about the Red Room, her previous assassinations, and sometimes about other spy agencies within the USSR.

There is no torture, physical or mental, and she receives three meals a day. After she has been there about a week, Coulson even takes her for a walk around an enclosed courtyard. It is the most bizarre interrogation she has ever had.

Natasha has no real way to measure the passage of time, but she has always had an accurate internal clock. After a month has passed, the routine changes. Coulson leads her into the room, but it is not Fury waiting for her. Instead there is an older woman seated at the the table. Her hair may have been a fiery red in her youth, but has faded with time and is shot through with grey at her temples. She is dressed in a plain pant suit and would look like any other elderly secretary if it wasn’t for her eyes.

Natasha collapses into her seat with something like awe. “Director Carter,” she greets.

“Miss Romanoff,” she smiles, her english accent still prominent even after living more of her life in New York than she ever did in London.

“The integration is over,” Natasha says as she realizes it. She wonders if this is when they shoot her. If she is going to let anyone pull the trigger on her life, she would be honored for it to be the
infamous Director Carter.

“Almost,” Carter agrees, “I only have a few more questions if you would indulge me.”

“Of course,” Natasha clasps her hands in front of her on the table, the moving of the chains loud in the small room.

“Why did you let Agent Barton bring you in?”

It is a question that they have yet to ask, and Natasha has been waiting for it, but that does not make the answer any less difficult. She takes a moment, collecting her thoughts. “I first met Clint, as I’m sure you know, at a New Year’s party.”

The Director nods, “Yes, gathering state secrets from the Senator, I recall.” Her smile is amused, no doubt because they had gotten the drop on her on that particular mission.

“I did not realize he was an agent at the time, he seemed nothing more than a bored child who had most likely spent the night picking pockets. Then I ran into him again…” she pauses, wondering if they know about the museum.

Carter laughs, “Yes at the museum function where you knocked him unconscious.” She leans forward, expression going serious “and you didn’t kill him. You must have gotten in some trouble for that.”

Natasha looks away. “I didn’t want to kill him,” she admits. It does not matter, today is her last day, and she has left Red Room, but she has never been any good at accepting failure. “He is just a boy,” she looks back at the Director, glaring, “and I did not want to kill him.”

“He is older than you were when you started,” Carter points out, unaffected.

“It’s different,” Natasha lets her gaze focus on the point beyond Carter, looking at the glossy surface of the one-way mirror. She wonders if anyone is watching. “I was born into Red Room. I never had another option.”

Of course, as far as she knows neither did Clint. She is rather certain he wasn’t raised like she was, but he has the shooting skills of someone who has been practicing for a very long time. In the Red Room they were told that all of them were there because they were either orphans, their parents dead in the war, or they had been given up by their parents for the program. Either way, they had nowhere else to go.

“So you did not kill him because of his age, but that does not explain why you allowed him to bring you back to base. Not infatuation, I think,” she quirs a brow.

Natasha snorts. “Hardly. I followed him because…” She wants to tell the truth, a surprising notion, but she isn’t sure she even knows what the truth is. “He got the drop on me,” she decides not to tell them that he refused to kill her. “I couldn’t get away without killing him” she shrugs, “so I followed him.”

Director Carter looks at her for a long time, her gaze searching. There is no doubt that she knows Natasha is withholding information. She gives a decisive nod. “Alright, then,” she stands, every bit the living legend. “Thank you for your time Miss Romanoff.”

They leave her alone in the room for almost a hour before Agent Coulson comes in and unlocks her cuffs. “Come with me, please,” he asks, ever polite.
She follows him, feeling surprisingly calm with the knowledge that he is taking her to her death. She wonders how they’ll do it, guns can be messy, a knife perhaps?

Coulson leads her out to the courtyard she has grown so familiar with. There is a man with his back to them and it takes her an embarrassing length of time to recognize him. “Clint.”

He spins, a grin stretching his lips. “Natasha,” he rushes over to her, pulling her into a hug.

She thinks about punching him, instead she taps his back awkwardly before stepping back. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m here to see you, obviously,” he says.

He isn’t armed, but that doesn’t mean much. “Are they going to make you do it?” she questions. If this was Red Room it would be the obvious choice. It would be their punishment, take the life you thought you’d saved. She didn’t expect it of Shield though, foolish.

“Make me do what?” he asks, head tilted.

“Kill me.”

“What,” Clint sputters. “Kill you!?”

“Yes,” Natasha resists the urge to roll her eyes. “My interrogation is over.”

“Yeah, you passed. You’re being allowed on the team, probationary. The Director just signed off on it.” Clint shoots Coulson a glare. “That’s what you told me, right?”

“Yes, sorry,” Agent Coulson actually looks abashed. “I suppose we never did explain it. The point of the interrogation, besides gathering information of course, was to determine if your cooperation was genuine. The Director has agreed to give you a chance.” He narrows his eyes, “you thought we were going to kill you. You answered our questions for a month with the thought that we would kill you when we were done?”

The look Clint gives her is wide-eyed and frightened.

“I…” Natasha focuses on Coulson. “It was a reasonable conclusion.”

“It was not!” Clint yells, but she ignores him.

Coulson ignores Clint as well, “I understand you don’t trust us Miss Romanoff, and neither do we to be honest, not yet. But we are willing to give you a chance, will you do the same?” He holds out his hand.

Natasha had been ready to take her last breath. To finally, truly, rest. The knowledge that death is not what awaits her is harder to swallow than she could have ever imagined. She stares at the proffered hand and feels the world turn. She takes it.
Most Shield Agents have a home they go to at the end of the day, but for the rare few that don’t, the base is equipped with a hall of apartments. The rooms have gained the nickname the Den. Home for the Director’s wayward dogs. It was suppose to be an insult, but Clint calls them that with pride.

They give her the empty apartment beside Clint’s. Across the hall is, surprisingly, Coulson’s. The apartment is similar to a studio, with only a half wall partition between the bedroom and the living room. The kitchen is against the wall by the front door, with an island separating it off. She even has her own bathroom. It is easily the nicest place she has stayed outside of a mission.

She spends most of her time in the apartment, only allowed around the base with an escort. Clint is always eager to show her around, but he spends a lot of time training and in classes he swears are for tactical reasons, but she is pretty sure are because of his young age. Coulson will escort her at times, he enjoys walking laps around one of the largest of the atriums. It is a lazy, relaxing experience. The man reminds her a bit of the Soldaty, quiet but deadly.

It has been a quiet two weeks since the day in the courtyard. Clint has taken his usual seat at her kitchen island, swirling lazily in the chair as he munches loudly on a potato chip. “So I have a new mission coming up,” he announces.

Natasha places her plate down beside him. Since neither of them can cook, Clint had ‘acquired’ some sandwiches from the cafe. “Congrats, I suppose. How long will you be gone?”

He shrugs, crunching down on another chip. “I dunno, depends really, probably a couple of weeks, maybe a month. Coulson’ll be with me, so it’s hard to tell.”

“Ah,” Natasha takes a bite of her sandwich to avoid speaking. So she will be alone until they get back. The idea of being stuck in her rather nice apartment for a month is surprisingly hard to swallow. She’s gotten soft.

She swallows her bite before turning the full force of her glare on Clint. “Don’t die,” she orders.

He laughs, unfazed. “Course Nat, wouldn’t dare.”

She gives a sharp nod, “Good.”

***

Clint and Coulson leave early the next morning. The hall to the Den has always been quiet, but with the two of them gone the air feels stale. She stays in her room.

The next day, a knock sounds at her door at 0430, but she is already awake. She answers the door dressed in the black Shield garb they had given her and without a hair out of place.

Director Carter is on the other side of the door, looking equally put together. She doesn’t have a guard anywhere in sight.

“Director?” Natasha greets, feeling uneasy.

“Miss. Romanoff,” she returns, “Ahh good, you’re already dressed. Come along then. With the boys
gone, I’m sure you are bored to death.”

Natasha can’t argue with that. She follows her down the hall, a smile quirking at her lips. “Boys?”

“Well Clint certainly,” the look she shoots Natasha is full of mischief in her lined face, “I think Agent Coulson was born an old man.”

Natasha has to bite her lip to stifle a laugh, from what she knows about Coulson that seems an accurate statement.

The Director takes her into a massive, circular room filled with people working with a mix of new computers and old typewriters. It is an organized chaos. Natasha is led to a room off the main circle. The room is mostly taken up by a large table, which in turn is covered by a world map and precarious piles of files.

Natasha looks over the mess with a scowl. “Please don’t tell me you want me to do...filing.”

Carter laughs. “God no, I wouldn’t dare.” She gestures at the map. “I could use your opinion, however. “

Natasha approaches the map, curious despite herself, but a display near the wall catches her attention. “Is that?” she steps closer, taking in the red, white, and blue. The colors are faded, the uniform well worn and old, but unmistakable.

“Captain America,” Carter says from beside her, sounding reverent.

“I always thought it was a strange name, you being a British citizen and all,” Natasha comments.

Carter jerks her head around, “What!?"

“I,” Natasha looks over at her, “I saw the footage, they made us watch it, of you taking down the Valkyrie. You stopped the bombs from falling.” They had been shown the videos - stolen from Hydra’s base- as a lesson in their enemy. It was suppose to show them the strength of the Capitalist pigs they needed to defeat. Though no one would ever say it outloud, Natasha always thought it backfired. She remembers watching Carter in her ridiculous uniform, and feeling not rage but admiration.

“No,” Carter shakes her head, looking bemused. “No, I was never Captain America. Wearing the uniform was…” She sighs, gaze fixed on the display. “Captain America will always be Steve Rogers, but when we learned that Hydra was planning an attack the higher ups wanted to wait for more intel before we made a move. I knew we did not have time so I tried to think what Steve would do.” She looks over at Natasha, a sad smile pulling at her lips.

“And what would he do?” she prompts.

Carter taps the glass over the uniform. “Well, I cobbled together a uniform and gathered the Howling Commandos to make a strike. It was ridiculous, against all regulations, and likely to get me killed. So, all in all, it was exactly what he would have done.”

Judging by her tone, Natasha can tell how important this man is to the Director, but she can’t help but ask. “What happened to him?”

Carter tightens her jaw, looking fit for battle. “He died.”

She doesn’t elaborate and Natasha doesn’t probe, she knows how some people can leave scars much
too deep for time to ever heal. She turns away from the display and looks back at the map. “What was it you wanted my opinion on?”

“Ahh,” Director Carter starts after a moment, moving to her side. “This map represents all of the known USSR operations in recent months. We have reason to believe that they are about to make a strategic move in Europe, but are having trouble pinpointing where. I would appreciate your perspective on the matter.” She keeps her gaze fixed on the map.

Each operation is marked with color coded dots. She notices someone has drawn a little red hourglass on the dots marking her own jobs. There is a large number of blue dots stuck all throughout Europe. “Is this a particular operative?” She asks tapping one of the marks.

“Not confirmed, but there are similarities that lead us to believe it is either the same operative or the same group,” Carter indicates the pile of files. “Each file represents a mark.”

Natasha sighs looking over the mess, “This might take awhile.”

Director Carter’s lips twitch, poorly hiding her amusement. “Good thing you have plenty of time.”

“Yes,” Natasha scowls, “plenty of time.”

The Director soon leaves her to her own devices, heading back out to the main room. Natasha looks over the table heaped with files. She gives a huff and gets to work. The files are actually more organized than their haphazard piling suggests. Each file is marked with its corresponding dot and each pile is color coded. She hunts down the blue files first and starts to read.

It takes hours and her eyes start to cross from the strain, but when Director Carter comes back into the room she has three points marked on the map.

Carter looks at the map and glances at the files piled in front of her before turning her full attention on Natasha. “Looks like you had some luck.”

Natasha leans back in her chair, rubbing her thumb into her aching eyes. She gestures to the files marked in blue, “These files were marked as being performed by the same operation.”

Carter nods, “Yes, we haven’t been able to determine who is leading the missions, however.”

She taps one of the marks on the map, “You were right, theses are the same people. I worked with them on a few missions back in the 70s. They go by the name Department X, led by Colonel Vasily Karpov. He’s a fanatic.”

“I’ve heard of him,” Carter says, face darkening. “You think he’s the one planning the next attack?”

Natasha places a finger on the top of each of the three pins. “I’ve narrowed it down to one of these three targets.”

Carter leans over the map, getting a closer look. “Not here,” she says, pointing at the mark in Sokovia. She taps the one in Prague, looking thoughtful. “This one, well…” she pauses, “This one, we’ll know about soon enough.” She steps back from the table, gesturing to the door with a tilt of her head. “Thank you for the good work Ms. Romanoff, would you care to join me for lunch. I’m sure your eyes could use the rest.”

“Yes,” Natasha stands, “That sounds excellent. I had not realized that defecting involved quite so much paperwork.”
Director Carter laughs like it is startled out of her. “Yes, well, unfortunately the spy business has become more bureaucratic over the years.”

They head out of the room together, but Natasha lets her gaze linger on the last pin in the map, Budapest.
Three weeks have passed when Natasha hears a knock at her door. Clint greets her with a cheery grin, still wearing his combat vest, but his bow and quiver are nowhere to be seen. There is a healing scratch on his cheek.

“Still alive I see,” She steps aside to let him in.

“So far,” he moves straight for her fridge, popping open the door and pulling out an eggroll. He gives it a sniff and then bites into it. “Hmm pork,” he hums through a mouthful.

Natasha rolls her eyes, taking a seat at the island. “How was Prague?”

Clint chokes, coughing a spray of cabbage. “How?” he asks, after gulping his bite down.

“I’m a spy,” Natasha quirks her brow. She soaks in his stunned look before admitting, “The Director told me.”

His face goes through a complicated series of emotions before settling on pleased. “She told you?”

“Hmm, I made a friend.”

He smirks, “I knew you two would get along.” He pops the rest of the eggroll in his mouth. “Prague was good.” He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand before grabbing two bottles of coke from the fridge. He hands her one as he takes the other seat at the island. “We took down a weapons smuggling ring that was causing trouble in the area, but we didn’t find what we were looking for.”

Natasha takes the soda with a glare, Clint had left them in there a month ago and they have remained untouched. She takes a sip and winces at the cloying sweetness. She sets the drink down, pushing it away with a sigh. “That means Budapest is next.”

“Budapest?”

“The Director wanted me to look over some files, it is the only target left.”

“Well that’s a good thing, isn’t it?” Clint says, “means we know what’s gonna happen next.”

“Not exactly.”

***

Director Carter calls on them two days later. Natasha is surprised at her inclusion, but she isn’t
Natasha leans forward, recognizing the names from the files.

“On June 13th, the Round Table talks start in Hungary. Analysts show that the talks should result in the removal of the Communist party from power and the installation of a Constitutional Democracy. Obviously, the USSR is determined to prevent this from happening. We have reason to believe that USSR operative Vasily Karpov is planning on assassinating Josef Antall and installing Janos Kadar to strengthen the communist hold in Hungary.”

Agent Fury rises and places another photo on the board. This one is a blurry image in black and white of a man in dark clothes, face hidden behind a mask.

It is a terrible image, but Natasha would recognize Batya anywhere. Only her training prevents her from revealing anything.

The look Director Carter gives the picture is fierce. “We suspect that the assassin Karpov will employ is this man, codename Winter Soldier. His involvement is suspected in over 60 assassinations over the course of 30 years. In that time, this is the only photo we have obtained.”

“30 years?” Clint squeaks. “You really think he’s still operational?”

Fury turns his singular gaze on Natasha. “It is suspected that he has some form of the super soldier serum similar to that used in the Black Widow program.”

