despite the threatening sky and shuddering earth (they remained)

by praximeter (Zimario)

Summary

“They really didn’t want the mask to come off.” Hill thumbed through the scans, and pulled out a film that she then handed over to Sam, face mostly expressionless but for the flat line of her pursed lips.

Sam accepted the film and held it up to the light, angling so both he and Steve could see it, squinting at the outline of the Winter Soldier’s skull, and the blips of unnatural white that showed up, God, in his brain, not to mention about half his teeth, plus the mask, with its thin protrusions—

“Those are pins,” Steve realized. He looked over at Hill. “The mask—it’s nailed to his face.”

Hill’s face was as unmoved as ever. “Like I said. They really didn’t want it coming off.”
Welcome to what I've been calling "maskfic" on Tumblr!

Please heed the warnings on this. Expect non-graphic descriptions of past torture, non-consensual body modification, and general body horror. What is done to Bucky in this 'verse is more extensive than in canon; all expected canon trauma triggers still apply. Bucky will continue to experience pain, suffering, etc., during this fic. The premise is that Hydra installed the mask on Bucky in a permanent fashion, and therefore it did not come off during the freeway fight scene in TWS. That means that Steve did not realize the Winter Soldier's identity.

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Art by the wonderfully talented quietnight!
Joyful friends, mostly loyal, they hadn't abandoned their protector before the gathering storm; and despite the threatening sky, despite the shuddering earth, they remained, smiling, considerate, and as devoted to misfortune as they had been to prosperity.” Alexander Dumas

“Benzos, methamphetamine—” Hill flipped the page, “—Haloperidol, that’s an antipsychotic, and, yikes, we’ve got an anti-androgen here, too.”

“A what?” Sam leaned over her shoulder. She pointed at the readout, and Sam carefully pronounced: “Cyproterone acetate. The hell is that?”

“Well, it’s as much proof as we’re gonna get that he wasn’t exactly a volunteer.” Hill’s mouth twisted. “He’s chemically castrated.”
Sam hissed in a breath through his teeth and rocked backwards on his heels. “Jesus.”

“All those other drugs, they’re…?” Steve scrubbed at his face. He’d showered twice since the Triskelion, since the helicarriers, but his skin still felt gritty, like the blood and dirt and smoke still clung to him, invisibly, permanently. “What do they do?”

“Well, they should be killing him,” said Hill bluntly. “According to the lab, anyway. They’re all in concentrations about 15 times what’s recommended. And, yeah, the readouts from his scans are showing at least three subdermal devices that could be delivering the drug cocktails directly into his bloodstream.” She flipped another page. “And, this is exciting, we should be glad Stark suggested the Faraday cage. The mask is rigged to blow.”

“Don’t tell Stark you said that,” Natasha commented blandly, her voice tinny. On the video-screen, she was examining her nails. Steve thought he knew her well enough now to see that she was, as ever, performing.

“Oh, I’ll erase it from the surveillance.” Hill’s tone was light.

“Rigged to blow,” Steve repeated flatly, his gaze pulling to the one-way glass, where the subject of this awful conversation still remained in his corner, in the same pose as yesterday. He probably hadn’t moved once. “If it’s tampered with, or...?”

Hill hummed in assent while Sam shook his head. “He’s wired with explosives? That is fucked. Who does that? What the fuck?”

“They really didn’t want the mask to come off.” Hill thumbed through the scans, and pulled out a film that she then handed over to Sam, face mostly expressionless but for the flat line of her pursed lips.

Sam accepted the film and held it up to the light, angling so both he and Steve could see it, squinting at the outline of the Winter Soldier’s skull, and the blips of unnatural white that showed up, God, in his brain, not to mention about half his teeth, plus the mask, with its thin protrusions—

“Those are pins,” Steve realized. He looked over at Hill. “The mask—it’s nailed to his face.”

Hill’s face was as unmoved as ever. “Like I said. They really didn’t want it coming off.”

The thing about the Winter Soldier, Steve had realized later, the thing that made fighting him so unsettling, was that he didn’t make a sound. In the heat of battle, as it took Steve everything he had to avoid the fast, precise strikes and vicious slashes of his knife, he could hear his percussive breathing through the mask, the sounds of his bodily exertion paired with the whirring and spinning of the mechanical arm, but that was it.
No sound when Steve landed a hit, other than the thump of his fist on his body; no gasps, grimaces or explosive grunts; nothing. Even the moment Steve had gotten him with a solid blow with the shield that had sent him sprawling, the only sound had been the scrape and spark of the arm against the asphalt and the thud and slide of his mass hitting the ground.

Later, when Natasha was explaining (‘he’s a ghost story’), Steve asked: “but he is—human?”

A lifted brow. “As much as you are.”

“What, he’s a super soldier too?” Sam had asked.

“It’s one theory.” Natasha’s face was paler than usual, the lines and planes she normally molded into softness made hard and sharp by the pain of her shoulder. “It makes sense. Especially if the “Winter Soldier” is a name, and not a title.”

“Like James Bond,” Sam offered. Steve blinked. “You know, that’s the reason there’s been so many different Bonds. ‘James Bond, 007,’ it’s a title, not a name.” He waited for Steve to get it; Steve didn’t get it.

“Jesus, Cap, add Bond to the list.”

He hadn’t made a sound on the helicarrier either; he’d just been waiting.

“I won’t hold back,” Steve had told him. He’d felt compelled to warn the guy, because whoever, or whatever he was, something about this silent, single-purpose creature struck a discordant tone in Steve’s brain, a niggling sense of we are missing a part of this story.

Perhaps it was his silence. Perhaps it was the way his eyes tracked Steve, the way they had on the freeway, the way they did the moment Steve appeared on that catwalk, the odd lack of malice in his focused gaze, that tinge of curiosity mixed with fear and—

(“I dunno, Steve, you do remember he kicked me off a helicarrier, right? That don’t seem a little malicious to you?” Sam had asked later, incredulous. “C’mon, man.”)

Still, it had been enough to make Steve doubt. He’d fought Rumlow, and Rollins, and the rest of those two-faced traitors who’d made up his team over the past months, he’d heard the slick, smarmy “it’s not personal” from a guy who was a true believer, even if the only thing he believed in was violence and power—but this guy? This ‘Winter Soldier?’ It wasn’t the same.
Steve was convinced he wasn’t the same.

In the end, hauling an unconscious man as heavy as himself (or heavier, as it would later turn out) from the wreckage of the helicarrier, though Steve was bruised and weary and bleeding and tired, hadn’t been a difficult decision.

Steve had just done it.

Later, the justifications came, and they fit neatly into a set of rational arguments that Steve had only vaguely considered when he’d saved the Soldier from the helicarrier.

“We can’t give him to anyone,” Hill had said once their small team had regrouped in the underground bunker that had been their temporary headquarters, and the only place Steve had thought might be secure enough to hold their prisoner. “We don’t know who to trust, not until we go through the data dump with a fine-toothed comb. And if they do get him, the CIA or FBI or Homeland, there’s too high a risk he’ll be made into a patsy. He’s got intel we need.”

“He ain’t very talkative though, is he?” Sam had observed sardonically, scratching at his stubble. “And I gotta say, I’m not down for any Guantánamo shit.”

“I doubt that will be necessary,” Hill had replied to him, crossing her arms. “There are better ways.”

“If he has been HYDRA for fifty years,” Steve had said, and didn’t that thought just eat him alive,
“then he knows who gave his orders, who he killed, where their bases are.”

“We think he’s the one who pulled the trigger on your parents,” Steve had told Tony bluntly. “I want to find out who told him where to point his gun, and end them.”

It hadn’t taken long for JARVIS to reach out, to arrange the quinjet and the drugs, to give them access to a part of the tower that had been Tony and Bruce’s joint project, a panic room, a prison cell, that was meant to withstand the Hulk.

Of course, they hadn’t heard from Tony, not yet. “He’s on a bender,” Natasha had told him matter-of-factly, over the phone, once they’d arrived in New York. She’d remained in DC, as the improbable new face of government transparency. “I wouldn’t expect to see him for a while.”

Sam stood shoulder to shoulder with Steve, looking through the one-way glass at the figure that was huddled in the corner of the sterile, empty cell.

The Winter Soldier was inside. With his tactical gear removed, barefoot and dressed in overlarge scrubs, both arms locked inside magnetic cuffs in what Hill had assured Sam “was not a stress position, though it may be uncomfortable,” he looked almost like the former captive Steve suspected him to be, and not a legendary wetwork operative.

The mask was still on. They still hadn’t been able to figure out out to remove it, not in the limited
time provided by the sedation. He’d burned through the stuff faster than even Steve.