All eyes turn to her, some curious some accusing. Natasha ignores them, focusing on the picture. As a child she had thought of the Soldaty as the perfect soldiers, but with experience coloring her memories she knows differently now. “I’ve heard the same.”

Director Carter nods, looking unsurprised. “We must not let him complete his mission. Which is why Miss Romanoff will be accompanying Agent Coulson and Agent Barton to Budapest.”

“Director,” Fury snarls, rising from his chair.

Carter silences him with a look. “I understand your concern, but we could wait five years or fifty and never be certain of Miss Romanoff’s allegiance. She has knowledge of Department X and the skills needed for this mission.” She turns to Natasha, “Of course it is your decision.”

Natasha wishes she had some idea of what exactly Carter wants from her, but Budapest is her best bet at seeing the Soldaty again. She inclines her head, “It would be my pleasure.”

The Director gives a sharp nod, “Excellent. I’ve had a specialist design the kit for this mission. It is critical that none of you are identified as Shield. It cannot be known that we are interfering with Hungarian affairs.”

Agent Coulson stands, looking as unruffled as ever. “Do we have a wheel’s up?”

“0500 tomorrow, I need your team in place as soon as possible. If you will follow me,” Director
Carter heads for the door, they follow.

“Who’s the specialist?” Clint asks.

Natasha is in the back of their little train, but she spots the wry twist of Carter’s lips. “The best money can buy.”

They stop in one of the smaller R&D labs. The only table in the room is littered with junk and the person digging through the mess looks more like a mechanic than a scientist. He’s just a kid, face soft under a streaks of motor oil. He completely ignores them, concentrating on the small device curled in his stained hands.

Carter coughs to get his attention, and when he does not so much as blink, coughs louder.

He jerks his head up, startled, fingers curling protectively over his work. He looks confused when he first spots them before recognition lights his face in a roguish grin. “Aunt Peggy,” he leaps from his stool, tossing the piece into the collection on the table.

“Anthony,” the Director’s face softens when she looks at the boy. When she pulls him into a hug he places his hands out in front of him like he plans to push her away, but Natasha notices how his whole body leans into the gesture, starving for it.

“Aunt Peggy,” he grumbles when she releases him. He runs his hands through his already messy hair, putting the greased spikes in further disarray.

“Did you have any trouble?”

“With your request?” he scoffs, going back to the table. “I thought this was some James Bond business, not a Renaissance festival. A bow and arrow, hah, not even a nice exploding pen, psh. I could make a great exploding pen.” He tries to clean his hands on his dirty Metallica t-shirt before pulling a thin, suspiciously pen-shaped, object from the pile.

“I imagine you’ve gone above and beyond expectations Anthony. I told you I wanted the best for this project,” Director Carter says, her smile practically maternal.

Anthony flourishes under the praise, posture straightening and cheeks flushing.

Natasha can tell that the Director’s words are genuine, but she can also see how calculated they are for the boy. She wonders who this person is that calls the Director of Shield ‘Aunt Peggy’. He looks familiar, but she can’t place his face.

“Well,” he smirks, “it goes without saying that I’m the best.” He tosses the stick into the air, catching it deftly. “So who is your dear Robin Hood then?”

Clint steps forward. “I am, but it’s Hawkeye.”

“Oh,” his face lights with glee, “that’s even better.” He tosses the stick at Clint and he catches it reflexively. “Give it a flick then.”

Looking braced for anything to happen, Clint flicks his wrist. The object makes a soft click and unfolds in thirds. In an instant, Clint has a slim, black bow in his hands. “Whoa,” he looks impressed.

“It’s a new polycarbonate I’ve been working on. Thinner and stronger than the usual stuff and easy to shape into anything you want. This won’t set off metal detectors and doesn’t look like much of anything under X-ray. It’s recurve so the draw is 45-55 pounds depending on the pull. Will that work
for you, hot shot?” Anthony gestures wildly when he talks, rocking back and forth on his heels like an anxious child.

Clint holds the bow up, pulling back the string that had unfolded with the bow. His posture is as perfect as ever, the practiced set of arms and shoulders. He sights down the line, releasing the string with a breath. “It’s good,” he remarks, flicking his wrist so the bow folds back into itself.

“That’s nothing,” Anthony pulls up a black cylinder like the sort people ship paintings in, “now this is something.” He holds the container out and points to five divots in the plastic. “Press your fingers there.”

Clint allows himself to be manhandled, his fingers pressed repeatedly to the divots until the canister gives a happy chirp.

“Perfect,” he grins. “Now you can open this with any of your fingers on any of the scanners. Give it a try.”

Clint takes the container, the scanners are placed so he can hold it in the center. With a whoosh the top slides open and down, revealing a set of black and purple fletchings.

“There are twenty-four arrows,” he scowls, “it's a bit of a space waster, but I didn’t have enough time to develop something a little more sophisticated. I’m sure I could use a remote with interchangeable heads that would be more effective, but for now you'll just have to remember.”

“I’ll remember,” Clint tries to look offended, but his eyes are still wide with wonder at the hidden quiver.

“Alright then Hawkguy, lookie here,” he points to a spot beneath the fletching. “The outer circle are all projectile arrows, nonmetallic, but the arrows are also marked beneath the fletching. No raised lines means regular.” He points to the second circle of arrows. “These have one raised line, that's grappling arrows.” He continues through the quiver pointing out everything from bomb arrows to smoke-screen to poison, each in a specific place with a specific marking.

With anyone else, Natasha would consider it too complicated, but Clint listens closely. He runs his fingers carefully over each mark, memorizing them. She can’t help but be impressed, these varied arrows give Clint an advantage even above his silence as a sniper.

“These are awesome,” Clint presses the scanner again and the quiver seals up. “Thanks Anthony.”

His face scrunches up in disgust, “Oh, whoa there Cupid, it’s Tony. Only Aunt Peggy calls me Anthony.” He shoots her a disgruntled look, but she just smiles innocently back.


“Uh yeah Double-O, you didn’t notice?”

“Wait, the genius inventor Stark? That Stark?” Clint gives him an assessing look.

“Uh yeah, some spies you are,” Tony grouses.

Coulson, who has been observing from the corner, snorts. “We just aren’t used to seeing billionaire genius inventors in shirts that are more engine grease than fabric.”

Tony shakes a frisbee-like disc in his direction. “Hardee, har, har Agent. If you don’t want your toys, I can just toss a few lumps of coal in your direction.”
Coulson holds his hands up, placating. “No Mr. Stark, please continue.”

“It’s Tony,” he grumbles, fiddling with the disc. “Fine, fine.” He tosses the disc in the empty space behind the table. It hits the ground and suctions down with a whir. “Shield,” Tony says, and something shoots from the disc, it unfolds into a clear, curved rectangle, looking like a large riot shield.

Coulson steps forward to investigate. He circles the device before running his fingers along the surface. “What is this? Not plastic.”

“Plastic, ha,” Tony scoffs, “that right there is a Stark special. I can’t tell you what it is exactly or I’d have to kill ya.” He winks. “I can say that it can take up to 30 rounds from a handgun, or three armor piercing rounds.” He steps over and presses a button on the top, the shield folds back into itself. “You can press this button and toss it, and it will deploy in a 1 second delay or you can plant it somewhere and it will activate instantly to the code phrase shield.”

“That will be helpful when dealing with snipers,” Coulson admits.

Tony preens, “Yes, and I made you 6 of them, so each of you get two. Don’t swoon.”

Natasha resists the urge to roll her eyes at his antics, but she is impressed.

He turns to her, pointing finger guns with a wide grin. “Now, last but not least.” Tony grabs a box from under the detritus covering the table and flips it open. Nestled in velvet are two silver bangles with blue light running through them.

“What is this?” She asks with a quirked brow, knowing the bangles must be much more than that.

“For a pretty assassin like you, anything,” he flirts lifting one of the bands and handing it over.

She slips it over her wrist, it fits perfectly.

“I call these Widow bites.”

“Anthony!” Director Carter scolds.

Tony smirks, unrepentant. “If you didn’t want me snooping around in your secrets you shouldn’t make them so easy to find.” He fiddles with the cuff and points to a small button on the side facing her. “Press this and it activates the electric contacts on the front, enough to knock someone out, but it won’t kill them.”

Natasha bends her wrist enough to click the button. The bangles gives a soft hum with the energy running through them and the light grows brighter. She bends her wrist in all directions, checking that she won’t accidentally electrocute herself, but the contact point is well placed. She gives Tony a genuine smile, pleased at the new weapons. They are well suited to her fighting style and easy to conceal as part of her wardrobe. “Thank you.”

“Well,” Tony’s gaze darts about, “I can make it better, make it a close range and distance weapon with launchable contacts, but I’m still working on getting them to sustain a charge once launched.”

Tony Stark, Natasha realizes, doesn’t know how to take genuine praise. How interesting.

He hands her the box and the second bangle, before flouncing off to mess with the collection on the table. “Well Agents,” he smirks, pulling on his confidence like a second skin, “it’s been fun, but now you have to go stop Hans Gruber from blowing up an airport or something.” He waves them off.
“Nice,” Clint snorts, “Natasha can be McClane.”

She doesn’t get the reference, but Natasha shoots him a glare anyways.

“Thank you Anthony, these are perfect. I know I didn’t give you much notice,” Director Carter says, while they gather their gear.

Tony waves them off again, “Anytime, it was way more interesting than what Obie has me working on.”

Director Carter walks with them back to the Den, she stops them just outside of the hall and reminds them, “Wheels up at 0500 tomorrow, the jet is already prepped.”

“Yes Ma’am,” Coulson nods.

“Aww five,” Clint whines.

“Of course, Director,” Natasha responds.

They head to their own apartments, needing to prep. Natasha hasn’t been nervous for a mission since she turned 16, but she feels the knot in her gut grow tighter and tighter at the thought of seeing the Soldaty again. She wonders if they’ll remember her.

***

Natasha has seen Shield jets before. They are quick little things with top of the line fire power. The downside is that they are immediately recognizable as a Shield design. No one has anything quite like them, and now that she has met Stark, she knows why.

Instead of one of the sleek jets, they take a clunky C130 that looks like it was one of the first to come off the line when they were invented. The old cargo plane has big panels replaced along the side in slapdash welding and the original army-green paint is flaking off. “Ah, so you can be subtle,” Natasha hums, approving. The jumpsuit she had been given to wear that morning now making sense.

“Every once in awhile, we are a spy organization,” Coulson huffs, walking into the plane through the load door.

The inside of the plane is filled with what looks like real cargo, including two up-armored humvees. It certainly has that dusty grease scent that seems to coat anything even remotely military issue. They squeeze between the containers, finding a single row of the red netted seats dropped down for their use.

Their pilots hardly give them a glance, only checking to make sure they are in place before closing the bay doors. The plane takes off with a rumble and a roar, shaking terribly as it heaves into the air. The noise is deafening, but Clint winds up leaning against her shoulder, dead asleep in moments.

Coulson gives them an amused glance, before pulling out a file of incomprehensible paperwork. Natasha leans her head back against the netting and mentally reviews the mission, and absolutely does not think about the Soldaty.

***

The Hungarian Parliament Building is one of the largest buildings that Natasha has ever seen. It is a sprawling structure butted up to the banks of the Danube river. It doesn’t have the vibrant colors of St. Petersburg, but there is something in the spires and arches that reminds her all the same.
“Damn,” Clint whistles, head tilted back to take in as much of the building as possible. He couldn’t look more like a tourist if he tried, but his slack-jawed naivety makes him an equally unlikely spy.

Coulson doesn’t roll his eyes, but it is implied by the set of his jaw. He leads them to the entrance, where he hands over their ‘official’ paperwork. According to their paperwork, they are minor American diplomats returning a few rare paintings stolen during the war. This is a complete lie, but is a good explanation for the two painting canisters Clint has slung over his shoulder.

They pass without issue though the metal detectors, splitting up not long after. Each of them hunting for signs of the Winter Soldier and mapping out escape routes that wouldn’t be found on blueprints. With the upcoming debates, the building is packed with people, making it easy to investigate unnoticed.

Natasha makes her way through the upper levels with ease. A uniform, a quick walk, and a binder of paperwork makes her invisible. Guards ignore her and politicians avoid looking at her in the hope that she doesn’t have work for them. In this manner, she clears the second floor and observes three easy exits and five trickier exits.

On the third floor she finds the suites for visiting politicians. The floor is quiet, the majority of the residents in meetings, but she finds a cleaning cart parked in front of a room. She snatches a paper off the top of the cart without pause, dipping into a side hall to get an uninterrupted look at it.

Kadar and Antall are on the same floor, but placed on opposite sides of the building from one another. She replaces the paper on the cart on her way to Antall’s room. Clearly being favoured, he’s been placed in a corner suite. After picking the lock, she finds one wall of windows overlooks the river while the other is filled with views of the city. She takes a closer look and curses.

Time to report in.

***

They reconvene at a cafe a few streets from the parliament building. The majority of the patrons are well-dressed businessmen and politicians, they don’t spare them so much as a glance.

“There are multiple options for it, but I’ve found the most likely.”

Clint and Coulson turn their full attention to her. “Part of his room overlooks the street. There is a lovely hotel across the way that looks promising.”

“Perhaps we should get a room,” Coulson suggests, giving her a nod.

“Right by the river, I bet the view will be spectacular,” Clint agrees.

“Did you see any other options?” Natasha asks.

Clint and Coulson shake their heads. “No, I think this hotel will be the best choice for us.” Coulson stands and they follow without comment.

Chapter End Notes

So the Road Table Talks in Hungary were actually a real thing and Josef Antall and Janos Kadar were actually involved. I learned a surprising amount of history doing this
story.
“Benign.”

“She came from home.”

“One.”

“Freight car.”

It burns. Waking hurts, fire running through his veins and muscles spasming. He doesn’t want to wake up, he fights it, but the words pull him. Always, the words. He’s dragged into the world screaming.

When the words stop, the pain starts to lesson. He opens his eyes, blinking rapidly against the lights. Half of his face is covered, the apparatus keeping him confined to the Chair, but he can tilt his head just enough to see Other. His eyes haven’t adjusted yet, but he can make out the familiar outline and the flash of silver along his arm.

His body relaxes, even as his muscles spasm from the electricity still coursing through his veins. Other is here. It will be okay. He shifts his gaze back to the man standing in front of him. The man that spoke the words, their new Handler.

“Soldaty.”

***

They are placed on a cargo plane in a metal box just big enough to sit across from one another. There is no light when they close them in. Soldaty doesn’t like the darkness, but it is good for his eyes, still so sensitive after the burning. When the plane roars to life, the noise amplified in the small container, it reminds him of something, but he quickly shoves the thoughts away. He tries to think of nothing but the image of the target their Handler showed them.

In the dark he can just hear the scuff of boots on metal before Other’s knee presses against his own. The touch is comforting, some of the tension along his shoulders relaxing. Soldaty leans his head back and tries to remember nothing.

He must sleep, because the next thing he knows, Other is tugging at his armor a moment before the container opens with an obnoxious screech. They are dragged from the container by rough hands. The men that will be their field handlers, march them from the plane. The sun has started to set, but the light still burns, he has to close his eyes against the assault, but knows not to stop moving.
“You idiot, you forgot the equipment,” One of the men snarls.

His head is forced down, pulled by the long strands of his hair before something is shoved over his head. Soldaty recognizes it after a moment, and fixes his goggles into place. The dark lenses are a soothing barrier from the light. He looks over as the man shoves a matching set of goggles on Other. It is an unexpected kindness.

They are forced into the back of a maintenance van. He and Other are flanked by two of the handlers with two more sitting across from them. One of the men looks significantly younger, and keeps shooting the Soldaty wide-eye looks.

“The room is already set. We’ll release them at the backdoor and then reconvene at the room,” the man beside him says.

“Release them?” the young man asks, voice wavering.

“Yes, you idiot,” the man snaps, “you think we want them to just waltz through the front door, hmm?”

The boy, wisely, stays silent.

“Here,” building plans are laid across their legs. “The room is marked.”

Soldaty looks down at the plans, memorizing the layout and the multiple routes they can take to get to the marked room.

Other reaches out and taps the service elevator. They share a look, agreeing to the plan without a word.

The man pulls the plans back, folding them up and shoving them into a pack on the floor.

“It’s fucking creepy, like watching murderous dolls or somethin’,” the handler beside Other comments, having watched the proceedings.

“They never talk, not since the 60’s. Think Kudrin cut their tongues out, yeah?” The older man across from them asks.

Soldaty watches their interactions with little interest. From their uniforms, he knows the man beside him, the one nice enough to give them their goggles, is the leader. He’ll have the punishment controls, and that is all he cares about.

They snark back and forth for a time, debating if the Soldaty can speak, before moving to different topics. When the van pulls to a stop, the handler beside Other, jumps out. He’s back a moment later, giving them the sign to move.

They jump from the vehicle and into the hotel in three long strides. Other taking the lead. They follow the path they discussed in the van. Moving swiftly through the halls and dipping into the service elevator. It’s a quick ride to the floor, exiting into the supply room. The service staff are all downstairs for shift change, so it is only a matter of checking the halls for wandering guests. It’s a quick dash from the corridor to the room, they slip in silently.

The handlers aren’t there yet, so they go into one of the side rooms to wait. It’s foolish, but in the absence of observation he reaches out to curl his fingers around Other’s wrist. In full gear, it is the only strip of skin he can easily access. Other looks over at him, but behind the goggles, he can’t read his expression.
They stand in the dark until the door clicks open and the code phrase is issued. He pulls his hand from Other, and they fall into attention. The handlers ignore them, moving about the room to set up equipment. He does not know what most of it does, so he ignores them in turn until the lead handler approaches them.

He hands them their daily rations, cups of grey mush that go down easy. “Mission go at 0530 tomorrow, stand down.”

They hand their empty rations back and move to the far corner of the room, keeping well out of sight of the windows. Soldaty had slept on the plane so he presses against Other until he takes the corner, dropping down to a crouch so he can sleep more comfortably. Soldaty stays standing guard with his hip pressed to Other’s shoulder.

The Handler gives them a narrow-eyed look, and Soldaty feels a tightness in his chest, but the man only huffs, rolling his eyes. He heads back into the next room.

In the middle of the stand down, they switch positions and Soldaty sleeps while Other stands guard. After the burning, sleep should be the last of their concern, but the process is draining, they have to grab their rest when they can.

At 0530 they are positioned at one of the many windows they have been avoiding. Other has the rifle, taking aim at the building across from them. The target should be there, but as time passes it is obvious that his habits have been altered.

The lead Handler curses, loud and colorful. “Plan B,” he snarls. “Find the target, end him. Anyone stands in your way, take them out.”

They move out, the handlers left behind. They go to the roof first, to get a better vantage point. Other sets his rifle on the ledge along the roof while Soldaty searches the streets, memorizing the layout and determining the best options for descent. The roads are empty this early in the morning, but he can already see dawn breaking on the horizon.

His full focus is on the ground, and he should know better. He only has a moment’s warning, a flash of black and red, before a weight barrels into him and he is being shoved off the roof.

The sensation of falling makes him lose all sense. He should be fighting, but he can’t, limbs frozen. He hits one of the cars parked in front of the hotel, his body slamming into the metal, crumbling it with his weight. It hurts, pain radiating up his spine and ribs, lungs contracting as air is forced from him. He coughs, choking on the blood welling in his throat.

There is a gunshot, the sound jarring, and the weight on his chest rolls and disappears. He heaves himself out of the wreckage, falling to the ground in a painful crouch. There is a women standing in front of him, knife in hand.

The rage he feels is sudden and all consuming. She interrupted the mission. They’ve been seen. He charges.

She leaps, graceful as a deer, jumping over him, knife slashing across his vest. “Papka,” she calls, when he spins around. “Papka, do you not remember me?”

He ignores her, grabbing his own knife. He’s more cautious this time, they circle like boxers, or wolves, knives at the ready. She moves first this time and he’s ready.

When she steps forward, he steps back, moving to the side and grasping the tied length of her red hair and yanking.
Her head jerks back, neck exposed and vulnerable, but she moves with the pull, body flipping over his arm, and he takes a steel toed boot to the face. His muzzle shifts, he snarls beneath the mask.

Another gunshot echoes across the street, followed by a hiss. He looks up. Where is Other? There are arrows lodged into the hotel ledge. He tries to spot Other, but there is a knife in his face.

He rears back, stepping away from the women. She lashes out with the knife, swift slashes that would be deadly in not for his gear.

He reaches out with his metal arm, catching the knife between the plates of his palm. His arm gives a whine, flexing as he crushes the blade beneath his fingers.

The women darts away, but he’s faster, grabbing her wrist and swinging her around to crash into the mutilated car. She gasps, breath knocked out of her. Her free hand goes to his throat, but she is unarmed and her small hand barely fits across his trachea.

This close he can see her eyes, a vibrant green. “Papka,” She starts, and he shuts her up with a forearm across her throat. He presses, it wouldn’t take anything to snap her neck. He pauses. She isn’t afraid, she’s breathing hard from exertion, but her eyes are narrowed, defiant.

He hesitates, there’s something… The hand against his throat shifts and with a buzz, pain shoots through his whole body. He convulses, muscles locking as the punishment shock, even more powerful than usual, rockets through his system. This time, the darkness is a welcome relief.
Chapter Nineteen: Punishment?

He wakes up on a bed. He jolts, moving across the room before he is even fully awake. The room is small, the walls bare concrete, that make him clench and unclench his fists. The bed he was on is actually a ledge of concrete sticking out from the wall. There is a thick mattress on it, a pillow, and blue blanket.

There is a curtain in one corner, that reveals a toilet and shower. The far wall is made out of clear material almost like plastic, but it does not so much as shift when he presses at it with his metal hand. What little he can see of the hall is just more grey concrete.

Soldaty has been in rooms like this before, usually when they need him for back to back missions before the Burning, but Other is not here. He feels a pathetic whine building at the back of his throat, but he cuts it off before vocalizing. He does not know if he has been captured or is being punished, but in either scenario he cannot risk such a show of weakness.

He looks over at the bed, thinks about sitting there to wait, but pushes the thought aside. If this is punishment, then such an indulgence would not be looked well upon. Instead, he sits in front of the ledge, it rests along his upper back and is a comfortable enough spot to wait. His gear is gone, someone has put him in sweatpants and a t-shirt, even his goggles and mask have been removed. He feels naked, exposed. His eyes hurt even in the dim light, but he keeps them open.

The only sound in the room is his own breathing and the buzz of the florescent lights above. It makes him uneasy, and he finds himself shifting every couple of moments. Usually he can sit still for hours without movement, but Other is not here. He leans hard against the wall on his right, pressing until his flesh shoulder aches. It does nothing to help.

Time passes and he starts to pace. His strides carry him across the room in two steps, to the point that his cycles around and around the cell start to make him dizzy. He slows, but doesn’t sit down. His muscles are twitching beneath his skin, his stomach aches, but he ignores it. After an endless length of time, he hears steps. He turns to the clear wall, falling into attention out of habit.

The women that appears is older, with faded red hair reminiscent of the women who attack him. Her jaw is clenched and eyes red-rimmed, he thinks she must be angry and this is punishment. She stares at him for a long time, he wants to step back, wants to hide, but he doesn’t dare.

When she finally speaks, a single name slips from her lips, ”Steve.”

His response is instantaneous and run on instinct. He steps forward and snarls, a vicious showing of teeth. He slams the wall with his metal fist, with every ounce of power the limb can produce. The wall does not so much as crack.

The woman steps back, startled. Eyes wide, she turns and leaves.

What has he done?

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He does not know how much time has passed when he hears steps again. This time his visitor is a middle-aged man in a suite. He has a tray in his hand that he slips through a small flap along the
Soldaty keeps his gaze on the man, not bothering to glance at the tray. He can’t name the look on the man’s face, but it isn’t anger. That’s not good. It’s always the calm ones that do the most damage. He can only imagine what they are doing to Other in punishment.

The man says nothing, just turns and walks away. Soldaty does not move until his steps have faded completely. When he looks at the tray he finds a sandwich and a bottle of water. He has never been punished in this way before, given rations he can’t eat. His handlers are being particularly cruel, for he is certain he is being punished now, but he isn’t surprised. He ignores the tray and goes back to his spot along the ledge. The wall at his side is cold, but is nothing like the press of Other’s metal arm.

He tries to sleep, but Other is not there to stand guard. When the overhead light shuts off, his heart starts to pound. The lights in the hall have only been dimmed, so he is not in complete darkness. In fact, the reduced light is soothing on his unprotected eyes, he’s being ridiculous. Still, he focuses on the few tendrils of light leaking in from the hall, and tries to keep breathing.

By the time the lights turn back on, his eyes burn and he has a migraine building at his temples, but when he hears steps down the hall, he jumps to attention.

It is the man again, another tray in hand. He looks at the tray left before and then Soldaty, expression unreadable. “Were you not hungry?”

He does not respond, simply regards the man with a look that any handler would consider defiant. He misses his mask.

The man pulls the old tray back through the slot and inserts the new one. This one contains scrambled eggs, bacon, toast, a mug of coffee, and another bottle of water. A curl of steam drifts from the food. His stomach grumbles and he has to clench his fist until the servos give a whir of discontent.

The man glances at his arm, looking more curious than angry. “What is your name?”

The question throws him so much, he takes an involuntary step back. Name? What a ridiculous question. He is Soldaty, he and Other, two halves of a whole. Why would he have a name?

The man hums, nodding like he expected the response. “You should eat your breakfast before it gets cold,” he says and leaves.

Soldaty looks at the food and wonders at the order. He doesn’t know what they want from him, but this is hardly the first time a handler has given him a problem with no solution. If he ignores the order he will be punished, if he follows the order and eats the food he will get sick and then he will be punished.

With no interest in reliving the last time he ate unfit rations, he ignores the tray. Other is not here. Perhaps, if he keeps breaking orders, they will bring Other back. They cannot punish him without Other. The thought is a cruel one, but he is not sorry.

He goes back to his spot beside the ledge curling his arms around his chest, digging the fingers of his metal hand into the flesh of his bicep. He presses until it hurts, until blood wells beneath his skin. The pain helps him forget the pounding in his head and the hole in his stomach.

He tries to sleep. He can’t.
The man brings him three trays a day, always different. He tells him every time that he should eat, and every time Soldaty ignores him. Though by the fourth cycle of lights out, he starts to drink the water. His migraine has gotten worst. He can’t see out of his left eye anymore, and his flesh arm is covered in gashes. He started shaking two cycles ago and hasn’t been able to stop. He thinks Other must be dead, and he will not be far behind.

This is not punishment, it is execution.

It is after the fifth cycle that the woman appears. It is the redhead, the one with the punishment controls. She does not bring him a tray, instead there is a familiar cup in her hand.

Soldaty had stopped standing at attention once his eye went dark, but he stands now, shuffling on aching feet.

“Oh Papka,” she murmurs, looking at him with sad eyes. An instant later her gaze has gone sharp and fierce. She tosses the cup through the slat. It rolls straight to his feet. “Soldaty, rations, now,” she barks.

He grabs the cup, popping the lid with a flick of his thumb and starts drinking without hesitation. It tastes different, a hint of flavor that isn’t usually there, but it is close enough. He drinks until there is no more, than he unscrews the lid and licks out what he can. When he is done, he puts the cup back together and hands it to her through the slat. She looks...pleased.

“Lie on the bed,” she orders.

He hesitates, mind sluggish.

“Now!” she snaps.

He scrambles over to ledge and lies on top of the mattress.

“Sleep,” is her next order.

He’s not sure how to comply with that one, as he has been trying for some time now, but the strange taste in the rations must have been tranquilizers, because already his eyes are starting to droop. He sleeps.
Chapter 20

Chapter Twenty: Too Close

Natasha looks at the video feed and sighs.

“Did you know?”

Natasha turns to find Director Carter standing behind her. She has always had a good mask, but since Papka’s response to her, it has turned to steel.

She shakes her head. “No. I always knew that there were two of them, but we we’re told they were comrades that volunteered for the experiment.” And hadn’t that been a surprise, the Winter Soldiers that had practically raised her were Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes, American war heros.

“You got through to him,” Carter comments, looking at where Papka is finally sleeping. It had taken about an elephant’s worth of tranquilizers, of course, but it had worked. In the other video, Batya is also sleeping, but they had shot him full of sedatives after the first day. As Natasha had expected, he had not responded well to waking without his fellow soldier, and had attack the wall to the point that he was either going to break it or himself.

“They need to be together. They haven’t ever been apart, not since the 40’s I suspect,” Natasha warns, as she has been since the moment they got back.

“It’s too dangerous to have them that close together, and they will never break their programing if they are both feeding off one another. I let you see Steve because he was going to die if we did not get him to eat or sleep soon, but this cannot go on.”

Natasha steps forward, “This is more than just programing. They aren’t just going to wake up one day, and, ho hum, be Steve and Bucky again. They need structure, orders, and they need to be together. All you are doing is killing them slowly.” She shoves past the Director of Shield without a backward glance.

Surprisingly, she is not stopped, and when she returns to the Den, there is no one there waiting to ‘dispose’ of her. Well Clint is there, but if he hasn’t shot her yet, it probably isn’t going to happen.

The archer is perched on the island with a beer that had definitely not been in her fridge and the remnants of a sandwich that definitely had. “Hey Nat,” he greets, taking a sip of his beer, “How’s Winter Cap?”

She thinks about reminding him he isn’t old enough to be drinking, but she’s not a hypocrite. Instead, she focuses on his words, “Don’t call him that.”

Clint gives her a look she can’t decipher. “How are they?”

“Bad,” she says flatly, “the Director won’t listen.”

“Well,” Clint takes another drink, collecting his words, “it’s personal for her. I don’t know the whole history, but I do know there is history.” He sets the drink down and hops off the island. “Of course, she isn’t the only one.”

“I couldn’t betray their confidence, not theirs.”
Clint sighs, slumping back against the counter. “It was one thing to share Red Room secrets, but not the secrets of the men that raised you. I get it, I do. I think the Director gets it too, but she’s too tied up in this.”

“Yeah,” Natasha agrees, swiping his beer, “We both are.”

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The next day, Coulson is back to bringing the food, though they have finally listened and given both soldiers a variation of the protein shake. They are both ‘eating’ now, but they aren’t getting better. Still, the Director holds for another week until Papka becomes so agitated he nearly gouges out his own eye.

They knock both soldiers out before moving them. Papka is only moved a few cells down while Batya is moved from across the compound. They are still not placed in the same cell - safety reasons, claims Coulson - but in two cells that share one of the strange glass-alloy walls.

Natasha is not allowed to help with the move, but she observes from the security feed as two of the greatest assassins of all time are carted from place to place like furniture.

It takes hours for them to wake up, even with their fast metabolism. Papka wakes first, sitting up with same dead-eye stare he’s been wearing since capture. He seems unconcerned with the change of scenery until his gaze falls on the clear wall of his cell and the body slumped on the other bed.

Then he is up and moving, at the wall in an instant, metal fist pounding on the barrier. Even in the grainy footage of the security camera, Natasha can read the the desperation on his face.