“You sure about this, Cap?” Sam nudged his elbow into Steve’s side. “This could go belly-up pretty quick.”

“Hill wants to observe,” Steve replied. He rubbed at his jaw. “And even if he’s restrained, I don’t want anybody else in there. Certainly not her.” His lips twitched. “She’s too important.”

“Yeah, yeah, Mr. American Icon,” Sam muttered. “Jesus, those feet.”

Steve glanced back to their prisoner. The toes on the visible foot—the other was tucked up under his body—were misshapen and knobby. The fourth toe was missing. The stretch of skin between his heel and the ball of his foot was slightly discolored, striped with scar tissue, a match for the keloids at the attachment point for the prosthetic arm that Steve had glimpsed when they’d been wrangling his unconscious body into the scrubs.

Steve exhaled a long, controlled breath. “I guess it’s time to see what he’s got to say for himself.”

“You got your earphone?” Hill asked, and waited for Steve’s nod. She tapped the transmit button twice, two brief clicks in Steve’s ear. Steve gave her a thumbs up. “All right then. Go get him.”

“Do you understand English?”

Silence.

“Nod if you can understand English.”

Slowly, his unfocused gaze unmoved, the Soldier nodded his head.

“Good,” said Steve. “So here’s the deal. HYDRA is done. Destroyed. You failed your mission. You’re now in my custody. Do you understand?”

Another nod.

“Are you going to cooperate?”

Another nod.

“Good. That’ll make things easier.” Steve stepped over to the bolted down chair in the center of the room. It was made of some sort of shatterproof plastic, according to JARVIS.
“His vitals are climbing, Cap, watch yourself.”

There was no demonstrable difference in the Soldier’s behavior, but Steve gave the camera a thumbs up to indicate he’d heard the warning. “We’re not going to hurt you. But we need you to communicate with us. We need to know some things.”

This time Steve could see the Soldier’s anxiety ratchet up, in the way the hair that hung over his face and over the perforations in the mask began to react to his rapid breathing. His disconcerting blank stare grew more unsettling as the whites of his eyes seemed to catch and reflect the harsh fluorescent light. He still hadn’t blinked, not that Steve had seen.

“Calm down.” Steve lifted both his hands to show they were empty. “I’m not going to hurt you. That’s not how I do things.”

In the corner, the Soldier seemed to press himself even more tightly to the wall.

“Can you talk through that mask?”

For a second, the Soldier glanced at him before his gaze skittered away. It was the most unprompted acknowledgement so far.

“Can you talk at all?”

The fingers of the mechanical arm — the only part of it that could move, restrained as he was — made a series of complicated movements, almost like a sign language. Steve’s eyes narrowed, and he waited for the team behind him to comment.

“No sign language we know, Cap, not ASL or Russian. JARVIS is checking.”

“I don’t know what that means, I’m sorry.” Telegraphing his motions, Steve slowly folded his hands together and let them hang between his knees. “Can you speak?”

Again, the Soldier looked at him, something desperate and wild there before his attention skittered away.

“Nod if you can, and shake your head if you can’t.” Steve performed the motions as he described them, for all the good it did since the Soldier wasn’t looking in his direction. “Can you speak?”

The Soldier shook his head.

“Okay.” Steve’s mind flew through the implications—was he being stubborn? Could he physically not speak, because of the mask? Was it something else altogether? “You’ve got nodding for yes, shaking your head for no. I want you to make this—” he formed his hand into a loose circle, and waited for the Soldier to see it— “if you don’t know. Do you understand?”

Nod. Yes.

“Do you know where you are?”

Shake. No.

“Did you report to Alexander Pierce?”

Circle. I don’t know.

“Did you you report to Brock Rumlow?”
I don’t know.

“Did you report to Nick Fury?”

I don’t know.

“Did you report to Arnim Zola?”

The Soldier flinched. It didn’t seem possible, but somehow he seemed to become smaller, as massive as he was. The metal arm strained against the cuffs.

“Cap, watch it.”

“He’s gone too,” Steve said, very quietly. The visceral sense of wrongness, of conviction that this man with his missing toe and masked face was the hammer, and not the smith, grew in his chest.

“Destroyed.”

Shake. No.

“He is. I saw it happen.”

The metal hand twisted its fingers into an odd shape, index and middle crooked, thumb extended, and it shook back and forth.

“I don’t know what that means, I’m sorry.”

The metal fingers flexed, and then went limp.

“Do you know who I am?”

Circle. I don’t know.

Steve raised his eyebrows. “You tried to kill me twice.”

Again, the metal hand made the same sign from before, the crooked two fingers, the purposeful shake.

“I don’t know what that means, but I think I remember it pretty well. Both times.”

The hand sign changed; now it was just his index finger, straight-up—

“Once? So you weren’t trying to kill me one of the times, it just felt like you were?”

The Soldier’s gaze roved anxiously—the mask made it difficult to guess at what he was thinking, but in this case, the distress was easy to perceive.

“Change the subject, Cap, his heart rate is about two seconds from needing a fin to stay on the ground.”

“My name is Steve Rogers,” Steve tried after a moment. “I’m Captain America. That means that I’m about as far from HYDRA as it gets. Do you understand?”

He didn’t respond. If possible, he seemed to compress himself even further. Steve could hear the gears and servos of the arm whirring.

“Do you understand?” Steve repeated.
The Soldier blinked. *No.*

Steve swallowed. “The point is that you’ll be treated fairly. We’re the good guys.”

art by quietnight
Chapter Two

Chapter Summary

Steve and Hill strategize. Steve explains why he let the Soldier live. The Soldier meets with Steve again.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

despite the threatening sky and shuddering earth (they remained)

Part 2

“So, his stress responses are off the charts,” Hill commented once Steve had left the room, and the Soldier, just about exactly as he’d entered it.

“That why you pulled me out?” Steve slid into the seat next to Hill’s. Sam was leaning against the wall, worrying at the corner of his mouth with his teeth.

“This was just exploratory,” Hill reminded him. “You were in there for fifteen minutes. That’s enough. We wanted to observe, and figure out a strategy.”

“He’s afraid,” Steve said abruptly. “You saw that, too? The fear was—” he cut himself off. No matter what this guy had done, no matter what Steve had seen him done, and how close Steve had come to being another of his victims, it was still disturbing to witness the Soldier’s desperation, his confusion, his rabid fear. It would be disturbing in anyone.

“We’re all in agreement here,” said Hill firmly. “It looks like he was coerced. That doesn’t change our plan. He’s still dangerous, Cap.”

“I know,” Steve bit out. “What about the signs? The sign language?”
“Doesn’t match anything JARVIS can find,” Hill replied promptly. “Wilson, did you…?”

Sam held up his cell phone. “Natasha just got back to me. We sent her video, we thought it might be, you know, a covert op thing, a wetwork thing,” he explained to Steve. “She says she doesn’t know what it is, but if they’ve locked him down like this, communication-wise, it could be custom.”

Steve looked back through the glass at the Soldier. “You mean, signs only his—what, his handlers? Only they would know?”

“That makes sense,” Hill said slowly. “There are only so many reasons for a mask. It checks out that they might strip other forms of communication from him, if they didn’t want him to talk.”

“How could the mask stop him from talking, though?” Steve asked, running a hand through his hair. “He said he couldn’t talk.”

“There’s too much interference from the mask to see any particular damage to his voice box,” Hill recalled, flipping through her growing file. “It’s possible. Our radiologist noted that his tongue looks intact.”

“That was a possibility? That his tongue got cut out?” Sam asked sharply. “This shit is fucked.”

“Helpful.” Hill’s tone was crisp, as she turned back to look at Steve. “Cap, yes-or-no questions will only get us so far.”

“Give him a pen and a notepad,” said Sam. “Like any other interrogation.”

Hill glanced back at him, one brow elevated.


“I don’t want to give him a pen,” she said, tapping her own against the desktop of the control center. “It’s a weapon.”

“He hasn’t tried anything,” Steve said slowly. “And he’s restrained. I couldn’t break those cuffs, remember? We tested them.”

“Tell me, Steve, what is it that HYDRA operatives used to do when you captured them during the war?” Hill inquired blandly.

Abruptly, memories of “Hail HYDRA!” and foaming mouths, of Bucky screaming “FUCK!” and kicking whatever tree or bush or jeep tire was closest, as another potential source of information chose cyanide over capture, flooded Steve’s mind. He swallowed tightly, pushing it all down, forcing his thoughts to obey. “You think he’d hurt himself?”

“He’s afraid,” Hill ticked off on her fingers, “he’s been captured by an unknown entity. He’s under the influence of several mind-altering substances, and his body has been physically modified to prevent him from communicating.” She leaned back in her chair. “What do you suppose are the chances that his mind has been modified, too?”
“No hits on DNA or prints, and obviously we can’t do facial recognition,” Hill greeted Steve the following morning. She looked as immaculately put together as ever, with zero signs anywhere that everything in her entire world had collapsed and reformed in the span of a week. She nodded at the coffee and paper bag he was carrying. “That for me?”

Steve glanced down at the two coffees decorated with a colorful, friendly little cartoon. “It’s from, uh, downstairs. And a muffin.” He extended it to the former deputy director, feeling awkwardly out of place. “Any change?”

“I didn’t watch the baby monitor all night,” Hill returned after taking a sip of the coffee. “Jesus, Rogers, couldn’t spring for a macchiato or something?”

“Sorry.”

In the midst of another sip, she closed her eyes tightly, a subtle don’t worry about it, and then set down the paper cup next to her. “JARVIS monitored him,” she explained. “He went unconscious at around two in the morning, and woke up again about forty-five minutes later. So, that’s forty-five minutes of possible sleep in the last three days.”

“He might have slept in DC, right?”

Hill shrugged. “As hopped up on methamphetamines as he was? Doubtful, but I can’t discount the possibility. That’s why we’re only counting the last three days, since JARVIS has been looped in. At any rate, we are exiting ‘cruel’ and entering ‘unusual’ punishment if the sleep deprivation continues.”

“We’re not keeping him awake?” Steve asked, surprised. “He is allowed to sleep, isn’t he?”

Hill fixed him with a look. “I told you that we’ve got better ways of doing things, didn’t I?”

“Yes, but—”

“We’re not going to force him asleep or force him awake, Steve,” she cut him off. “We want him healthy and mentally competent, able to answer questions. That’s why we’re doing this.”

Steve set down his own cup and lowered himself into the chair next to hers. Inside the room, the Soldier had—miracle of all miracles—actually changed his position: his back was still up against the corner, but his feet were flat on the ground, both knees up to provide a sort of shelf for the serious hardware that was keeping him restrained. His forehead rested against the cuff apparatus. If not for the readouts on the screen indicating he was conscious, Steve might have concluded he was asleep.

“There are some other concerns,” Hill interrupted his thoughts. “He hasn’t eaten at least since you brought him in, or had any water outside of what went into his IV with the sedatives. Not to mention his injuries.”

“You’re worried he’s more seriously injured than he looks?”

“It seems like mostly soft-tissue damage,” Hill commented. “That’s what the films show. But if he’s
not getting nutrients or sleep, he won’t heal. Even if he is a super soldier.”

“Yeah, I know,” Steve replied. He’d had a lot of lingering injuries in the war, when they were behind the wire for what felt like weeks and they ran out of food. Bucky had shoved food at him at every opportunity, often at his own expense. At least, until Steve had noticed, and put a stop to it. The thought made his chest ache.

“But,” said Hill, “I don’t feel comfortable putting a medical professional in that room.”

“I have medic training,” Steve offered, feeling a little silly. “I mean, from the war, and also recently.”

“I know, and so do I.” Her voice was kind, but the dismissal was clear. “And so does Wilson. He’s more qualified than either of us, actually. But we’re talking about an NG tube, most likely, and that’s not something any of us can do, especially not with the mask.” She glanced at him. “NG. Feeding tube, through his nose.”

“Are you going to bore a hole in the mask or something?”

“No.” She made some sort of complicated gesture at the screen, which overlaid the viewing window, and a mechanical drawing of what looked like the mask appeared and began rotating. “Got this in from Stark this morning.”

“What did he say?”

“Nothing,” Hill replied shortly. “The file name didn’t even include a reference to Jim Carrey, so take that for what you will. It’s a Mark I attempt at reverse engineering this thing, based on the scans only and what I reported from the physical examination when he was under.”

Steve breathed through the irritation—who the hell was Jim Carrey, and what did he have to do with the Soldier? —and leaned in to examine the drawing, not sure what he was looking for.

“Here, and here,” Hill pointed out the holes in the mask that allowed the Soldier to breathe. “Stark did annotate the drawing, thank God. It looks like a filter apparatus, but it’s pretty small. The perforations are big enough that we could probably get a tube in there. There are handheld ultrasound devices that could help us place the tube properly.”

“But we need somebody to do it.”

“But we need somebody to do it,” Hill agreed.

“And Tony…?”

“He’s got the connections, but he’s still radio silent, other than that.” She flicked a finger at the image still being displayed. “I’ve asked JARVIS. He’s working on it.”

Steve sighed and leaned his elbows on the console, looking back through the glass.

“What made you take him into custody, Steve?” Hill’s voice was professional—Steve doubted she was capable of anything else—but oddly gentle. “Not that I don’t appreciate it, from an intel perspective. But you aren’t exactly known for taking it easy on HYDRA.”

No, Steve wasn’t. He hadn’t spent a great deal of time learning what the 21st century thought of him, or reading what the historians wrote—what little he had read was so small, so reductive, so clinical—but it didn’t take a genius to figure out that most people thought Captain America had been a kind of figurehead, a cartoon figure with simple lines and flat colors, virtuous, noble,
unimpeachable.

They didn’t know how many enemy soldiers he’d flat out *decapitated* with the shield that now showed up on keychains and necklaces and in toy stores. They had no idea that Steve could—and had—punch *through* a man. More than once, even, and both times in defense of Bucky.

Steve carefully locked away that thought.

“‘The thing about Nazis,’” he said finally, “is that they’re proud of what they are. I never fought a Nazi who was wearing a *mask.*”
Losing time. Respond *immediately*.


“Are you in pain?”

Nod for *yes*.

“Okay. We’re going to try and help.”


“We’re not going to hurt you. Remember, I told you yesterday. That’s not how we do things. You gotta calm down, okay?”


“Are you hungry?”


“When was the last time you ate? Can you—is there a way to eat through the mask?”

Too many questions. Respond *immediately*. *Fuck*. No. He can’t understand. Remember that he can’t understand the old words. New words only. Six words. Six new words but one is the same. *Yes* is the same.

Hand in a circle. *I don’t know*.

“What about drinking? Maybe a—maybe a straw, or something? Would that work?”


“You with me?”


“We’re gonna figure something out. It’s okay.”

No question. No question there. Steve Rogers did not ask a question. No response. No response is okay.

“We need some information, though. Yes or no questions, that’s not going to work. I need to know: if we give you a writing implement, will you cooperate?”

Cooperation. Yes. Nod for *yes*.

“Will you try to harm yourself?”

“—down. Calm down, c’mon. You’re okay.” Steve Rogers is talking. Steve Rogers is closer. His hands are him. Big hands. Scar on a fingertip. Scar on his index finger. The tip of his index finger. “Hey, pal.”

Losing time.


“Good. Good job.”

Thumbs up for *good*. One of the six new words.

“Okay. We’re going to take a break.”


Chapter End Notes

Wow, I am *floored* by the response to this story! Thanks so much to everyone who commented, left kudos, and subscribed. I am so grateful. Hope you continue to enjoy it and please don't hesitate to say hello in the comments or on Tumblr. You can find me as *Praximeter*. 
Chapter Three

Chapter Summary

Steve and Sam talk. The Soldier is a little more free. Steve comes to a terrible realization.

Chapter Notes

Some additional trigger warnings for this chapter. There is a brief allusion to sexual violence perpetrated against women during warfare. It is not described in detail. If you'd like to skip this reference, stop reading after "Friends where?" and start back up at "Anyway," Sam said. "I know it ain't the same..."

despite the threatening sky and shuddering earth (they remained)

Part 3

“You know, I’ve still got friends over there.”

Steve glanced up over the lukewarm macaroni he was pushing around his plate. “Hm?”

“Yeah. That better not be my momma’s mac you ain’t finishing, either,” Sam continued. He leaned back in his chair, tilting it so just the two back legs remained on the ground. “That traveled a hundred blocks to you, man. From Harlem. And I had to go through my momma getting all up on my case about you. You better at least be enjoying it.”

Steve pushed his spoon in the direction of the cheesy pasta, corralling the noodles, leveraging the sides of the Tupperware container to try and get all of it onto the spoon. Finally he got it, and
promptly stuffed the entire overlarge bite in his mouth.

Sam quirked an eyebrow at him as he slowly rocked back and forth on the fulcrum of the chair’s back two legs. “You happy with yourself?”

Chewing, Steve tried to answer. Any potential words were muffled through the sound-proofing that was the lump of day-old mac and cheese in his mouth.

Sam outright laughed. “You’re such a shit. How did nobody know you were such a shit?”

Steve managed to swallow. “Some people did.”

“Oh, and how many of ‘em in this century?”