When Batya moves, turning sluggishly to the source of the noise, Papka’s desperation turns to relief and tears run tracks down his cheeks.

She turns from the screen, offering what little privacy she can.
Chapter Twenty-One: Together

Other is alive. This is the single most important information that the Soldaty has ever had, but somehow it is information he keeps forgetting. The moment he turns his gaze from the clear wall, and the familiar form of Other is no longer in sight, he finds his heart pounding.

He ends up situating himself in the corner between the clear wall and the concrete one, so he can keep his gaze on Other at all times. Other seems to be suffering from the same problem because he places himself against the clear wall with his back to the hallway. Strategically this is a dangerous placement, but it puts them in direct sight of one another while staying as close as possible.

Soldaty reaches out, pressing his flesh hand to the wall. Other mirrors him, stretching out until they are palm to palm, only a thin layer between them. All the tension since this punishment started releases. He knows that this is stupidity personified. They will surely be punished for this obvious display, but they have not been put back in the Chair and there has been none of the usual prep done before the Burning. Either they are wanted for another mission or they about to be killed, whichever is the case, he no longer cares.

When the male handler appears, they are reluctant to move, but they take their rations, drinking them quickly so they can return to their previous positions. The man does not speak this time, only gives them a searching look before turning back down the hall.

Soldaty watches him go, worried, but Other taps the glass with his fist, turning his attention. Other gives him a look, half reassurance, half threat.

Soldaty huffs and taps the wall with his finger, little tap, tap, taps, an apology.

When they reach the point in the cycle where the lights dim, Soldaty feels a heart-clenching sense of dread. He knows they want them to sleep. The lead handler had commanded it, but he’s worried. If he sleeps, will Other be there when he wakes? His first sleep had brought Other to him, but what would they do this time?

Other taps on the wall, a familiar pattern of reassurance. It will be okay.

Soldaty wants to point out that they have no clue what will happen next, but he relents with his own message. You first. Even in the dim light he can read Other’s glare, but he won’t fold.

Other sighs, but leans his head against the wall. He closes his eyes reluctantly, his shoulders tense, and the metal arm giving a soft whir, but eventually his breathing evens into a shallow sleep.

Soldaty waits, guarding.

Halfway through the cycle, Other wakes without prompting. Switching watch, Soldaty leans against the wall. The cool plastic is a relief to his aching head, the migraines had subsided somewhat with rations and sleep, but have flared up again with a vengeance. It has gotten to the point that closing his eyes is actually painful.

Other taps a warning.

Soldaty sighs and forces himself to close his eyes, to try and relax. It is a surprise when sleep comes.
He wakes hours later with a jolt, certain that Other will be gone, but he hasn’t moved, still sitting right in front of him. He’s leaning his head against the wall, his long hair sticking to the glass. His left eye is closed, scrunched tight in pain, but his right eye is alert and focused.

Soldaty motions to his own head, where the pain hasn’t lessened.

Other nods.

This is not good. If both of them are suffering from headaches, then the problem is unlikely to be the lack of rations and sleep. It means they’ve been out of the Chair too long. Soldaty clenches his fist, the servos whirring up for a strike. He can’t remember the last time they had been out of the Chair for too long - that is kinda the point - but he has the feeling that it had not ended well.

Further worry is interrupted by steps moving down the hall. They both stand, moving to attention at the center of their rooms. Each echoing step down the hall makes his heart pound. Soldaty can feel sweat beading at his brow and his migraine continues to throb behind his left eye.

When the person comes into view, it takes every ounce of Soldaty’s control not to step back. It is the woman from before, the one that he had tried to attack. She doesn’t look angry, but her narrowed-eyed intent could be just as dangerous. He knows from experience that pain can be wrought under any expression.

She looks at each them in turn, gaze flicking back and forth. “Bucky,” She says, looking at Other.

Soldaty watches as Other shifts, fingers clenching and unclenching behind his back. He doesn’t turn his head, but his eyes dart to the side and back.

The woman stares at him for a long time, waiting for something. Whatever response she is looking for, she eventually turns her gaze to him. “Steve,” she says.

His heart stutters in his chest, pain blooming beneath his sternum. The servos in his arm give a threatening hiss, the gears readying for a strike. He takes a step back.

“Steve,” she calls again, “Captain Rogers. Please Steve, it’s me. It’s Peggy.”

He takes a step back, and another and another, until he feels the bed against the back of his knees. He’s breathing hard and the ache behind his eye becomes a stabbing bolt, blackening out his vision completely. He screams.

When he comes back to himself, his right eye clears to a blurry view of the cell. Other is frantic, throwing himself bodily into the wall connecting their cells. Ignoring the woman, for she is still there, he crawls over to his usual spot beside the wall. His hand is shaking when he raises it to tap at the wall. I’m okay. I’m okay.

Other stops in his assault, scrambling over to the corner so he’s pressed against Soldaty’s side, only the wall between them. He practically slams his hand against the wall, there is no message in his actions, just desperation to get closer. Soldaty reaches out, covering Other’s hand with his own.

He’s never had such a breakdown of discipline before- not that he knows anyways. Still, it is inexcusable how long it takes him to return his gaze to the woman.

She looks...devastated. Eyes wide, brows raised, lips parted. The moment she notices his attention, however, her expression closes with a sigh. “Alright,” she murmurs, shoulders straightening, “Alright.” Her voice raises, pitched so it is clear she addressing them again. “You will both be placed in the care of Agent Romanoff starting tomorrow.” Then she turns on her heel and marches away.
Instead of relaxing, his muscles tense, coiling tighter and tighter until it aches. Agent Romanoff? The name is not familiar, but the threat is clear. Tomorrow, they are to be punished.
Chapter Twenty-Two: Health Examination

Natasha holds the two thermos for the morning’s rations, and feels oddly nervous. She is standing outside the containment unit feeling like she did at eight years old before running the gauntlet. It’s madness. She takes a breath, focusing and steps into the unit.

All of the cells along the way are empty, only the two at the end of the hall holding Shield’s current ‘guests of honor’. When she comes in view of the Soldaty, they are already in the center of their rooms, hands at their sides, shoulders stiff.

The Director had been emotional the day before and her terse instructions before leaving the Soldaty would sound like a threat to anyone who had ever been trained by Red Room. Natasha wonders what they are expecting of her, certainly not what she is about to do.

She tosses the thermos into each room, and waits for them to eat and return the containers before she moves to the far wall. There is a panel set deep into the concrete that she first must access with her palm print before typing in a long stream of numbers. Once the sequence is complete, she plugs in the command and steps back. The panel closes with a swish, while the mechanics in the ceiling give a rumble.

The Soldaty glance up and then at each other before returning to attention. Neither can hide the widening of their gaze when the wall separating their cells sinks into the floor with whir of gears. Both shift position, their feet don’t actually move, but their hips rotate, angling towards each other. It is clear they wish to rush to the other’s side, but know better than to do such a thing in front of a handler.

“At ease,” she orders.

Their arms relax and they side-step the few feet so they are shoulder to shoulder, just shy of touching.

Natasha had only seen this particular command applied to the Soldaty once, when she had spied on them interacting with Kurdin. At ease, to her, has always meant a relaxed posture, but to the Soldaty it seems to mean they are allowed to go back to one another before adapting the usual stance. She’s pleased to see the command still applies.

“You are to be assessed for physical health, stand down for further orders,” she informs them before marching back down the hall. The Shield doctors had been wanting to better assess the the two since they had arrived, but had feared retaliation. Natasha knows, however, that if they consider her their handler, they will comply without hesitation.

She motions to the doctor to come into the hall. Natasha knows little about him, only that he is the lead doctor and had been approved by Director Carter. The man must also have some knowledge of dealing with flashbacks as well, because when he steps into the hall he is dressed in slacks and a tie-dyed t-shirt. The discarded lab coat was a good idea, though she wonders how the Soldaty will respond to the portable x-ray machine he’s carrying.

“Doctor,” she greets, eying his brightly colored shirt.

“Tim,” he corrects, shooting a curious look down the hall, if he’s nervous he’s hiding it well. “Are
they ready?”

She nods, gesturing for him to follow. “No sudden movements, and try to phrase everything as a command. I’ll be in the cell with you.”

When they make it back to the last cell, the Soldaty are still in the same position, though now their shoulders are touching.

“Sit on the ledge,” she orders.

They move to Papka’s bed, perched on the very edge, postures stiff.

Natasha goes to the wall, typing in the long sequence that will slide open a small panel into the room. The Soldaty don’t so much as twitch. She knew letting them be in the same cell was the way to go about this.

She moves into the cell, Tim following behind. He glances at her, waiting until she nods before approaching his...patients.

Tim’s movements are slow, but confident. He goes to Papka first, placing his medical bag and the X-ray down before approaching further. He hesitates there for a moment, clearly debating his first move. “Remove your shirts,” he says.

The Soldaty yank off their Shield issued shirts without hesitation, tossing them off to the side. Natasha has never seen them without their tac gear. She’s surprised at the amount of scars littering their bodies. The metal arms in particular bear nasty scarring, large knots of fibrous tissue running along the joining where metal meets flesh.

Tim makes a curious noise, but his face stays calmly blank. He pulls a stethoscope from his bag and gets to work. He checks heartrate and breathing before moving on to the arm, palpating gently around the metal and along the ribs.

The Soldaty watch him with equally wary eyes, but they listen intently, moving as instructed without hesitation.

It isn’t until Tim pulls out his penlight that things become difficult. He shines the light into Papka’s eyes, moving smoothly from the right to the left, then he pauses, brow furrowed, and repeats the process. He focuses the light back on the left eye and squints. “Soldier,” he says, “Can you see out of your left eye?”

Natasha doesn’t react visibly, but it is a struggle. She had of course noticed that both men were suffering from migraines. The signs were there no matter how hard they tried to hide it, but they had apparently been doing an effective enough job to hide something severe.

Papka tenses at the question. He glances at her and then away, looking ready for execution. Batya tenses as well, ready for a fight.

“Answer the question, Soldat,” she barks, hoping to turn the situation.

Like it pains him to do so, Papka shakes his head.

Tim asked again, clarifying, “No, you can’t see?”

Papka nods.
Tim curses. “I need to check you as well.” He moves to Batya next, going quickly through the steps of the physical. He pauses over the left eye. “Some pupil dilation, but it definitely isn’t even. Do you have vision loss in this eye?”

With the same stiffness, Batya nods.

Tim sighs, running his hand through his already messy hair. “You both should have been checked out long before this. I need to x-ray those arms, but I would like a better look at brain function. That metal’s going to be a problem though.” He shakes his head, frustrated, while he gathers up the x-ray.

Natasha has seen x-ray machines before, but the portable one from Shield is the sleekest she’s seen. It’s about the size of an ice chest. Tim handles it practiced ease, unfolding it into 3 bendable panels, with a computer screen on the outside of the center panel.

“I’m just taking an image of the arm, this will not hurt, but I need you to hold still,” Tim focuses on Papka again.

Papka, still seeming frozen from their discovery of his weakness, does not so much as twitch while Tim takes a series of x-rays. He repeats the procedure with Batya with a similar response. When the machine is folded back up, he pulls a biohazard bag from his kit and turns to Natasha. “I need to collect blood from both of them.”

Natasha hesitates. She knows the small needle won’t hurt, it would be nothing to the Soldaty, but they are wound so tight right now, even the slightest provocation could set them off. Still… She glares at the Soldaty, adapting her most threatening posture, “The doctor will take blood from you now. Do not move.”

Tim looks nervous really for the first time since this started, but he gets to work. First, he pulls out a blue strip of rubber that acts as the tourniquet, tying it just above the elbow on Papka’s good arm. It seems rather redundant, his veins already prominent, but Tim palpates before cleaning the area with an alcohol pad. He then pulls out a needle, needle hub, and a fist full of brightly colored tubes. After assembling the hub, he pulls the skin below the vein taunt with his thumb. “Needle,” he warns and sticks.

The muscles in Papka’s arm jumps, but all he does is look down at the doctor, a confused expression on his face.

Natasha can just imagine him wondering why it doesn’t hurt.

Batya watches everything with narrowed eyes, but seems calmed by Papka’s expression. It is not until his own draw, however, that he fully relaxes. He shares another confused look with Papka at the lack of pain.

“Thank you, that’s everything I needed,” Tim assures, putting each set of labeled tubes in their own bags. “I can’t give them any medication until the blood work gets back, but at least we have a starting place.”

Natasha lets Tim leave first, before she steps from the cell. The door closes immediately behind her, sealing the Soldaty back in their conjoined cells. “Rations will now be six times daily. As you were.” She motions for Tim to follow, not bothering to watch their response to the dismissal. She’ll look at the tapes later.

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Hours later, Natasha is waiting in the briefing room with Coulson and Clint. Coulson is there
because he has to be while Clint says he is just curious, but Natasha knows he’s mostly just there for morale support. The Director isn’t there, having left the day before to handle issues at another base. Natasha can’t blame her for leaving, the thought has certainly crossed her mind.

There is a knock on the door and a moment later, Tim pushes his way in, arms ladened with files. He stumbles over to the table, dropping into a chair with a thump as his papers spill over the table. He looks exhausted.

“Doctor?” Natasha prompts.

“Sorry, sorry,” he murmurs, pulling his papers into some semblance of order. “I can’t confirm most of this without a CT scan of course, but the x-rays helped to get a better understanding of…”

“Doc, seriously, what’d you find?” Clint interrupts from his perch on the corner of the table.

Tim runs his hand through his silver hair and sighs. “So based on both of their blood tests, the CBC results look pretty good, low hemoglobin, but that’s expected from the shakes. The CMP was a little worrying, high sodium, low calcium, and increased BUN. They are both dehydrated and malnourished. We need to increase the nutritional value of those shakes and get them drinking more water. Their CK was high, so judging by their increased metabolism and the dehydration there is some serious muscle breakdown. If it wasn’t for the serum…” he trails off, looking grim.

“Has the lab had any luck recreating the rations from Budapest?” Natasha asks.

“Not exactly,” Tim winces, scratching the back of this head. “The original stuff has a blend perfectly suited to the serum, but it’s also chock full of psychotics. It’s a wonder they were even functional enough to move, let alone assassinate people. Either way, they just can’t figure out how to separate what they actually need and what they don’t. We’re going to have to do what we can with a liquid diet and see if we can move them back to solids.”

The greatest assassins in the world, laid low by solid food. Natasha holds back a snort. She has to grit her teeth to keep any expression from her face. “And the X-rays?”

Tim shuffles his papers, pulling a set of X-ray prints from the mess. He lays them out along the table, pushing them Natasha’s way.

She pulls them over, two sets covering the shoulder and the upper part of the ribs. She doesn’t know how to read x-rays, but she can certainly make out the bright-white outline of the pins running through the bones.

Tim points at one of the pictures, “This one is Bucky.” He pushes forward another x-ray, “and this one is Steve. If you notice, the lighter coloration and the haze to Steve’s x-ray. It turns out, that their arms are made of different metals.”

“What sort of metals?” Coulson asks.

“Well,” Tim shrugs, “Bucky’s is a mix, it would take some samples to pinpoint it, but we are almost certain that Steve’s is vibranium.”

“What the hell is vibranium?” Clint cuts in.

“The rarest metal on Earth. Steve once carried a vibranium shield.”

Clint makes a series of faces like he isn’t sure he wants to ask the question, but he gives in, “What happened to the shield?”
It’s Coulson that answers, “We were never certain. It was lost when he fell.”

“Oh,” Clint murmurs, looking down at the x-ray.