Steve set down the spoon and lifted his hand, started ticking off: “Peggy. You.” His hand dropped back to his lap.

Sam exhaled slowly. “Sorry, man. I’m sorry. That was shitty.”

Steve shrugged. He methodically pushed it all down, like the lump of macaroni in his gut. “Friends where?”

Sam’s eyes cleared. “You know. Afghanistan. Wherever. That’s the thing about PJs, you get sent all over. So I got guys who heard from other guys, or saw themselves, what it’s like—”

He cut himself off and leaned forward so the front legs of his chair settled back onto the ground. He took a deep breath and started again. “You know, terrorists, right, Al Qaeda, Taliban, whatever flavor of the fuckin’ month asshole runs around putting themselves in charge, they’ll go into a village, one that’s probably full of some different ethnic group or sect or whatever. And they take some of those village girls with ‘em when they move on. Maybe their boys, too. And the girls, they ‘marry’ them. For one night. Each.” Sam’s expression was sober. “Track me?”

Steve closed his eyes. For a second, he could see the Italian woman’s face, pale, twisted into horror and fear, as she saw them approach her house, boards covering windows that had been smashed not with bombs but with rocks, “No, non di nuovo! Per favore! Per favore!”

“I’m tracking,” he said finally.

(Her name had been Luciana. Her son was Paolo. She’d cried when they’d given her their rations. She’d cried harder when they’d left her in peace.)

“Sometimes, my guys, my friends over there, they get to help ‘em,” Sam went on. “Training the locals, you know? And sometimes that means finding these girls and reuniting families, even. Not always. But sometimes. And at first, they’re okay. As okay as they can be. Those girls, they’re crying, they’re hugging their parents, and then…”

“What?”

“After it all wears off, after it’s back to real life,” Sam said flatly, “Sometimes, those girls—they’re vegetables. Laying in their cots, nonverbal, can’t eat, can’t sleep, can’t talk. Suicidal, sometimes.”

Steve felt sick. And all the while, he’d been happily going on mission after mission at HYDRA’s bidding—

“Anyway,” Sam said. “I know it ain’t the same. But our guy, Steve, he isn’t there. I watched that
tape. The one from yesterday. He’s trying. He’s trying to communicate. That’s clear. And he’s not hurting himself. He’s cooperating. As much as he can.”

Steve snorted. “Cooperating. What choice does he have? It’s not the same. He doesn’t know he’s been ‘rescued,’ Sam. For all intents and purposes, he hasn’t. He’s locked in a cell.”

“Better us than the CIA. I read that report.”

Steve didn’t know what report. “It’s about what’s right,” he said finally. “It’s not even about HYDRA.”

“I got a car with no steering wheel that wants to have a word, then.”

“Sam.”

“Look, man, I get it,” Sam said. He exhaled heavily. “I know it’s not about HYDRA. Honestly, it stopped being about—hunting HYDRA down, or whatever it was you were gonna drag me into next, the minute I saw those x-rays.”

Steve glanced at him. “What does your car say about that?”

“Nothing, Steve, she wasn’t KITT.”

Steve sighed, dug his thumbs into his eyes. He’d slept, but fitfully. Something about the Soldier, about the way he couldn’t discern help from harm, the animal panic in his eyes, the way he’d tracked Steve’s hands, compressed his body against the wall—

“He—had a fit, Sam. When I asked him if he could drink water through the mask.”

“It’s a panic attack. Fear response,” Sam said quietly.

“I know,” Steve replied. It came out shorter than he meant for it to. He rubbed at his face and looked at his friend—this guy he had only known a matter of what? a few weeks? Yet still felt closer to him than anyone since—

His mouth tasted sour. “We found a—laboratory. Once. In the war. People in cages. Most of them dead.” The words came out stilted, harsh. He couldn’t make them sound more respectful, or more kind, in the way the dead deserved. It was all he could do to just get them out.

Next to him, Sam was silent.

“There were a couple. Who were alive.” Steve stared hard at the wood grain of the table. “Not for long, though.”

“Jesus, Steve.”

“They were like that,” Steve continued doggedly. “So afraid they couldn’t—they didn’t know they were being rescued.” He swallowed. “Well, they weren’t. Not really.”
“Establish a pattern, man. Say hello in the same way. Don’t raise your voice. Be conscious of your tone. That kind of thing.”

Steve took a deep breath and stepped inside the cell. The Soldier’s eyes were upon him. He looked awful. Steve had seen him already, of course, from the viewing window, but viewing somebody under glass was different—it took face-to-face contact to reform an observer into a person.

“Good morning,” he greeted, trying to keep his voice gentle. Had his voice ever been gentle in his entire life? His mother’s had. Bucky’s had. Never his. “How are you feeling?”

The Soldier stared at him with bloodshot eyes. They weren’t bruises, the dark smudges around his eyes, but they looked it, especially when compared to the chalky, dry paleness of his face—or what was visible of it, anyway. He’d slept overnight, for a total of maybe two hours in four separate attempts. Each time he’d jerked awake panicked and afraid; JARVIS had sent Steve the tape.

Steve waited. The Soldier remained motionless. Steve held out his hand and arranged his fingers into a thumbs-up. “I’m good, today. A little tired, but good. How are you feeling?”

Thumbs down. Bad.

“I’m sorry to hear that. Gonna try and make that better, though.” Steve reached inside his pocket for the gadget that Hill had reluctantly handed to him. "This is not a discussion," he’d told her. "We're taking it off." Her incisive gaze had pinned him for a few seconds, as she looked for something in his expression. He wasn't sure what. "All right. You got it, Cap."

“This is going to remove the cuffs. We’re going to put new ones on, like bracelets, that will let you use your hands, but—” Steve hesitated, and then recalled the set of rules he and Sam had worked up. "We can't lie to him." He cleared his throat. “—But, if for some reason you need to be restrained, they’ll magnetize and get you to any of those points on the walls, whichever is closest.” He gestured towards the nearest wall, and the strip of gray that marked the anchor point. “Can you see those?”

The room was quiet. Steve could hear the Soldier’s breathing as it quickened.

Nod. Yes.

Steve wasn’t sure if it was better or worse, having the Soldier’s unblinking gaze fixed on him instead of jittering around the room.

“Do you understand the plan?”

Nod. Yes.
“I’m going to approach you now.”

“Take it easy, Cap.”

Steve didn’t waste time, and he didn’t acknowledge Sam’s warning in his ear. He stepped in the Soldier’s direction, and carefully knelt down beside him. This was the closest they’d been since Steve had hauled him over his shoulder in a fireman’s carry five days ago.

He reeked. River water, for sure, but also body odor, and a sour, unwashed smell distinct from the leftovers of exertion. Illness, maybe, though that didn’t seem likely since he was enhanced. Steve breathed through his mouth.

“Can you extend your arms out to me, please?”

The apparatus locked his arms into a cross shape, with the metal one under the other. The restraint system extended from the crux of his elbows to his wrists.

His pale hand, the flesh hand, was shaking.

“This won’t hurt,” Steve said, and abruptly, the Soldier squeezed his flesh hand into a fist.

Steve stilled. He made uncomfortable eye contact with the him, whose own eyes were wide open, still fixed on Steve’s face. “It’s okay if you’re afraid. I know all of this—must be frightening. It’s not going to hurt. I’m going to remove the cuff now, all right?”

Where the mask curled over the edge of his jaw, and subsided into pale, dirt-streaked skin, Steve could see the rapid flutter of the Soldier’s pulse.

“It’s okay,” Steve repeated again. “It won’t hurt.”

Slowly, the flesh hand released itself from its fist. Thumbs up. Good.

Steve didn’t wait any longer. He held the little gadget up to the device, depressed the button, and the locking mechanisms hissed as they released. The bands of metal that curved around the Soldier’s arms withdrew, and Steve slid the hand not holding the remote underneath the apparatus, and lifted it away from the Soldier’s arms.

He was unrestrained.

He didn’t move, just kept holding his arms up, as if the cuffs still had him, as if—

“They must be sore. Well, the—your right one, anyway. It’s okay, you don’t have to hold them there.”

The Soldier lowered his limbs to his lap. The “thumbs up” was long gone. Instead, he dug the fingers of his metal fist deep into the meat of his thigh, and slowly—telegraphing his movements, Steve realized, he raised his right hand to his head, and pushed back a clump of greasy hair that had been hanging over his face.

The thing was, Steve hadn’t forgotten, not once, that the Soldier was a man. But still the gesture struck him. How long had the Soldier felt irritated by the hair sticking to his forehead, covering some of the air holes of the mask? How uncomfortable must he have been, stuck for days in the same position, unable to move his arms, unable to eat or drink or wash or sleep—

Better than the CIA, Sam had said. It might be true, but that didn’t make Steve feel any less repulsed.
“Now for the bracelets. You can put them on yourself.” Steve reached into his pants pocket and removed the slender bands, about an inch wide apiece. “They’ll resize to your wrists when I press this button.” He displayed the remote again. “It won’t hurt.”

He reached out with the cuffs in his flattened palm. “You can take them when you’re ready.”

The Soldier squeezed his eyes tightly shut. Steve could hear a deliberate, harsh breath from behind the mask; once, twice, three times, as if he was gearing himself up.

“I can set them—” Steve started, but stopped as the Soldier snapped both arms forward, extending them towards Steve. He seemed to be holding his breath. The fingers on the metal arm twitched.

“Okay. First the left,” said Steve. He slid the cuff over the metal fingers, over the palm, with a metallic clink. “Now the right.”

His fingers were straight and stiff, and they trembled either from the tension—Steve could see the tendons of his hand quivering—or his fear. Probably both. This close, it was clear how dry his skin was, how his finger nails were too long, and ragged at the edges, filthy with gunk.

Steve slid the cuff on. At the first slide of the metal, or maybe at the feel of Steve’s own fingers, the Soldier’s hand twitched. It was cold to the touch.

Steve exhaled a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding as the cuff made it to the Soldier’s wrist. “Good job,” he told him. “Don’t be alarmed. I’m going to press this button—” he held up the gadget —“and the cuffs will tighten. You ready?”

The Soldier’s eyes were open again. Nod.

“Good. Here goes. Three, two, one—”

A small clink, and they adjusted, and it was over. Steve’s heart was pounding.

“Hard part’s over,” said Steve. “I’ll be right back.”

“That was real good, man,” greeted Sam as Steve ducked back inside the control room. “That’s the kind of trust-building we talked about.”
“That was the plan,” said Steve wearily. “He understands everything, at least that’s clear. And he can move his arms now. No signs of violence, fully cooperative. Agreed, Deputy Director?”

“Just Hill, Steve,” she said, without looking up from her screen. “I’m not the director of anything.”

“Who are you talking to?”

“JARVIS,” she replied tersely. “It’s fine.” She looked up at him. “Ready to take his statement, Cap?”

Jesus. Steve had been in that room not even ten minutes and he was worn down. The hyper-vigilance, the tension—it was exhausting.

“Let’s do it.”

“Last time we talked, I asked if you’d cooperate if we gave you a pen and paper,” Steve said as he reentered the cell. “You remember that?”

The soldier didn’t acknowledge him. In the few minutes he’d been alone, he’d drawn his knees up and looped his arms beneath them, so they rested on the floor. His cheek—or where his cheek would be if it weren’t covered by the mask—was pressed to the wall. His eyes were open, but blank, looking at nothing.

“You with me?”

Silence. Stillness.

Steve stepped closer and slowly slid into a crouch. “C’mon, pal.”

The reaction was instantaneous. The Soldier’s eyes went wide, and awareness flooded back into them, an awful blend of confusion and fear. His fingers scrabbled at the floor, the rasp of the metal fingertips against the artificial surface loud in the silence. He struggled to focus on Steve.

“Sorry, sorry,” Steve said, alarmed, but trying to keep his voice calm. “You remember where you are?”

The Soldier was staring at him, his shoulders and chest shaking, like the panic had somehow condensed into his muscles.

Steve set down the two pads of graph paper he’d carried in with him and withdrew a couple of the
black markers he’d stuffed in his pocket. “It’s okay. Try and focus. Here you go.” He uncapped one of
the markers and slid it on the floor towards the Soldier. He flipped the cover sheet open on the pad
of paper and pushed it over too. “You can use this. Go ahead, take it.”

The Soldier obediently retrieved the marker and the pad of paper from the floor. He held the marker
like a knife, all four fingers wrapped around the barrel, thumb pressed into the cap.

“Can you tell me how long you were held by HYDRA?”

The Soldier’s brow darkened; his eyes pinched in at the corners. Slowly, he shook his head.

“I want to help you. We’re going to help you,” Steve tried again. “How about a name? You got a
name?”

His shoulders shrank in on themselves. His gaze was still fixed on Steve, something pleading there,
something pathetic.

“Write it down,” Steve told him, quietly. “It’s okay.”

The Soldier bowed his head over the paper. The hair he’d pushed back before fell into his eyes
again. He ignored it, and his hand holding the marker hovered over the page. He hesitated.

“It’s okay,” Steve repeated. “Go ahead.” He watched as the Soldier lowered the black tip to the
page; heard the squeak and shudder as the marker dragged unevenly across the paper.

Steve stared. He held the marker like a knife.

He watched in uncomprehending fascination as the Soldier worked at the paper, and absolutely
nothing coherent materialized.

“That’s—that’s good,” Steve heard himself saying. “Let me see.”

The Soldier slid the pad back over to Steve. He picked it up automatically.

It wasn’t a name, or letters at all. It was a scribble, the hand that produced it shaky and uncertain:
Chapter Four

Chapter Summary

Sam takes a stand. Steve gets the Soldier a drink. The Soldier asks for help.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone for your amazing reception of this story. I cannot tell you how much your kudos and comments mean to me!

Do yourself a favor and immediately check out quietnight's lovely fanart for this story, which you can find here. What an amazing, beautiful piece to mark the very first time someone has ever illustrated my work! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

despite the threatening sky and shuddering earth (they remained)

Part 4

Steve is drawing. No. He is writing. Drawing is—drawing is—not black lines. Other ones. Scratch
Big hands, fingers curled around the pen. Fast, sharp jabs. Like a map. Squeaks.

Steve Rogers holds up the paper.

Black lines. Curves. Angles. A dot. Not like the picture. The little guy. He is waiting. What is he waiting for. What does he want. What does he want—

Steve Rogers is talking. Concentrate. Don’t lose time can’t lose time even though—


“All right. Good. Where did you—do you know what this is?”

The picture. Big hands. Yellow stains. “That’s some real artistry there, pal.”


“It’s okay. This is—this is Kilroy. ‘Kilroy was here,’” Steve Rogers is upset. Breath fast leaning closer. “Why did you—what are you trying—”

The pen is still on the paper. In the hand. The black pen. Black dot. Drop it.

Everything hurts. Chest shakes. Everything hurts cold the eyes the mouth the nose in the chest shaking. Bad. It is bad. Thumbs down for bad.

“Sorry,” Steve Rogers says. “I’m sorry, I didn’t—I didn’t mean to.” Hands up. Palms out. Fourth and fifth fingers crunch down on the paper. The picture. Like on the ship. “We don’t have to fight.”

Scratch in the floor. Tap. Tap. Drag drag drag. Tap tap tap—

“Are you an American? A GI?”

Over here.

Over here.


“Is that what—are you trying to tell me you’re an American?”

Question. There’s a question. Respond immediately. Hand in a circle. Hand in a circle is I don’t know.

“All right, we’re going to—”

Steve Rogers is off the ground. So tall. Hey pal.

Don’t lose time. Can’t lose time. He’s going he’s leaving where is he going—

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**NOD IF YOU CAN READ THIS.**

Sam smoothed the wrinkled paper out on the console. Steve’s draftsman print was clear, crisp, sharp. “So, he can’t talk. He can’t *read*. He’s got—fucking—*implants* in his entire goddamn body. How is this—” He cut himself off. “We need a new plan here.”

“This is not,” Hill began carefully. She exhaled slowly, through her nose. “This is not something I’ve seen before.”

“Jesus, I’d hope not.” Sam laced his fingers together and rested them on the back of his head, leaning backwards in his chair. “I’ve got a fucking headache.”
Steve strode over to the small refrigerator in the corner of the observation room and crouched down, opening it and tossing a bottled water in Sam’s direction. Tired but reflexes intact, Sam’s hand snatched it out of the air. “Thanks.”

Steve didn’t say anything. He grabbed one of his own, twisted the cap and began gulping it down as he stood back up.

After half of it was gone, he swallowed and wiped the back of his mouth. “He drew this.” He reached out and slid the Kilroy drawing in front of Hill. “Look at this. Look at it.”

“‘Kilroy was here,’” she said aloud. “The cartoon that soldiers—”

“That we drew,” Steve interrupted her. “We drew this. In the war.” He swallowed tightly. His stomach roiled. “Is it possible that he’s…?”

He couldn't think about how Dum-Dum used to draw it fucking everywhere. Hell, he’d scratched it into a damn tree with his bayonet while they were taking fire. And Bucky used to go over to his “masterpieces” and add a little hat—

“I drew it too,” said Sam. “When I was in-theater. It’s still a thing, Cap.”