Tim clears his throat loudly and reaches over to point at the upper ribs on both images. The bones are brighter than the rest. “They’ve replaced the whole ball and joint, the top four ribs, collarbone, and scapula. This was extensive surgery. If they were anyone else, they’d be dead. These arms are bolted to their spines and wired into their brains. I’ve never seen anything quite like it. They must be in constant pain.”

Natasha doesn’t doubt that, looking down at the images, she can only imagine. “Is there anything we can do about that?”

Tim shakes his head. “Not that I know, but unfortunately that isn’t the main concern right now. We need to fix their nutrition levels and we need a CT scan.”

“The blindness?”

“Yes. I’m worried about swelling. There is more to the memory loss than conditioning and the psychotics.”

“Can you get that set up for tomorrow?”

Tim nods, “Yeah, no problem. They might not respond well to the machine though.”

“They are conditioned to follow orders, for now, that will work in our favor.” Natasha can only hope that they continue to think of her as their handler.

“All right, I’ll get that set up and have a rough plan for the liquid to solid transition for tomorrow.” Tim stands and shuffles his papers, gathering them together.

“Thank you Doctor,” Coulson says, standing as well.

Tim waves him off, shuffling out of the room.

“Whoo,” Clint whistles.

“Hmm,” Coulson hums. “This will take delicate handling and time. Are you ready for that Miss Romanoff?”

Natasha glares because Coulson knows better. “I have to be.”
Chapter Twenty-Three: The Chair

Soldaty stays pressed to Other’s side throughout the night and into the morning. They separate just far enough to not be touching when they hear the steps. For the first time in a long while, Soldaty is not hungry. All the rations they had been given the day before still sit heavy on his stomach.

It is the lead Handler again, though she has the older man with her this time. She passes the rations to them without a word. While Soldaty might not be interested in the rations, he knows better than to disobey. The first taste gives him pause, however. The rations have a flavor, which is a change from their usual bland nothingness. The flavor is familiar, stirs a memory, something long forgotten. He pushes the thought and gulps down the rest of the rations before handing the container back. Handler’s expression hasn’t changed, he can only hope she did not notice his mistake.

“Take one,” She orders, passing two more containers through the slat.

Soldaty takes the red bottle and Other the blue one. It is a regular plastic water bottle, red but for a white star on one side. He shoots a side glance at Other, he is looking down at his bottle with a scrunched brow, his thumb running along the white wing shape.

“You will drink at least 2 full bottles of water a day, more if you need it, but drink slowly,” Handler orders.

Soldaty pulls the top on the bottle and takes a sip of the water. It is cool and helps wash down the rations. He wishes he knew what Handler wants from them. Her orders are not unusual, but they are never given so much without a mission in between, and why the colored bottles? They have always been issued the same equipment; same tac gear, same knives, same hand guns. Their equipment always in grey or black. In comparison, the red bottle makes him nervous.

Handler, thankfully, ignores their confusion. “The doctor has prepared the scan. You will both be fitted with cuffs before leaving the cells, but I do not expect any trouble.”

Soldaty hears the threat loud and clear. When Handler steps into the cell, followed by the older man, they offer up their hands without hesitation. The cuffs they secure into place are large metal ones, completely covering his wrists. They are softly padded on the inside, but Soldaty does not doubt that they equipped to do damage.

They are marched down to medical with Handler in front and the man guarding from behind. It is less guards then they are used to and neither handler appears to be armed, but that likely means they are even more dangerous. Soldaty is still contemplating this when they are brought into the room. It is a sterile room, white tiled covering the floor, walls, and ceiling. The Doctor is already there waiting, still in that bright shirt, but labcoat or not, Soldaty knows a Doctor when he sees one.

In the center of the room is the Chair. It looks different, true, but he knows. This version has a long table for them to lie down on, prone, while the circular mechanism at the top is where they will place their heads as they wipe them. There is only one Chair in the room so one of them will have to watch while the other screams.

He can’t help it, he balks. Soldaty steps back, flexing his metal fist, but the cuffs are sturdy, they hold. He’s breathing hard, and there is a noise coming from his throat, a high pitched whine like a
beaten dog.

Other has gone stock still at his side, his arms hung tense in front of him, both fists clenched. He is staring wide-eyed at the Chair.

“No,” Handler is saying, she’s right in front of him. A sudden flash of auburn that draws his attention. “You will not be injured. This is a scan. It takes pictures of your brain. There is no pain.”

Soldaty shakes his head because this is madness. Of course there will be pain. There has always been pain. She places a hand on his flesh arm and he flinches, expecting the sharp jolt of the punishment shock. There is no pain, however, she only squeezes his arm, drawing his attention. He looks down, he is so confused.

“I need you to lie on the scanner, just for moment. You just have to lie still,” She is saying, leading him with gentle tugs. He doesn’t want to follow her. He doesn’t want to go into the Chair and have his mind scrambled, and then the Burning, back to sleep until they are needed again. He doesn’t want it, he never wants it, but it doesn’t matter does it? She will get him in the chair weather he wants it or not.

He’s shaking by the time he gets to the Chair.

The doctor looks concerned, brow furrowed. “Maybe we can wait, I mean, look at them. This isn’t good for the patients.”

Handler shakes her head. “We don’t have time for them to be ready. You said it yourself. There is definite brain damage and you can’t treat it without knowing what is wrong. I won’t let them die because we waited too long.”

Soldaty hears their conversation, but he doesn’t understand it. Brain damage? Patients? His confusion allows Handler to press him back so he is lying along the table. His hands are still bound, so he has to lay them on his chest.

“I know you don’t believe me,” the doctor is saying, appearing in Soldaty’s field of vision, “but this will not hurt. I’m not even using any contrast. I just need you to stay still. There will be some noise and the table will move so the scanner covers your head, but it will not hurt. I swear.”

He is right about one thing, Soldaty does not believe him. He tries to slow his breathing to something more manageable, but his heart is pounding.

The table hums as it lifts and moves forward, settling just inside the cylinder. Soldaty can still see out into the room a bit. Other is still standing stiffly next to the older man. The look he gives Soldaty is even more painful than the shock that is awaiting him. The bald fear is impossible for either of them to mask. Times between wipes are mostly a blur, just flashes of sensation and pain, but there is one thing that he always carries with him. The fear that this time, when they wipe him, he will forget Other.

He clenches his fists and grits his teeth, ready as he will ever be. The machine starts up with a whirr, something in the cylinder is moving, rapid whoosh whoosh noises. The noise is almost soothing. There is something in the air, it makes the hair on the back of his neck stand up. The sound gets louder, a steady thrum.

His heart rate speeds up and he can’t breath for the lump in his throat. The noise comes to a crescendo and he shuts his eyes, waiting. With a soft whine the machine cycles down, the thrumming slowing until it shuts down entirely with a soft hum. The table buzzes as it returns to the starting
“All done,” The doctor is saying, pressing a hand to his back and helping Soldaty to sit up. “See, did it hurt?”

Soldaty stares at the man, wide eyed and confused. He’s fine, the machine didn’t do anything. He wonders if it is broken and they just don’t realize it yet, or worse, is it working and they somehow wiped him without him even knowing?

He looks around the room, gaze locking on Other, his wide-eyed fear has transformed into confusion, so Soldaty must not have screamed. He pulls himself off the table without waiting for orders and steps over to Other.

Other pulls him to his side as best he can with his arms chained, a half embrace. He taps along his side, careful to hide the movements from the handlers. Are you okay?

Soldaty leans into him, hiding his movements between them as he taps. I remember.

Other leans back, giving Soldaty a once over, before giving a tight nod. He goes to the table without hesitation and lays back.

The doctor shoots them a curious look, but presses something on the side of the machine that moves the table into place. The cycle of the machine starting up and turning off is surprisingly fast, while on the table it had felt like hours.

Other gets off the table with a curious look. Having experienced the same lack of pain or memory wipe as Soldaty. Perhaps they had been telling the truth, maybe it was just a scan.
“So I’ve got good news and bad news,” Tim announces.

They are back in conference room, the day after the mess with the CT scan. Natasha hadn’t bother to sleep the night before, uninterested in being haunted by the look of pure fear Papka had given her when she had made him get on the table.

“Bad news first, doc,” Clint speaks up, when neither she nor Coulson responds.

“Well,” Tim scratches at the back of his head. “I had the Shield radiologist look at the scan, she’s better at these sort of things than I am. The report she sent says that the boys both have severe damage to the limbic system, the hippocampus in both of them looks like it’s been roasted on a BBQ.”

“What means?” Clint prompts.

Tim winces. “Memory, it means their memories are, to put it bluntly, fucked.”

“Well Christ, Doc, what’s the good news?”

“That’s the weird thing,” Tim says, pushing forward a series of images that could possibly be a brain. “They are both suffering from acute encephalitis.” At Clint’s raised brow, he clarifies. “Swelling of the brain. It’s usually caused by a viral infection, but this one looks like it’s an immune response. The damage to their brain should leave them as drooling vegetables, but they are, all things considered, fine. I won’t be able to tell without another scan to compare, which isn’t happening anytime soon, but I think they’re healing.”

“How do we treat it?” Natasha speaks up for the first time since Tim entered the room.

He nods. “Yeah. The damage is spotty in places that just wouldn’t makes sense unless their bodies were healing the damage, and it would explain the swelling. They are both healing damage that should be impossible. Steve appears to be healing at a slightly faster rate which is why he deteriorated quicker. The healing process is working, but it is causing the fluid retention that resulted in the swelling. With the swelling pressing on the optic nerve, it caused the partial blindness, the headaches, and the off and on fever and shakes we’ve been observing.”

“How do we treat it?” Natasha can only imagine how dangerous swelling of the brain can be, but with the Soldaty’s healing abilities it is hard to tell what could be deadly.

“Well I was thinking about adding some ibuprofen and corticosteroids to the protein shake for the next week. That should help with the swelling and the headaches, but the cause is the healing. It will go down on its own. The best plan now is to get them eating better, drinking more water, and to just keep an eye on them.”

“Will they remember?”

Tim shrugs, looking down at the scans with a worried expression. “I honestly don’t know. There isn’t a lot of precedence for this. If I had to hazard a guess, I would say they should remember some things, but whether they are in any order or if they will be able to properly sort them, I don’t know.
“There are a lot of ifs here. The only thing I do know is it is going to be a long road.”

Natasha sighs. She isn’t surprised, her life has long since prepared her to expect the worse, but she still can’t help the stab of disappointment.

“Thank you Doctor,” Coulson says, when Natasha doesn’t respond.

Tim gives them a sad look, before gathering his records and leaving.

“Well, we knew this wasn’t going to be easy. They responded to the rations this morning. Steve definitely noticed the banana we blended in, and they both seemed drawn to the water bottles,” Coulson comments, turning to fully face Natasha.

Natasha nods, she had noticed his pause as well. “Yes, we can start following the Doctor’s plans for the liquid to solid diet he drew up.”

“Yes, and I have a few cognitive association techniques that may help as well,” Coulson suggests.

Natasha nods. It’s time to fix this.

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They start slow, following the doctor’s recommendation and adding various fruits and vegetable to the shakes. Not only are the Soldaty unused to solid food, but they have no real basis for flavor.

They respond well to the banana and strawberries and Bucky - not Batya she has to remind herself- responds favorably to the kiwi. They add oatmeal to the mixture to thicken it. Neither of the them seem to care for the new viscosity, but at least it gets them to drink more water.

To help with their memories, Coulson starts to introduce new stimulants to the cell. They give them new clothes, jeans, khakis, and scrubs with shirts in a variety of colors. They seem confused about the changes at first. Both of them choosing the same colors out of habit, but soon Bucky leans more towards darker shades and jeans while Steve tends towards the brighter colors and khakis.

The introduction of better blankets and pillows still doesn’t get them to sleep on the beds, but they form a nest of bedding against the far wall of the cell where they take turns sleeping. Attempts at verbal communication fail at first, and then the nightmares start.
Chapter 25

Chapter Twenty-Five: Kotenok

It’s grey. Grey walls and grey clothes and grey thoughts. Everything is muted, even his thoughts run sluggish. Other is there. He’s on his back, face pale. Soldaty wants to shake him, tap messages into his skin until he wakes up, but his body is moving on its own.

He’s saying something, whispered words long forgotten, as me moves Other’s arm out. It’s his left one, the metal one, but this time the arm is flesh and bone, but it does not look well. The air is heavy with rot, it gags him, but he does not falter. Soldaty lifts his arm and the giant knife clenched in his fist.

He wants to stop it. Wants to shout and scream and tear himself apart, but still the knife rises. It falls like lightning, a blinding crack that makes the grey bleed red.

Soldaty wakes up screaming.

Other is there, at his side, his hand a warm weight against his shoulder.

He shoves him away, scrambling out of reach until he is on the far side of the cell. He’s still screaming, a screeching noise punctuated by uncontrollable sobs. He’s clawing at his right arm, the flesh arm that severed the flesh of his Other. His fingers tear into the flesh, drawing blood and bringing pain.

Other is there again. Grabbing his hands and shoving him to the ground. He fights, trying to buck Other off of him, but he isn’t in the right state of mind, and he does not wish to harm - not Other anyways.

When he finally settles, Other is still pressed above him, breathing hard, but unharmed. His eyes are wide, frightened, but there is a fierceness there, a promise that he will not let Soldaty injure himself further.

He relaxes slowly, it is a fight with each muscle to release the tension that is holding him taunt. His breathing slows and his heartbeat follows. He can more acutely feel the damage he has done to himself now, his right arm aches, but Other got to him in time. The muscle is undamaged.

Other tightens his grip minutely, drawing Soldaty’s attention. He’s glaring, a challenge.

Soldaty submits, turning his eyes away and giving a nod.

Other releases him, standing back and offering him a hand up. He doesn’t release his grip once Soldaty is standing. Instead he extends his index finger and taps along his pulse. There is no real message in the gesture, just the offer of comfort.

He doesn’t deserve it. He knows he doesn’t. The dream, like the others before it, is a memory once lost. For once, he is hoping they will wipe him again soon. He’s degrading, and he doesn’t know how much more of this he can take.

Other, perhaps sensing his hopelessness, pulls him into a rough hug.

Soldaty tucks his face between the junction of his neck, and prays to remember no more.
The memories do not stop.

Within two cycles, Other starts to be plagued with them as well. They both try to avoid sleeping now, every sleeping moment bringing screaming terrors, but soon the memories follow them into their waking hours. There is no relief.

Handler brings them their food, but neither can be bothered with more than a few swallows. She looks even more familiar now, the bright auburn of her hair, taunting.

Then one day, when he hands back the ration containers, and she offers him a hint of a smile - if something so sharp could be called a smile- he speaks. His voice is a hoarse rumble, but understandable all the same, “Kotenok.”

Her eyes widen, a familiar, vibrant green, “Papka.”

He falls back at this title. He has heard her use it before, but now it comes with a surge of emotions. There is a warmth there, a feeling of protectiveness and care. It makes no sense, she is Handler, but she is also Kotenok. Which makes even less sense. Why in his memories does he regard Handler as the Russian word for kitten?

Other pulls him back, shoving Soldaty behind him in a protective stance. They have enough memories now to know that speaking is not a good idea, but Handler does not retaliate. Instead, she smiles, a true one. There is no showing of teeth, but the curl of her lips is more welcoming than the fierce expression they have grown use to.

“Papka,” she says again nodding at Soldaty. “Batya,” she gestures to Other. “I know you don’t remember me, not yet, but my name is Natalia Romanova. You trained me. Before that,” she hesitates, “before that you were Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes.”

They both flinch. Those names again. The older woman had used them and they circle now in the depths of their nightmares, taunting.