“But the Winter Soldier’s been operating for fifty years,” Steve countered. “That’s what Nat said. Even if it wasn’t my war—”

“You’re thinking he’s a POW,” said Hill. She was scrolling through the footage of the past fifteen minutes. She paused on a frame of the Soldier with his head bent over the drawing, hair obscuring the mask. Steve could see the Soldier’s white-knuckled grip on the marker. “That’s one angle we might be able to—”

“You know what, it doesn’t actually matter,” Sam cut in flatly. He reached forward and pinned the Steve’s hastily contrived test with his index finger. “Look at this. Don’t forget this. It doesn’t matter if he was a soldier, or a POW, or whatever. We know that he was a prisoner. Kidnapping, false imprisonment, whether it was HYDRA or SHIELD or us right now, this is not a guy who volunteered for this shit.”

“We know that, Wilson.” Hill’s voice was cool. She was still clicking through the tape frame by frame. “But it is still worth figuring out who he is, what he is, what he knows—”

“No. It’s not.” Sam’s voice cracked through the air. “This is a victim. He’s unstable. He’s not going to be interrogated. Not anymore. He’s going to get medical attention, real medical attention, we’re going to get that fucking mask off him, and get him some god damn help.”

“Sam’s right.” Steve crossed his arms over his chest. “He’s right. We need to be helping him, not putting new handcuffs on him.” He tried not to think of the way the Soldier had forced his arms forward, so afraid that the tendons of his intact forearm practically vibrated with tension, that he flinched the moment Steve’s hand brushed his.

“Look,” said Hill, turning away from the screen in the chair and rolling to face both of them. “I am sympathetic. What’s been done to him— “she shook her head sharply, once, twice; grimaced. “It is unacceptable. It is inhumane. But Sam said it: he’s unstable. What that means is that he’s dangerous.” Her jaw tightened. “Tell me I’m wrong.”

“He hasn’t been violent once, not since he came out of sedation,” Steve defended. “He’s been cooperating.”
“No, Steve,” said Hill quietly. “He’s afraid.”

“This is for you,” Steve said as he eased himself down on the ground maybe two yards away from the Soldier. He held up the bottled water to show him. “No straw. We’re working on that. But, the holes, I think if you want to try it, you might be able to make it work.”

Carefully keeping his movements slow and smooth, Steve set the bottle on its side and gave it a little push so it rolled in the Soldier’s direction. His eyes dropped from Steve’s face to track the bottle’s progress.

“Next up will be some Gatorade, or something with nutrients. To make you feel better. But for now,” Steve gestured at the bottle, and held up his own, “just water.”

The Soldier was calm, as calm as he’d been so far. Steve wondered how much of it was his adrenaline finally running low versus getting comfortable in his presence. Judging by the fact that not too long ago, Steve had been beating his face in, he guessed it was probably the latter.

“You can twist off the cap,” Steve started, demonstrating. “That one’s yours. You can drink it.”

It seemed that he’d been waiting for permission. The metal hand shot forward, grabbed the bottle so forcefully that the plastic crinkled and snapped, tore off the cap, tilted his head back and just—poured it over the mask.

It was uncomfortable to watch. Perhaps because the mask kept his jaw closed—that’s what the radiologist had noted, anyway, it was something to do with the placement of the pins—it sounded like he was forced to suck the water in through the filtration unit, pull it through his teeth, and inhale at the same time, all before he could swallow.

He mistimed it a few times, and coughed raggedly, wetly, as water was trapped in his windpipe. His eyes streamed. He didn’t stop, though, not until the bottle was empty. Water that hadn’t made it to his mouth beaded under his jaw, where it had escaped the mask, and ran down his throat, leaving pale streaks in the dirt. More water still had soaked into the collar of the scrub shirt.

“Sam said you might feel a little sick, if you haven’t eaten in a while. So you can have more, after that settles.”
Carefully, Steve did not think about emaciated bodies in striped clothes and awful, weak, hoarse
coughs and groans, the pungent reek of dysentery and tuberculosis and—

The Soldier carefully replaced the cap on the bottle. His hand twisted in some too-fast-to-catch
gesture, before abruptly stilling, and clenching into a fist.

Steve swallowed. He had six signs to communicate. Six. “Let’s come up with some more signs for you, okay?”

Carefully, Steve pulled the tips of his fingers and thumb together on both hands, tapping them
together. “This means more. If you want more water, more food, more anything, that’s what you use.
Okay?”

The Soldier’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. His eyes were narrowed, paying rapt attention
to Steve’s hands. The metal hand gripped and clawed at his knee. There was a rip in the thin cotton
there, no doubt from him doing that exact thing over and over again, a grounding tactic, the only one
he seemed to have.

“Oh, so that’s ‘more,’” Steve said after an awkward beat. He thought back to the images Sam had
pulled up on his phone. “This is—” he flattened one hand and rested his other fist on top of it, thumb
extended— “‘help.’ If you need help. Okay?”

Slowly, the Soldier nodded. Yes.

They went through three more: the index, middle, and ring finger, extended in a ‘W’ shape, against
the mouth, for water; flattened hand, rubbed in circles over the chest, for please; the thumb and pinky
extended, pulled from the forehead, for why.

“You can use those anytime,” Steve said quietly. “You don’t need to wait to be asked questions. Got
it?”

Nod. Yes.

“Great. Good. Good job.” Steve cleared his throat. “There’s another thing—”

But the Soldier was moving. He lifted his metal hand to where his mouth was, under the mask, and
formed the W. Water. He moved the hand to his chest, motioned the circle. Please. His hand
dropped. He stared at Steve, utterly focused, completely motionless, so still he seemed he had
stopped breathing altogether.

Steve grinned at him, surprised, delighted. “You got it, pal. Good one.” He twisted to left, dug inside
his deep tactical pants pocket for the second unopened bottle he’d brought in with him. He turned
back to the Soldier and rolled it to him, the same maneuver as the previous time. This time, he didn’t
catch it. He didn’t snatch it from the floor. He didn’t seem to notice it was there. He just stared, his
eyes wide, bloodshot, fixed on Steve.
“You with me?”

No word for—no word for this. No sign. Eyes bright and blue, open, lit up, light the world up. Pal. That was him.


Steve Rogers is talking. Don’t miss it, Pal. Can’t miss this. “You okay?”


Focus. Focus, Focus. Where—where is this—

good one buck

tilted hat cloud of smoke

no, steam

it’s just me

from the mouth

Come on Steve


“Good hit!”

What hit

No hit

“Doing great,” Steve Rogers says.

“Lookin’ good.”

Steve’s hand. On his shoulder. Steve Rogers hand. Warm to the touch through the—

pajama shirt
“Just keep breathing, pal. Come on, do it with me. Breathe in for one—two—three—”
thump, the hand, rub back and forth, breathe out, three—two—

“Good, breathe out, three—two—one—”

Chapter Five

Chapter Summary

Tony has a chat with the soldier, and reveals what he's found out about HYDRA's operations.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

**despite the threatening sky and shuddering earth (they remained)**

**Part 5**

“Making friends, huh?”

Steve’s head snapped up as he slowly re-entered the control room. He already felt shaky, off-balance, from the last few hours; Tony’s surprise appearance certainly wasn’t going to help. “Tony,” he greeted dumbly, glancing back through the observation window at the huddled figure he’d left up against the wall, and then back to his teammate.

“He came in a few minutes ago,” Sam offered uncomfortably. “We didn’t want to—ah—”
“—interrupt your little, uh, therapy session in there,” Tony completed the thought, the hard edge to his tone exposing the bravado for what it was. His hands were buried in his pockets, but the defined lines of his forearms, their straining tendons, made his tension obvious.

He looked awful. His hair was grimy and unwashed, the normally precise edges of his goatee blurred, the lines in his face more pronounced than ever. He reeked of hooch, and his tee shirt had the crumpled, over-stretched look of clothing worn for too many consecutive days.

Steve shook his head. “Tony, I don’t know what—” he stopped and cleared his throat. “He’s a victim,” he said firmly. In his mind, he saw the Soldier’s panic, his gaze fixed on Steve, the one hand asking please please please and the other digging into his own thigh with such force that Steve had seen the bruises blooming dark and purple through the shredded cotton pants. He carefully focused on Tony. “I know we think he—”

“—killed my parents?” Tony’s voice sliced through the room. It wasn’t really a question.

“—killed Howard, and your mother, but we don’t have any evidence yet, and even if—”

“About that,” Tony cut in. He withdrew a little device from one of his pockets. A little wild-eyed, he tossed it onto the console with an ominous thunk. “This is what he’s got in his—” he gestured to his torso, a distaste twisting his expression—“it’s for insulin.”

“He’s diabetic now?” Sam asked in disbelief. “Seriously?”

“No,” said Tony tightly. “I said it’s for insulin.” He dragged a hand through his hair, throw it into fresh disarray. When he dropped his hand back down, the dirt and sweat and God knew what else kept the new coiffure in place. “It’s not even—it’s not even turned on, in him.” He jerked a thumb toward the viewing window. “It’s empty. The scans show it’s empty, deactivated. They just—left it there. In him.”

“And where did you get this?” Hill asked calmly, picking up the little device and inspecting it. “Reverse engineered?”

“No,” Tony repeated. “It’s a prototype. From the fifties. Never went to market. Too expensive.”

“What does it do?” Steve asked, at the same time as Hill inquired: “How do you know?”
Tony’s eyes shuttled back and forth between them. “It’s meant to regulate the flow of a—of a medication. Or a drug. It’s programmed, with”—he fluttered a hand in the air, clearly searching for the right words, before unleashing in a torrent: “It can sample the blood, and dispense medication in reaction to what it finds there. Very rudimentary. But it could also be radio-controlled. Again, too expensive for the market at the time, and it didn’t work precisely with the dispensation. Too dangerous. Never even went to the FDA.”

“Stark,” said Sam flatly. “How do you know?”

Tony’s jaw clenched. “Go ahead, buddy.”

“Of course, sir.” JARVIS’s voice floated down from one of his omnipresent speakers. “Deputy Director, I’ll be taking over control of your screen.”

A second later, the metrics and measures, the maps and the diagrams, that Hill had been analyzing while Steve had been trying to help the Soldier through—his fit? panic attack?—all disappeared from the monitor and were replaced with a series of scanned design schematics, all clearly intended for the little device sitting innocuously on the console. Steve stepped closer, rubbing briefly at gritty eyes before focusing his attention on the drawings.

“1956,” Tony continued. “That’s when this is from. ’56. Stark Industries didn’t even have a biomedical division back then. But we had a contract with SHIELD.” His voice was tightly controlled. “And not too many engineers were read into that contract, either.”

Hill flicked her fingers in the direction of one of the drawings, expanding and zooming in to the little box next to the stamped seal, with its signature—“H. Stark, P.E.,” she read aloud. “There are other names, but—”

“That’s the only one I care about. That’s his name. That’s his seal.” Tony rocked back onto his heels, staring in through the transparent monitor to their prisoner.

The Soldier’s body was limp, his back propped up by the corner in which he had pressed himself hours ago, his legs stretched out in front of him, one arm resting motionlessly in his lap, the other having slid to the floor beside him. His eyes were open. He was staring at something only he could see.
Steve didn’t know if it was better or worse than him hyperventilating, afraid, unable to communicate beyond pleading for something. If it was better, it wasn’t by much.

“1956,” Sam said. “That’s—sixty years ago, man.”

“It never went into production,” Tony said tersely, zeroed in onto the Soldier. “I can’t find any records of it being manufactured, except for one delivered by courier to some building in New Jersey. In 1956.” He glanced over at Steve, his expression furious and intense. “My father wasn’t HYDRA. You knew him,” he spat out. “He worked against them, not for them.”

Steve’s gut clenched in an echo of that awful betrayal, that slow, despairing realization that SHIELD was rotten from the inside out. He swallowed it down.

“So did I,” he said grimly.

Tony stared at him sharply, searchingly, until a second later he blew out a huff of compressed air. His breath smelled sour. “It’s my turn to play Clarice,” he said abruptly. “I’ve got questions.”

“Let me reiterate,” Sam drew out, “that I think this is a bad fucking idea.”

“I’ve seen the footage,” Tony snapped. “I know. Darth Vader’s traumatized, he’s illiterate, he’s afraid. Got it. I’m going to ask him questions, Wilson. He killed my parents, you don’t think I deserve some answers?”
“I think he deserves therapy and medical treatment—”


“Tony.” Steve’s voice was stern.

“Don’t you want to know?” Tony burst out, tossing a hand in the direction of the small, white room and its motionless occupant. “He was your friend!”

“Of course I want to know,” Steve bit back. “I want to know who HYDRA had him kill, who was in charge, when it all started, where their bases are, how many of them are still alive. I want to know everything. But Tony, look at him. That’s not the mastermind.”

“But he did it, Cap!”

“But we don’t know that.” Steve reached out and settled his hand on Tony’s shoulder. “What we do know… isn’t good,” he finished lamely, struggling to articulate just how claustrophobic it was in that room, how tense, how the Soldier’s fear was so potent it seemed to clog Steve’s lungs. “Just—can you be fair?”

Tony shot him a withering look. “Are you asking if I’m sober?”

“If that’s what it takes for you to be fair.”

“Jesus, Cap,” Tony spat out, jerking himself away from Steve’s hand. “I’m fine, I’m sober, I’m ready to play nice with the murderer. Let’s go.”
The Soldier was staring at both of them through strands of greasy hair. He’d come back to himself the second the door had opened, had somehow clawed himself out of that unsettling blankness—what Sam had called dissociation (“though it’s hard to tell for sure, since, you know,” he’d said, and gestured at his own face).

Now, his entire awareness seemed trained on them. He’d lurched to his feet at the sight of Tony, and backed himself against the opposing wall. The second water bottle remained unopened, and judging by the way he seemed to sway on his feet, it was clear that he was nearing the last reserves of his strength or adrenaline.

It was also the most he’d moved in the five days they’d had him.

“Easy,” said Steve, raising his hands in the same way Bucky had once done to try and diffuse schoolyard fights or nervous civilians, deep behind enemy lines. “This is Tony Stark.”

“You know who I am?” Tony asked. “I mean, I’m assuming you do. If you don’t, well.” He gave a practiced shrug. “That’d be insulting.”

Reluctantly, the Soldier pulled his scrutiny away from Steve and towards Tony. He shook his head once, slowly. His right fist was compressed into a tight fist; the left, the fingers were extended, twitching, as if he were ready to quickdraw.

“Ouch,” said Tony humorlessly. “What about you, then, Michael Myers? Who are you? You got a name?”

The pace of the Soldier’s breathing began to increase. He glanced back to Steve, questioning, confused, as if to say I don’t know the words for this.

“He doesn’t know his name, Tony,” said Steve quietly. “Or,” he amended, “he can’t write it down, at least.”
“Why don’t you let the big-boy assassin over there answer for himself, Cap?” Tony returned flatly. “Hey. You. You got a name?”

This time, the Soldier’s attention didn’t waver. He remained locked in to Steve, his brow furrowed, the flesh of his cheeks where they met the edges of the mask almost deformed from its constrictions—Steve could almost imagine his face beneath it, the expression of confusion, of total bewilderment, as he searched for the answers to the endless questions and just couldn’t find them.


It took what felt like minutes, but the Soldier did finally look back to Tony. No.

“How about Howard Stark? Maria Stark? You know those names?”

An agitated pull of the brow; another shake of the head.

“Fuck,” Tony spit out. “You don’t know if—did you kill them? Here, look—” Tony made a series of violent gestures at the heavily reinforced one-way glass, sudden movements that made the Soldier grow, if possible, even more tense.

Two formal portrait photographs, the first of Howard Stark, as Tony must have known him—white haired and thin—and the second of a beautiful older woman appeared on the screen. “Right there,” Tony said, jerking his arm out towards them. “Howard. And Maria. My parents. Did you—”

The Soldier took three hesitant steps forward, towards the glass. His bare feet were silent on the floor. He cocked his head, lank hair swaying, and stared at the two images.

“Did you?” Tony repeated. “Did you do it? Were they HYDRA? Is that why, did they—were they moles? Did you do it?”

“Tony,” Steve said gently. “He doesn’t know.”

Tony’s gaze jolted down to the Soldier’s hand, curled into a loose circle. I don’t know.
“Are you fucking—is this some kind of joke?” he snarled. “He ‘doesn’t know?’ Look! Their pictures are right there! It’s a simple question!”

As quickly as he’d sprung to his feet moments before, the Soldier abruptly backed away, no longer paying attention to the images, his eyes wide with fear. Please. I don’t know. Please.

“He seemed…” Steve searched for the word. “Fascinated.”

Tony shot him a sour look. “The mask’s not a lampshade, Cap. He’s not a golden retriever.”

“What?”

Tony rolled his eyes and dropped his face into his hand, digging one thumb into the corner of his eye as if hunting out the source of his headache. “Forget it.”

“He’s using ‘please’ as ‘sorry,’” announced Sam, his arms folded over his chest as he watched the tape of the encounter. “He did it with you too, Steve.”