She raises her hands, palms up. “I know, I know. You don’t like those names. I can understand that. You knew me as Natalia Romanova, but Shield, that’s who I work for, they know me as Natasha Romanoff. I needed the change. A new name for a new future. Is there a name either of you would prefer?”

Soldaty and Other share a long look, confused by Handler Romanoff’s questions. They shake their heads. A name? Weapons do not have names.

She sighs, but looks neither surprised nor angry. “Is there anything else you would like to tell me?”

The share another look, contemplating. Handler Romanoff is a strange one, but as far as either of them can remember - which is something they are actually capable of at the moment - she is the kindest Handler they have had. They do not want to be passed on to another Handler if they do not prove useful, and thus far they have taken no missions for her. Unfortunately, neither one of them has information that would be of any use.

She leaves after awhile, watching them until the lights start their night cycle.

Soldaty is thinking about her questions when he final succumbs to sleep. He and Other are driving down an old dirt road. They are on motorcycles, the roar of their engines deafening on an otherwise quiet night.

The rough ride is almost soothing, the vibration in his bones helping to shake off the last of the
Burning. They weave their motorcycles between the trees, a deadly dance, until they are leaping off the path and onto the smoother roadway. There are tail lights ahead, the target.

Other moves ahead, the engine revving as he pulls up beside the car. He lashes out with a metal fist, shredding the tire and sending the car spiraling into the surrounding trees. They pull up beside the smoking vehicle. There are two people within, both still alive.

Soldaty approaches the driver’s side. There is a man trapped in his seat, face covered in scratches and eyes tight with pain. He turns to look at him, head lolling like he can’t control it. He squints against the light from the motorcycles. “Help,” he whispers, voice hoarse.

At the passenger's side, Other approaches the woman. She’s equally injured, a large gash across her brow from where she hit the dash.

Soldaty reaches out with his metal arm, grasping the man around the throat. His eyes seem to focus then, going wide with surprise. They do not turn to fear, however, as all others before him have done. His lips quirk, blooming into a full grin. “Steve,” he says.

Soldaty snaps his neck.

A moment later and the woman is also dead. They pop the trunk, retrieve the briefcase they were sent for. It is the work of a loosened fuel line and a match before they are on their way back to base.

Mission complete.
Chapter Twenty-Six: Not the Only

Not the Only

Natasha cannot decide if this has been a breakthrough or a backslide. Papka -Steve, she has to keep reminding herself- had remembered her, had called her by her old nickname. In the three days that have followed, however, the Soldaty have both suffered from horrendous nightmares, flashbacks, and fugue states. They have had next to nothing to drink and eaten even less.

They have started to talk. A jumbled mix of words in equally jumbled languages, but it is the most they have gotten out of them since they arrived. The Doctor had explained that this was most likely a result of their healing memories. The memories are not coming back in any order and they are both struggling to cope with the barrage of images.

Looking at the surveillance footage now, they do seem to have settled somewhat. They are pressed side to side in their nest of bedding. Both awake and looking more lucid than they have in the last few days.

She heads down to the cells with their food on a tray this time. They’ve taken to putting the protein shakes -this time a blend of banana, strawberry, and kiwi- in a bowl with a spoon. With the added oatmeal to thicken it, the shake is closer to the consistency of porridge.

They aren’t standing at attention when she comes in sight of the cell like they usually are. Instead, they are still tucked against the far wall like she had seen on the video feed. Batya - no Bucky, enough people have tried to steal their names - is staring straight at her, but she can tell he isn’t seeing her. Steve seems to be in an equal trance, his head leaned against Bucky’s shoulder, gaze fixed on some point in the nest of bedding surrounding them.

“I’ve brought breakfast. You need to eat, both of you.” She tries to keep her voice soft, but still commanding. Orders still work best in getting them to eat and can usually pull them from flashbacks.

Bucky blinks slowly, she can practically see his eyes come into focus. His head tilts, confused as he tries to pull his memories together, remember where he is. He taps at Steve’s shoulder, a rapid series of alternating fingers. She knows from watching the tapes that this is how they communicate with one another. They’ve tried deciphering the messages, but it has clearly been made up by the two of them. There are similarities to morse code, but the changing fingers and rapid movements is like nothing they have seen before. A language all their own.

Steve comes back to reality with a shake, a full body shudder like a dog after a bath. He blinks rapidly before bringing his focus to Natasha. They stand with some effort, leaning on one another for support. She knows that being confined to the cell hasn’t been good for either of them. She’ll have to convince Coulson, and most likely Clint, to let them out into the courtyards. They need to stretch their legs and they need sunlight.

Instead of sliding the tray through the slat as usual, she opens up the panel and steps into the cell. They look confused, but less wary than before. She walks over to the edge of the nest and places the tray down. They are still standing in the center of the nest, looking confused. Taking what could be a terrible gamble, she sits down a little ways from the tray, close enough to get a good look at them, but far enough away to not be threatening.

She gestures at the bowls, wishing now that she had brought a third so they could eat together. Next
time. “Please eat. I know you don’t feel well, but it will help.”

Bucky reaches out first, snatching the yellow bowl and pulling it to his chest like she’s going to demand it back. Steve is more hesitant, taking the pink bowl - with smiley faces. Where are they getting these things?

Bucky takes a few bites, and it must be one of his hungry moments, because he keeps eating until the bowl is empty. He deposits it on the tray before pulling his water bottle from somewhere in the blankets and drinking greedily, throat bobbing as he downs half the bottle in a few gulps.

Steve is less energetic. He takes a few big spoonfuls, swallowing like it is physically painful. He gives up by the time Bucky is finished, and places his barely touched bowl back on the tray. Bucky nudges him meaningfully, making Steve huff as he pulls his own bottle from the blankets and takes a few deep drags.

“Natalia,” Bucky says, breaking the silence, his voice is a harsh rasp, like he’s been smoking for years.

She’s so startled by the direct communication, that her first response is a questioning, “Yes?”

“Natasha,” he says, brow furrowed like he’s testing the name out.

Steve glances between them, looking pained. “We remembered something.”

We, she thinks, as if they are one person. “Would you like to tell me?” she asks. It’s a stupid question, they wouldn’t have brought it up if they didn’t want her to know, but she likes offering the option.

“We are,” Steve stops, eyes scrunching closed like he’s been struck.

Bucky reaches out with his flesh hand, tangling his fingers with Steve’s metal ones.

She never realized how awkward it must be with both of them having their left arm metal. With them side by side like this it means one of them is always in contact with the metal, never the true comfort of skin on skin. She has to bite back a scowl.

“We are not the only,” Bucky finally says, jaw twitching.

“Only what?”

Steve lets out a harsh breath, his arm giving a whine of charging servos, but he doesn’t tighten his grip on Bucky. “Soldaty,” he whispers, “we are not the only.”

Natasha feels her world shift. Always, she thinks, always expect the worst. All she can think to say is a concise, “Shit.”

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“There are more super soldiers? Where the fuck are they getting the serum? We’ve been working from the notes for Project Rebirth for years and have never gotten so close?” Agent Fury snarls. He had returned to base when the Director left, and Coulson had immediately brought him in on the new information.

“Well, actually,” Coulson interrupts the rant, looking as unruffled as ever. “After further questioning them, it seems the serum was actually acquired from Mr. Stark.”
Fury grimaces, “We knew it had been an assassination, but it was never proven who, so they admitted it then. The Winter Soldier… Soldiers killed Howard Stark.”

Natasha steps in, “Their memories are still haphazard at best, and they still don’t like to talk, but their description matches. They took a briefcase from the car and gave it their Handler at the time. A Soviet agent tied to Hydra and Red Room. The serum in the case was used on 5 soldiers hand picked from the military for the job. The Soldaty helped train them, but were pulled from the training process before the soldiers were ever sent on a mission. They don’t know what happened after that.”

“Well we definitely hadn’t had 5 Super Soldiers running around. Maybe the serum killed them,” Clint pipes up.

Coulson shakes his head. “Unlikely. While the serum may not have been a match for what Steve has, I imagine Howard’s version wouldn’t have killed the subjects. It’s more likely that they are standing down until the armistice is done.”

Fury curses colorfully. “Just what we fucking need. They wait until we sign the treaty and once we’ve grown complacent during the stand down, they strike.”

“Armistice?” Clint asks, looking confused.

Natasha sighs. “You work for a spy organization, don’t you ever read a newspaper.”

Clint scowls. “I don’t read the newspaper because I work for a spy organization.”

Natasha has to concede the point. “You know about the so called ‘Cold War’ that’s been going on.”

Clint arches a brow, a look that clearly says, ‘duh’.

“Well they’ve been in discussions of a stand down for awhile now, but it’s looking like the treaty will actually be signed within the next couple of months. Both nations are being careful.”

“Which means that we can’t act.” Coulson says.

“Any action that can be linked back to the American government would be an act of war and ruin years worth of peace talks. There isn’t shit we can do until the treaty is signed,” Fury agrees with a scowl.

“Couldn’t we go in covert, you know James Bond style. We will deny your existence sort of thing?”

“Except you are very obviously American, and only the Soldaty know the location of the Hydra base. We’d have to take them with us.” Even as Natasha says it, she knows it is a terrible plan. It is everything the Soldaty can do to even function day to day. Taking them on a covert mission to find Super Soldiers in a base they may or may not be remembering correctly, it’s suicide.

“Yes that’s an excellent plan,” Fury drawls, “let’s send two mentally unstable assassins and Shield’s most ragtag agent’s into the heart of the Soviet Union and hope they don’t start a war.”

“We might need a better plan, but Nick,” Coulson starts, drawing his attention, “waiting until they make their move isn’t the best idea either.”

Fury sighs, running his hand over his face. “I’ll speak with the Director. You three need to get as much information out our Winter Amnesiacs that you can. Dismissed.”

***
Getting the Soldaty outside takes less effort than Natasha expects. Fury shuts down the central courtyard, barring all but one of the exit doors. The Soldaty, themselves, are the most trouble. They don’t fight, but Natasha knows that if she had not ordered them, they never would have left the safety of the cell. To them, every time they leave, is just another chance to be mind-wiped or put back in cryo.

She assures them that they are only going outside for a chance to stretch their legs, but they do not seem to believe her, shooting worried glances back and forth as she leads them up the steps and out the door to the courtyard.

They both hiss the moment they step outside, blinking rapidly against what is actually a pretty cloudy day. “Sorry,” she fishes two pair of sunglasses from her kit and hands them over.

They both relax significantly under the protection of the dark, Shield-issue, shades. Under the right light, she’d almost say Steve was smiling. “Have your eye’s been bothering you this whole time?” She knew about the vision problems, which had finally cleared up, but with the glasses in places she notices a slackness to their jaws that wasn’t there before.

They hesitate, that point between honesty and avoiding punishment that Natasha has walked many times herself. Finally, Bucky gives a stiff nod, Steve follows a moment after.

“You can keep the glasses then, even inside. I need you to tell be if there are other problems like this. You won’t be punished, I just need to know.”

“W..W..We are operating at acceptable efficiency,” Steve states.

Natasha wants to scoff that they are not operating anywhere close, but holds her tongue. “Go walk around, enjoy the outside, stretch your legs. Coulson, Clint, and I will observe from here.”

They share another of those looks, like they can read each other’s mind with a glance, before heading off down the path. They walk at a pretty fast clip, long legs eating up the distance. She can’t tell if they are trying to appease her with the speed or if they just want to get the most out of their venture.

She watches them closely, they could certainly escape out of one of the barred doors, they haven’t equipped them to handle the full force of their metal arms, but she doesn’t think they’ll run. It’s been so long since they’ve experienced freedom, she doubts they would even know what to do with it. Both live in constant fear for the other. Hydra had been lucky when they caught them together and clever for keeping them that way. They might give each other something to live for, but they are each other’s chains. Alone, perhaps they would have risked it, but together that stubbornness they were always known for has been tempered with fear. Not for the first time, she curses Hydra and Red Room.

After they have been walking for a half hour, she walks over to join their circuit. Clint follows, trailing far enough behind to get a good view of everything, ever the sniper. The Soldaty freeze at the sight of her, falling to attention, but she waves them off. “I just want to walk,” she explains.

They dart a glance at Clint, but Steve gives a shaky nod and they return to their route. While Natasha contemplates the best way to ask about the other Soldiers, Bucky stops and gives Clint a second look. “You had a bow and arrow?”

“Yeah,” Clint chuckles, rubbing the back of his head like an embarrassed schoolboy. “Sorry about that.” Once Natasha had knocked out Steve, Bucky had bolted over the roof intent on vengeance. Without Bucky laying down suppressive fire it had been easy for Clint to shoot him with one of
Stark’s electric arrows.

Steve gives them both a curious look, but Bucky actually offers a hint of a smile. “Good shot.”

“Thanks man,” Clint beams. “You weren’t too bad yourself.” He hesitates, worrying at his bottom lip. “How about the other soldiers, are they as good?”

The Soldaty freeze.

Natasha cuts in, “You know that we are a part of Shield, not Hydra. We just want to assess the threat. That’s why you told us about them in the first place, right? You thought it was information we needed.”

“They’re good,” Steve murmurs.

“Dangerous,” Bucky adds.

“Could you bring us to their last known location?”

Steve clenches his teeth, the muscles of his jaw jumping. “Yes. Siberia.”

Natasha reaches out, touching the skin of his bare arm. The muscles twitch beneath her fingers, but he doesn’t pull away. “Thank you.”

Steve looks at her with wide, sad eyes. “I’m sorry I tried to kill you.”
Soldaty and Other walk side by side through the courtyard. This is the fourteenth time they have been allowed outside, two weeks worth of walks in the sunshine. It’s strange, enjoying the fresh air without a mission. They have no weapons. There is no weight of their gear pressing into their shoulders. He plucks at the sleeve of his green t-shirt. The cotton is light and flimsy, it would be useless in a fight, but he finds comfort in it all the same.

“They want us on the mission to Siberia,” Other says, jolting him out of his thoughts.

Soldaty looks back, but their handlers are giving them space. “There was always going to be another mission.”

“I’d hoped,” Other sighs, “stupid.”

Soldaty reaches out, grabbing his shoulder just above the metal arm. “Maybe… Maybe it will be better. No Chair, no Burning.”

“Handler wants us to kill them,” Other argues, but there is a look of hope in his eyes.

“Natasha.”

“Handler,” Other corrects, but sounds less sure.

“Will we do it? Follow their orders?” It’s blasphemy to ask. They’ve never questioned orders so blatantly, not since… He has a flash of memory, a bloody tray of medical tools, the open components of a metal arm. He clenches his hand until his nails draw blood, the pain helps bring him back to the present.

“I don’t know.”

***

They are given lunch when they get back from their walk. The handlers have been changing out the rations, but whatever they are doing has not brought back the debilitating pain of before.

Soldaty takes one of the colorful bowls that have become common for meals. It’s scrambled eggs and cheese with a side of oatmeal and maple syrup. The syrup is the sweetest thing he’s ever had, but somehow it brings up a memory of a small apartment and a taste of bitter smoke on his tongue.

Other takes one bite and says frankly, “Brooklyn.”

Steve hums in agreement, sounds about right.

“Well this is different, two world class assassins dressed like fashion rejects eating out of Hello Kitty bowls. Shield’s even weirder than I thought.”

Soldaty turns toward the new voice. There is a boy standing in front of the cell. He’s dressed in a MIT hoodie that looks about three sizes too big. His shoulders are hunched protectively, but his hands are shoved into his front pocket sullenly.
The older woman from before, Carter, is with him, standing a step behind. “Tony,” she warns.

“Yeah, yeah,” he waves her off. “So we - and when I say we I mean me - found a mountain in Siberia with some lovely underground real estate. I’m all for going in with a nice bomb and being done with the thing, but international incident, blah, blah, blah.” He pulls a photo from his pocket and tosses it through the slat.

Other steps up to grab the picture. He looks it over before passing it. Soldaty recognizes it instantly. The large steel doors still haunt his dreams.

“So,” the boy keeps talking, “the powers that be want to put this to rest before Mother Russia decides to unleash the kraken. As it were. But see, we got a bit of a snag. You two crazies are the only ones that know what’s beyond those doors and judging by the electronics, I’m gonna have to go with you.”

Carter coughs. “Tony! We talked about this.”

“No, no,” the boy, Tony, interrupts. “You talked at me about this. I never agreed. They killed my parents to create these ‘soldiers’. I’m seeing it to the end.”

“Tony, they didn’t know. They never would have hurt Howard or Mary.”

“Yeah, except they did. They snapped their necks, but I’ll deal with that later,” his face goes flat and fierce. “If you want my help with this Auntie, I’m going.”

Soldaty steps closer to get a better look at the boy. The wild hair, the bright eyes. He remembers a familiar voice: ‘it’s called vibranium. Rarest metal on Earth.’ The sound of gunshots on metal. “I’m sorry.”

Tony grits his teeth. “Do you even know why you’re sorry?”

Soldaty doesn’t respond, he can’t.

Tony shakes his head, looking disgusted. “He looked for you, you know. Always said you couldn’t have died in the fall. I wish he’d been wrong.”

***

The next day Natasha and Clint come to get them, but instead of their usual route, they go to a conference room on one of the upper floors. Coulson, Tony, Carter, and a man with an eye-patch are already waiting inside.

“I would just like to start this by saying this is a stupid fucking plan,” Eyepatch comments, after Soldaty and Other have taken a seat.

“Noted, Agent,” the woman sighs. “Unfortunately, our time of waiting has ended.” She gestures, “Tony.”

“Right,” Tony throws down a series of satellite images, the glossy photos spreading across the table. “So last week a shipment from Stark Industries went missing from Moldova. I don’t deal with the business side of things, so I didn’t look into it, that’s more Obie’s speed, but then this happened.” He pulls one of the images to the top. It shows an armoured truck with soldiers moving large crates into the base. Another image shows a close up of the crates and the Stark Industries logo. “Those crates contain a new explosive compound we’ve been working on. More bang for your buck if you will, and hard to track. Also a collection of high-powered assault rifles and a few new sniper rifle designs.
It’s an arsenal. As far as I can tell, they just started gathering weapons like this.”

“Which means they are planning an attack,” Carter interrupts, “which means we need to act fast.” She turns to better face them. “Our best chance of getting in and out quickly is a small, covert unit, that knows the area.”

“Director,” Eyepatch starts.

“I know how you feel about this Agent Fury, but I’ve made my decision.” A look of fierce determination settles over her face, making Soldaty think of a younger woman - hair fire red, a smoking gun in steady hands. “Agent Coulson will lead a team made of Agent Barton, Agent Romanoff,” she grits her teeth, “Tony and the Soldiers.”

Even Coulson looks surprised. “Mr. Stark and the Soldiers?”

“While there may be others that can handle the weapons, Tony knows them the best,” she gives him a searching look, “and I understand the need to see things to the end. As for the Soldiers.” She gives Soldaty a smile, “I trust them, and this may actually be good for them. It's time.”

Coulson considers her words before giving a nod of agreement. “Alright. Looks like I have some work to do.”

“Thank you Agent.”

***

A mission. It’s been months now. Months without pain, without the Chair, without the Burning, and now they have a mission. He knows that this is different, he can feel it, but it doesn’t stop him from feeling nervous.

Other reaches out and takes his hand, metal to skin. Soldaty takes comfort in the touch, and allows himself to look around the room they have been brought to. It resembles any number of ready rooms they have been in before, the walls lined with equipment.

“You don’t have to do this,” Natasha says, from her point behind them. “You do have a choice and you will not be punished if you do not comply.”

Soldaty does not know if she is telling the truth. He thinks, perhaps, that she is, but Tony’s words ring in his ears. They need to finish this. “We will complete the mission.”

She offers a pained smile, “Yeah, I thought you might say that. Let’s get you two geared up.” She gestures at the walls, “Choose what you want.”

“You want us to pick?” Other asks, giving her a look that would have gotten them both punished with any previous handler.

She shrugs, “go for it.”

They’ve never picked out their own gear before, it’s strange to have their own choice. It’s difficult to push down the nagging thought that he will make the wrong choice, but Soldaty moves to the collection of knives on one wall. They come in a series of shapes and sizes, all built for a variety of uses. He takes a whole kit of throwing knives and two larger knives for close quarters. He’s never been fond of guns, but he grabs two M-9s. He should probably grab an assault rifle as well, but he avoids them
For clothing they are fitted with arctic gear, white and grey cargo pants and heavy snow jackets. The pants are comfortable, but he pauses over the tac vest. It’s a mirror to the vests they are used to, sturdy fabric, concealing a set of heavy plates. Pulling on the vest, feeling the weight tugging at his shoulders, brings back memories he does not care to relive. He shudders, but forces himself to strap the vest into place.

Other has an equal look of uncertainty on his face as he pulls the straps tight. A shadow falls over his eyes when it is secure.

Soldaty reaches out, grabbing his attention. He taps along the bare stretch of his neck. Stay with me.

“Sorry,” Other shakes his head, placing his hand over Soldaty’s. He taps against his knuckles, a familiar pattern. Always.

The rest of their prep goes smoothly. The movements are familiar even after such a long break. Preparing for a mission, it’s like breathing. They turn to Natasha as one. “Ready to comply.”

She winces. “I knew this was a bad idea. Come on then, we’ll have our brief on the plane.”

They follow a step behind her to the hanger. The plane is like nothing they have ever seen. It’s something like a cargo plane, but there are two rotor blades built into the wings. The sleek, dark design makes it look like the plane equivalent of a sports car.

“Like it? Built it myself. One of a kind. This design doesn’t officially exist anywhere, so it can’t be traced back to us.” Tony Stark appears from the side of the plane. He’s dressed in a variation of the arctic gear, his vest looking lighter, with smaller interlocking plates.

“Has it been tested, Mr. Stark?” Coulson asks, walking up behind them, Clint at his side.

Tony shrugs, grinning wildly. “Eh. It’s fine.”

Soldaty has a spark of memory. The man from the car, much younger, giving him a manic grin. For some reason, he trusts that grin. He steps forward, boarding the plane without hesitation or waiting for orders.

“See, we’re all good,” he hears Tony say.

They gather at the front of the plane, each taking a seat in the series of chairs making up the cockpit. Tony takes the driver’s seat with Natasha as copilot. Soldaty and other takes the chairs behind them, with Coulson and Clint in the last two.

Tony starts up the plane with a series of buttons that seems way too easy. Soldaty watches him with narrow eyes. He’s flown a plane a few times, but he remembers the process being more complicated, though he is unsure if this is due to the passing of time or the plane itself.

In moments, the plane is down the blacktop and off the ground with a roar. Tony presses another button and both his and Natasha’s chairs turn around while Other and Soldaty’s chairs click into the side wall, a configuration that allows them all to face one another.

“Alright,” Coulson starts, seemingly unconcerned with the moving chairs. “We’ve been keeping a constant eye on the base with satellite. We know the majority of the base is underground, but whatever material it is made of blocks infrared. Judging by the coming and going of the soldiers and the supplies, it appears to be a small operation. We estimate the total combatants to be between 30-40. Does this sound accurate?”
It takes Soldaty an embarrassing time to realize that he is the one being addressed. “Our last mission was out of the Siberia base. That seems accurate to what we saw before deployment.” He looks to Other for agreement.

“Yes. The purpose of the base was as the home location and training center of the Winter Soldiers. When we brought back the serum, the 5 chosen soldiers were converted in the medical ward. The base is three floors. The top floor: hanger, supply storage. The second floor: medical ward, labs. Third floor: training, barracks,” Other expands.

“Great,” Clint huffs, but looks less concerned than he sounds. “So the place we’re gonna find these guys is the bottom floor I’m guessing.”

“Why do we need to go all the way to the bottom floor?” Tony scoffs. “The explosives are all on the top floor with the supplies. Let me rig those up, and we’ll just drop the whole mountain on them. Easy peasy.”

Coulson’s lips twitch in a hint of a smile, “You know Mr. Stark, that is an excellent plan.”

“Yeah well, that’s why I’m the genius, and it’s Tony, G-man.”

Coulson ignores him. “We still have to confirm that the soldiers are on base before we blow it. So we need to get you to a computer terminal before we level the base.”

Tony shrugs. “Easy enough. They should have all the base information on a private server. It might be difficult for mere mortals, but I got it.”

“Tell me Tony,” Natasha drawls, “can you read Cyrillic?”

Tony winces, “Ahh. No...not exactly.”

Clint barks out a laugh.

Coulson shoots them a glare. “Natasha, go with Stark, you’ll translate. Clint I want you pulling guard at the entrance with me. Soldiers, you’ll be guarding Natasha and Stark, clearing the way.”

“Sounds simple,” Natasha comments, looking sceptical.

“Sometimes that’s the best. Be ready to adapt as needed. I trust all of you to make the best decision for the mission. As Clint and I will be guarding the exit, Natasha you’ll take the lead once inside.” Coulson gives them a pointed look.

“Right, go team,” Tony claps his hands. “Well the fasten seat belt sign has now been turned off, so your captain’s gonna stretch his legs.” He unclips his harness and steps past them without even a backwards glance at the controls.

Soldaty gives them a worried look, but doesn’t really understand the panels. No one else looks concerned, however, so he lets it go. Natasha unclips and follows after him, probably to better explore the plane. Clint, quickly moves up to steal her chair, but is careful not to touch anything. Coulson seems content with his placement, and moves to look through a series of files he brought with him.

Soldaty hesitates, but he’s never liked being stuck in one place. He heads to the back of the plane, Other right behind him.

Natasha is exploring a series of monitors set into the far wall of the plane. She glances up at them as
they enter, but her attention is quickly dragged back to the screens.

Soldaty decides to risk exploring, and tries one of the two doors separating the front and back halves of the plane. Tony is sitting at a work desk, messing with the pile of electronics spread before him. He looks up at them with a scowl. “Well if you came to snap my neck too, you’re going to have a hell of a time piloting this plane.”

Soldaty takes a step back, knocking into Other. “I wouldn’t.”


“We…” Soldaty stutters.

Tony scowls and flings the screwdriver at them. He has a surprisingly good throw, the tool ebbing itself into the wall behind them. “Get out of my fucking face.”

Soldaty lurches back, falling further into Other, who grabs him around the shoulders and helps to pull him out the door. He knows Natasha must have heard, must be watching, but he does not look at her. He stumbles to the other door and hurries through it, Other hot on his heels.

This door leads to the cargo hold. There are boxes stacked against the netted walls. It looks like military equipment, but they are unmarked. Soldaty goes to a portion of empty wall and leans against it. For once, he misses the cool of the concrete on his bare skin. In his gear, there is too much separating him from the comforting coolness.

He falls into a crouch, going as small as he can, tucking his face against his knees. His eyes hurt, even with his new goggles, they burn.

Other is at his side, arm around his shoulders and pulling him into his side. “Stop, stop,” he whispers, tugging at Soldatyi’s hands.

He’d been clawing at his face, he hadn’t even noticed. “They want us to kill the other soldiers,” he choke. His voice sounds strange, strained like it had when he first started speaking again.


“Is it?” Soldaty looks up at him, brow furrowed. “I think once. Once we might have been better.”

“Maybe,” Other looks away, gaze focused on the floor of the plane. “I think I remember a time before the Chair, but even then there was a rifle in my hand. A death in my scope.”

“I remember a shield,” Soldaty speaks slowly, measuring his words. He reaches out to touch the edge of the red star set into his arm. There a memory, an accented voice, not a soldier, but a good man. “I don’t want to kill the soldiers.”

“What if we have to?”

“Then we...I’ll do it on my own terms.” His next words choke him, the heat behind his eyes becomes an inferno. “Are you with me?”

Other’s lifts his head to look at him, pulling his goggles back at the same time. His eyes are a deep, fierce blue. “Of course I’m with you.”
Til the end of the line.
A Chance

Chapter Twenty-Eight: A Chance

Stark puts them down on the mountain above the base. Any other plane would have been detected, but Natasha does not doubt him when he says they won’t be caught. They deplane into the freezing bite of Siberia’s winter. Despite being wrapped in the best arctic gear Shield can provide, even she feels the cold to her bones.

They move quickly, a silent line moving down the mountain. Tony is kept safely in the middle of the line, and he does well keeping up with them. Natasha leads them down to the entrance, a massive steel door set into the side of the mountain. There is an armored humvee hidden beneath an outcrop, but otherwise the entrance is empty.

She holds a palm up, halting the line, and moves forward alone. She makes her way quickly to the door, taking cover while she observes the area from her new vantage point. There is no movement along the path, so she gestures with two fingers.

Tony and Bucky hurry over, the rest standing guard. “Is this a little too quiet?” Tony asks when he gets to her side.

“Just open the door,” Natasha tells him, but she’s worried as well.

“Yeah, yeah,” he huffs, and moves to the control panel. It’s a hand scanner and keypad, but he pulls off the casing with a screwdriver. Natasha only spares him a glance as he hooks up some handheld device to the system, before looking back out to the mountain landscape.

There is a series of beeps and then the doors gives a wheezing growl, opening outward.

“See easy,” Tony smirks.

The entranceway is suspiciously empty, there should be guards stationed at the doors. There are only a few wavering lights on, the rest of the floor shrouded in shadow. “This isn’t right,” Bucky whispers, voice hoarse.

“No it’s not,” Natasha agrees, but she gestures the others forward all the same. Clint and Coulson take their guard at the door, one aimed out and one aimed in. While she moves further inward with Tony and the Soldaty.

They’ve hardly gone a few paces when she notices a dark streak on the floor. Steve kneels down and scratches at the stain. It flakes in his hands. “Blood.” A look around shows other such stains, each puddle large enough to represent a death. Something is definitely wrong.

“Quickly,” she orders, pulling Tony to her side. For once, he stays quiet. They move swiftly through the hanger to a large panel on the far wall. The Soldaty flank them, pulling guard as Tony enters into the system. He moves swiftly, only occasionally pointing to words for Natasha to translate. His innate understanding of systems transcending the language barrier. Natasha will never admit it, but she’s impressed.

Tony’s brow furrows when she reads a date off to him. “According to this, the last communication log was sent out two days ago.” He points out another few lines for her to translate. “This doesn’t make any sense. The system is reading 6 people on the top floor, that would be us. No one on the
second floor, and 5 people on the third. That’s it.”

“Are they the Winter Soldiers?”

Tony scrolls through a few more screens before nodding. “Yeah, it’s them, but why are they here alone?”

“I don’t think they were,” Steve says and flicks the light on the wall. The fluorescents come to life with a buzz.

“Holy shit,” Tony gasps, stepping back.

There are dead bodies lining the walls. Streaks of dried blood mark the floor from where they had been dragged. There are fifteen soldiers dead in the room, some look like were shot, but others have been mangled with knives and fists. It’s a massacre.

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” Tony says, voice shaking. “Look,” he points out the Stark Industry boxes the lights had also revealed. “I can get those explosives set up and we can get the hell out of here.”

Natasha nods in agreement. While these are certainly not her first dead bodies, something about the scene sets her teeth on edge.

“No,” Steve says, voice flat and firm. They all turn to him.

“What?” Natasha asks, confused.

“No,” he repeats, “we won’t just blow them up. We want to speak with them.”

“Speak with them, why?” Tony looks stunned.

“They deserve a chance. We got a chance. You said that we did not have to kill if we did not want to. Well we want to talk to them.”

Natasha knows this is a breakthrough. The first real sign of the person that had once been Captain America, but she desperately wishes his timing was better.

“You want to talk to these psychos?” Tony gestures around the room. “They slaughtered these people, and who knows how many more on the other floors.”

Bucky steps forward, placing a supportive hand on Steve’s shoulder. “If we could have, we would have killed them too. They were…” his brow scrunches, searching for the right words, “bad men.”

Tony’s expression does a complicated dance. “I can’t argue that one, but you said these were dangerous people. That’s why you told Shield in the first place.”

“So are we,” Bucky points out.

“You told me that all we do is follow orders. You are right, and we don’t want to just follow orders any more,” Steve says, and he looks so damn earnest.

“So you decide to start that right now, in this murder room?”

“They deserve a chance. You gave us a chance,” Steve argues.

“Let them go,” Natasha interrupts, before Tony can work himself into a full rant. She’s not sure if this is the best idea or the best time, but she, of all people, understands. She got a chance when no
person in their right mind would have given her one, and it allowed her to rescue them. She could at
least give them this. “Coulson and Clint will continue to pull guard in case someone is sent to
investigate the base. We’ll go down with you, Tony will need to work the locks.”

Tony scowls. “Do I have a choice in this madness?”

Natasha grins, “Of course.”

He sighs and turns back to the panel, typing in a series of numbers. The door to their right clicks as
the locks disengage. “Come on. Let’s get this death march over with.”

Steve reaches out, grasping Tony’s shoulder. “Thank you.”

Tony brushes his hand off with a shrug. “Yeah, don’t make me regret it.”
Bad Idea

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Bad Idea

Soldaty takes the lead down the stairs, left arm out to act as an impromptu shield. Other is at his back, his rifle poised over his head. They move quickly through the second floor, only noting the sprawl of bodies before Tony hacks the lock to the stairs.

The stairs leading down to the third level stink of dried blood, sweat, and urine. The scent sparks memory after memory of Soldaty’s murders. This is the scent of death, he thinks, and wonders if he is making the right decision.

Other, always so attuned, jabs him sharply in the shoulder.

He shakes off the doubt and moves quickly down the stairs, they can’t stay in the corridor. Even taking the high ground, it isn’t ideal. When he opens the stairwell door, it is to a sight that has haunted his dreams for months.

The floor is aged tile, slanted to the various inset drains. Right off the stairs, they are blocked by metal bars, but the door that had once guarded the barracks has been ripped off it’s hinges. It now lies in a crumbled heap.

He does not spot the Soldiers, but there are three more dead bodies. He can’t tell where one ends and the other begins, the soldiers had ripped them apart. There are streaks of dried blood leading to one of the grates, he can see the splatters of handprints trailing the floor.

“Deserve a chance, yeah,” Tony huffs, before Natasha shushes him.

Soldaty steps further into the room, Other steps up to his right side, rifle at the ready. He doesn’t have to look to read the tension gripping him.

There are no steps to announce him. One moment the room is empty, the next, there is a man standing before them. He is dressed in a familiar set of black tac gear. There is a large knife in his hand, still covered with gore.

“Soldat,” Soldaty greets.

The man snarls, revealing blood stained teeth. His pupils are expanded to the point his eyes appear black. The whites have become a riot of busted blood vessels.

The Russian comes with surprising ease to his tongue. “You can stand down now Soldat. Your mission is done.”

The man growls like a wild animal, hunching his back and hefting the knife. There is no recognition in his eyes.

“This might not be a time for talking. There’s something wrong with him,” Natasha says.

“It’s the serum. I don’t think it was right,” Tony whispers.

“Soldat, stand down,” he orders, hoping the tone will reach the man. It doesn’t.

The man hefts the knife, throwing it with practiced ease. Soldaty prepares to catch the knife with his
metal arm, but the trajectory is off. He isn’t the target. Thinking quickly, he leaps into the path. The knife sinks into his vest, but the plates stop it. He yanks it out and tosses it to the ground.

He glances back. Tony is staring at him, wide-eyed and stunned. He clearly hadn’t expected Soldaty to take the hit for him.

Other fires three rounds without hesitation, but the man is expecting them, he slides to his knees, taking a graze to the shoulder. The slick tile carries him straight to Soldaty, another blade already in hand.

Soldaty falls back, taking the hit on his left arm. The metal on metal screeches terribly with his turn. He takes a knee, falling into a vulnerable position. The Soldat grins, triumph as he brings the knife down, but a shot rings out. He falls.

Soldaty stands, shooting Other a thankful look.

“I know we wanted to give them the benefit of the doubt…” Tony starts, just as the sound of boots echo through the halls. They’re coming.

Soldaty pulls out his gun with his right hand and knife with the left. They were right, this was a bad idea. Two soldiers come from one hall and two from the opposite. Other raises his rifle, ready to shoot, but when they round the corner the soldiers are carrying riot shields.

“Get upstairs, go!” Soldaty shouts.

Natasha hesitates, torn, but she grabs Tony by the jacket and shoves him through the stair doors.

Soldaty feels some of his tension release at their exit. He wants to protect them and what a new feeling that is. He only has a moment to marvel at it, before a shield slams into his side. He punches with his metal arm, the servos whirring to full power, a chip cracks outward from his hit, but the shield holds.

The woman attacking him has the same wild-eyed look as the other man. She slams the shield into him, striking again and again, knocking him to the ground. He blocks with his left, knife up. It hits the shield, catching in the chip. The startled look on her face becomes permanent when he swings his gun around the shield and fires into her chest cavity. The spray of blood paints the inside of the shield. He’s protected from it, but still feels inexplicably ill.

Her partner comes after him with a vengeance, leaping over her body. He has a shield in one hand and a hatchet in the other. Soldaty grasps the shield from the woman’s slack hands and falls to his back, shield balanced on his hands and knees.

The man hits with a shuddering weight, but his blade slips in the gore on the inside of the shield as Soldaty kicks his legs out, sending the man flying.

He lands in a sprawl, shield lost, but hatchet held in a white-knuckle grip.

Soldaty shoots him. The bullet enters through the front of his skull, dropping him with a thud. He spins to check on Other.

Other is grabbing the top of the shield with his metal hand, yanking the soldier forward and slamming the thing onto the man’s boots hard enough to break his toes. The man gives a howl of pain and fury.

Other spins around the shield, knife at the ready, but the man has already let go and pulled out his
own knife. He jabs the blade into Other’s side just before he slams the blade through the solder’s carotid.

Soldaty rushes to his side, shoving the dead Soldat away to get a better look. The blade went in below the last rib and above the hip, angled straight. It probably didn’t get a kidney, but Soldaty suspects it scratched an intestine.


Soldaty is turning to check when Other’s eyes go wide. “Steve!” he shouts.

Then gunshots.
They burst onto the hanger floor. Tony stumbles over to the Stark industry boxes, already pulling his kit out of his pocket. “Give me five minutes,” he shouts, pulling down a case and clicking it open. The explosive compound, separated into small bricks, tumbles out with a pile of tangled wires.

“Ahh, maybe ten,” he shouts, pulling at the wires.

“Just don’t blow us up with the base.” Natasha puts Stark behind her and takes aim at the door, waiting.

She can hear the echo of gunshots from the lower floors, before it goes suddenly silent. She waits, finger on the trigger, ears straining to hear even the slightest movement on the stairs.

There is a creak.

She lines up her shot.

The sharp crack of gunfire fills the air, the moment before the bullet impacts her shoulder. What follows isn’t exactly pain, instead a numbness works outwards from her arm. The nerves go hot and cold, a confused burst of sensation.

She curses, leaping out of the way as another burst of gunfire tears through the door. She can’t spare a thought for the Soldaty, she lands hard, jolting her wound and sending a warm splash of blood down her side.

She pulls into a crouch, switching her gun hand and firing. The door slams open, the shots absorbed by a riot shield.

She’s too slow to dodge his next shot. It slashes through her side, sending more blood poring. She stumbles onto shaky legs, the blood loss is severe, she doesn’t have long before shock sets in.

Before the man can fire again, an arrow sings through the air, landing at his feet an instant before exploding. The blast sends him flying backwards into the wall, the concrete cracking under the force.

“Natasha,” Clint shouts, at her side an instant later.

She waves him off. “Stark, guard Stark.”

“Coulson’s on it,” Clint is pulling at his pack, yanking out a package and ripping it open with his teeth. “We gotta stop this bleeding.” He pulls the gauze free and slaps it over her side.

It sizzles on contact, sending spikes of pain radiating outwards. She glares.

“What?” he grins, pulling out another pack for her shoulder. “QuikClot, stings like a bitch, but it will save your life.”

She snatches the pack from his hand. “Take care of the Soldat.”

“I just blew…” Clint pauses when he hears the clatter of the shield falling away. “Shit,” he grabs up his bow, reaching back for an arrow in a smooth draw. He has to leap out of the way when the shield
is tossed his way, clattering to the ground with a racket.

Natasha watches as Clint launches a steel tipped arrow. It flies true, but the Soldat is in full armored gear, even his head is fully covered in helmet and mask, the arrow clatters to the ground, harmless.

Clint launches another arrow, this one exploding into a net that tangles around the soldier. He snarls beneath the mask. It barely slows him, he tears through the reinforced netting like ripping paper.

Natasha opens fire, emptying her clip into center mass, drawing his attention.

The soldier turns, gun focused on her. She sees her death in the reflection of his mask.

An explosion of rifle fire fills the air. The soldier screams, spinning around as the Soldatay march into the room. Bucky leads the charge, rifle tucked to his shoulder. There’s dried blood splattered across the white of his gear with an eerie collection of bloody handprints on his shoulder. Eyes narrow, jaw set, he looks pissed.

Steve is just behind him, gun at the ready, but his posture is off. He’s injured.

The Soldat barrels at them, head down like a charging bull. Bucky and Steve fire, but it does nothing to slow him down. He slams into into them, shoving them into the wall.

Steve screams, pain twisting his face, while Bucky shoves Soldat back. His rifle is lost, thrown from his hands and clattering down the stairs. He yanks a knife from his vest, stabbing wildly.

Natasha tries to follow their movements as Soldat and Bucky trade knife blows, but her vision has gone fuzzy around the edges. The blood loss is catching up with her.

Clint runs over, grabbing her around the waist and helping her to her feet. “Come on Nat, we need to go.” He pulls her over to the wall where Tony is setting the last of his bombs. Coulson stands over him protectively, eyes locked on the soldiers.

“Done. We just need to clear the area,” Tony says, appearing at their side.

In front of them, Bucky takes the soldier down with a punch of his metal arm, cracking the helmet.

The soldier yanks his helmet off, tossing it to the side. His face is a mess of dried and fresh blood. His nose is broken. He spits at Bucky, sending a spray of red.

It doesn’t distract him. Bucky lands another punch with his fist, and another and another, until the Soldat is a smear of blood and bone across the floor.

“Bucky! Bucky! Soldaty!” Coulson shouts.

He stops at last, turning to look at them. He bares no expression, eyes dark and uncomprehending. He doesn’t look human. He stands quickly, stepping over the body without so much as a backwards glance. Gore drips from his knuckles.

“Bucky?” Coulson tries again.

“Steve is hurt,” he says, expression still not changing, but there is that name. Not once, had they referred to each other by name. He turns and goes to collect Steve from where he had fallen.

He looks rough, there is blood pouring from his side, and bruises blossoming along his face. Bucky heaves him up, getting his shoulder under him.
Natasha looks over when Tony shifts at her side, there is a moment of uncertainty before his face clears. “Here, I’ll help,” he offers, going over and slipping under Steve’s other arm. The height disparity makes him practically useless, but Natasha understands his meaning.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” Clint says, tightening his grip to better take Natasha’s own weight. She’s too injured to argue.

Together, they make their slow, wounded, trudge back to the plane. Tony waits until they back in the air before he flicks the switch, collapsing the base in a roar of flames.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Epilogue

It smells of stale bleach and dust. Steve runs his fingers along the rusted metal of the base, trailing along the rails, bumping across imbedded wires. “It’s just a chair,” he says, but his heart is pounding.

“It’s just a chair,” he repeats, tugging a leather book from his pocket. It had been a gift from Peggy. Peggy who he finally remembers. He thinks he might have loved her once, but now it is painful even to look at her. A constant reminder of a life lost. Still, he is grateful for the book.

He opens it to an empty page. The book is over half full now, mostly filled with doodles and the occasional writing when the nightmares become too much. It helps to draw things out, helps to hold on to the good memories and deal with the bad, or at least that’s what Coulson says. He isn’t so sure, but he likes drawing and that’s good enough for him.

He pulls out a pencil and starts to sketch. He draws out every detail, every rusted pipe and faded stain, the wires and that accursed helmet. When he is done, the drawing is a perfect replica of the chair before him. He resists the urge to tear the paper out and set it on fire. He tries again, sighing heavily, “It’s just a chair.”

A hand suddenly covers his own, warm and comforting, obscuring the image. Steve leans into Bucky’s familiar weight. A message taps across his knuckles. Til the end of the line.

“Bucky,” Steve whispers.

“Such a simple thing isn’t it? Just some metal and wires,” Bucky links their fingers together. “It scares me,” he admits.

“Do you ever wish you didn’t remember?” Steve can’t help but ask, turning to face him.

Bucky keeps his gaze on the chair. “Sometimes, but it doesn’t change what happened. Doesn’t bring back the people we killed.”

“So many deaths,” Steve closes his eyes against the onslaught of memories. “All I ever wanted was to protect people.”

Bucky tightens his grip, drawing Steve’s attention back. “Do you ever regret jumping after me?”

Steve’s memories are still full of holes, blanks that will probably never be filled, but he remembers his desperation. His fear, not for himself, but for Bucky. He had dived from the train without hesitation, and 50 years of torture had followed. “Buck,” he pulls him into a hug, pressing his face to his collar. “Don’t be an idiot.”

“Ahem.”

Steve steps back to find Natasha and Tony standing in the doorway.

“Ready to burn it to the ground?” Tony asks, smirking widely.
“Ready?” Natasha asks and Steve knows she asking more than that.

Steve looks over at the chair. A broken tool that will never hurt anyone ever again. He looks at his drawing, the care he put into each detail. He rips the page out of the book and places it on the worn seat of the chair. “Yes.”

“Tony drive you crazy yet, Kotenok?” Bucky asks, breaking the tension. He strides over to them, a true smile on his face.

“Not yet,” Natasha answers over Tony’s sputters.

When they are far enough from the base, Tony holds out his hand to Steve. There is a small remote in his palm. “Want to do the honors?”

Steve takes the remote and turns to Bucky. Hand over hand, together, another wound is healed.

Chapter End Notes

So this has been a wild adventure. Those that have commented have noticed how quickly this was posted and updated. That isn't my usual speed, but this story is for the 2017 Stucky Big Bang and the rules were that we had to post the whole thing in 4 days. I hope you've enjoyed the ride. This was a hell of a story to write and it came out even more emotional than I intended.

For some of you this ending might be a disappointment. I get it, it isn't a super happy, off into the sunset kind of ending, but this was never going to be that kind of story. Steve and Bucky are completely different people at the end of this tale, but they are healing and they have friends that are helping them. Considering where they started, I think we can all agree that things are looking up for the Soldaty.

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