Steve frowned. "When he...?"
“It’s his go-to,” Sam said, glancing backwards at the two of them. “He hasn’t even used ‘why.’ He used ‘water,’ ‘I don’t know,’ ‘No,’ and ‘Yes.’ And ‘please,’ about a hundred times.”

“What’s your point, New Guy?” Tony inquired acerbically. “He’s a polite assassin, at least?”

“No.” Sam’s tone was frosty. “He’s used to begging.” He paused. “So how about that dinosaur Band-Aid?”

Tony exhaled wearily. “I’ll do you one better,” he said finally. He looked up at Steve. “You want to go kick some ass?”

“So, what exactly do you think this place is?” Hill asked, as they crowded around the monitors in Tony’s laboratory. “And how did you find it?”

“I’ve had every server JARVIS’s got working on that data dump,” Tony explained, attention unwavering as his fingers flew over the holographic letters and symbols and widgets of his incomprehensible workstation. “And, with Hannibal back there in a Faraday cage and about four transmitters that we know of buried in his wetware, I figure that between the information Natalie dumped into the new, improved Boston Harbor of the digital age and wherever those transmitters are getting data from——”

“HYDRA base,” Steve concluded, leaning against the cluttered surface of one of Tony’s workbenches. “The one he operated from, even.”

“Gold star, Cap,” said Tony. “Take a look.” A satellite image appeared in mid-air. “I spoofed the
signals on those transmitters, tweaked the data packets and let 'em bounce around on a couple satellites and cell phone towers, waited to see what happened. Well, JARVIS did. A whaddaya know, we triangulated two of those signals to right… here.”

“And that’s a… what, a bank?” Sam asked, leaning in. “A bank in Crystal City?”

“Looks that way,” Hill agreed, her eyes rapidly tracking the action on Tony’s monitors. “Any activity since you’ve been monitoring it?”

“What makes you think I’ve been monitoring it?”

Hill shot him an unimpressed glare.

“Fine, I’ve had a geosynched satellite on it for the last two days, sue me,” Tony snarked. “Or try to; I have excellent lawyers. No activity since Captain Fantastic over here destroyed half of DC. Nothing in or out, according to the satellite or local CCTV, no unusual spikes on the grid, but—” he flicked another file up on yet another screen –“these are its utility records.”

“What, are they late paying their bill or something?”

“Why don’t you just stick to falling with style, Buzz? The building routinely consumes about four times the energy of a facility of comparable size and type. 5,600 megawatt hours a year. For a bank. And their peak demand—” Tony pointed out a particularly spiky squiggle on the chart—“is off the charts. They’re running something big here, something that draws up to 25 megawatt hours a day, and occasionally…” Tony exaggeratedly mimed an explosion. “And can you guess when the last time that happened was?”

“I suppose you’re going to tell us.” Hill's tone was dry.

“Way to ruin it, and yes. The morning of the Triskelion,” Tony finished. He spun around in his chair to face them head on. “And JARVIS has found about four hundred layers of shell corporations involved in its ownership. A mille-feuille, if you will, of treason.” His mouth twisted into ugly, determined slash. “So. Like I said. You want to go kick some ass?”
Chapter End Notes

So, you'll notice that the chapter count is 5/?, and I originally said this was going to be a five-chapter story. Well, uh. Let's just not hold me to that, 'kay?

Thanks to everything for your continued feedback, engagement, and enthusiasm for the story. Hope you continue to enjoy it! <3
“So how long’s it gonna be?”

Steve heaved a tired sigh, reaching up to massage at his neck. “Uh, he said about eight hours. To fabricate the suit.”

Sam looked unimpressed, leaning forward on the kitchen island of the guest apartment they were sharing. “I don’t give a shit about the suit, Steve.”

“It’s pretty neat,” Steve volleyed weakly, stepping over to the kitchen area and pulling open the refrigerator door to examine the contents. It’d been hours since he’d eaten.

“I’m talking about medical care,” Sam said flatly. “Medical care. Interrogation first, Band-Aid second. That was the rule, and it’s his house, his rules.” The words were mocking, but Sam’s voice was too hard to make them seem like much of a joke.

“I know you’re talking about medical care,” Steve swung the door shut, not finding anything appealing, and turned to face his friend. “We talked about it. He’s not budging on the outside staff, but he’s working on a plan.” Tony had been adamant, in the agonizing debate they’d had on the subject after starting to plan out their infiltration of the HYDRA bank.

(“He’ll get fed and watered,” he’d bit out. “We’re working on it. But I’m not putting some soccer
mom in there with him so she can get her neck snapped the second she asks too many consecutive questions.”

“He’s—‘not budging.’” He was incredulous. “This isn’t—that’s not an option. The dude hasn’t eaten in at least five days, Steve, he’s had sixteen ounces of water—”

“He hurt one of the nurses, when he woke up from sedation, the day we got here,” Steve reminded him. “Broke her arm, gave her a concussion. And with the mask… Tony’s right, we can’t force somebody to try and help under those circumstances.”

“They’re doctors, that’s what they do. Have you ever seen a doctor not try to help somebody who’s in distress like that? Come on.”

“I know,” Steve said—though not doctors, not really. Other than Dr. Erskine, he’d never had great experiences with either the qualified ones or the snake oil salesmen claiming to be. But combat medics? He’d seen them run straight into hell, into machine gun fire, to try to get to a man down, even a man so far gone he’d stopped screaming for his ma. “The mask might blow up.”

Sam snorted in disbelief. “And the great Tony Stark, you’re telling me he can’t figure out a way to get it off?”

“He’s working on it. He wants better scans, and he wants to find out… what we find out. At this bank. I’m not happy about it either, Sam.” In fact, Steve felt sick about it even as he recognized the reality of their predicament. “That’s why we’re going to DC.”

“I’m not,” Sam said flatly. “I’m staying. I’m not leaving him here in this fucking building by himself.”

Abruptly, Steve remembered: pararescue. Sam had done that—run headlong into a combat zone, or flown in, to help an injured airman, civilians, whoever needed it.

“You’re a good man.” Steve folded his forearms over one another, leaned against the island countertop. “I know this isn’t what you signed up for.”

“We passed that point a long-ass time ago, Cap,” Sam retorted. “I’m more concerned about the fact that this isn’t what he signed up for.”

“This is… not a bad idea, actually,” said Hill over the speakerphone, locked down as she was combing through the details of the bank and god knew what else. “Get him accustomed to people...
other than Steve who aren’t Stark.”

“Yeah, I’m a smart guy,” Sam agreed, as he surveyed the boxes now piled in the corner of the observation room. Steve leaned over and looked in at the mish-mosh of goods inside them spotting a sweatshirt, a bedroll, books, socks, a blanket, a couple of miscellaneous cords and cables. “That and my momma’s been after me to get this stuff out of her house for years.”

“I don’t need the play-by-play, Wilson,” Hill said briskly. “Let me know how it goes. Hill out.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Steve looked in through the glass. The full water bottle was gone from its place against the wall, where it had rolled, forgotten by the Soldier once Tony had entered the cell. “Did he touch the water?”

“Yeah, he did. Good for him,” Sam replied as he squared up his stack of printouts with a couple of quick taps to the table. “So, you gonna introduce me, or…?”

“I think it’s a good idea,” said Steve. “Though who knows if he trusts me after getting the third degree from Stark.”

“Good one,” said Sam lightly, reaching past Steve to dig into one of the boxes and extract two paperbacks. “He doesn’t trust anyone, Steve. Aw, shit—”

Steve snatched it before hit the ground to Sam’s mumbled thanks as he set the other book down on the console and went back to rifling through the box.


Sam craned his neck to see the cover. “Yeah, that’s the first book. There’s four of ‘em.”

“No kidding.” Real delight was rare these days, so rare that it took Steve a second to even recognize it in himself. “I read this—god, I read it to—to my friend’s kid sister. When it came out. She ran around calling herself Wart for weeks.” He opened the front cover—“Property of Sammy Wilson Age 9. And this whole time I’ve been calling you Sam.”

“Oh, that’s nothin.’” Sam rolled his eyes. “My nickname in middle school was Guppy. Then it was ‘Gup’ for short, by the time I made varsity football. Senior year they even put a jersey together with just that on the back.”

“Guppy? Like a fish?”

Sam shot him an exaggerated grin, then clicked his teeth together twice. “The moneymaker, man. It started off as Gappy, and…”

Unexpectedly, Steve laughed. “Gup. I like it.”
Sure enough, two empty plastic bottles, their caps replaced, were lined up in the corner next to the Soldier. He was sitting cross-legged with his head bowed forward, but when the door entered he looked up at them. Tension zinged through him—and the room—at the sight of Sam.

“Hey there,” Steve greeted quietly. “No questions this time. Not unless you have some for us.”

The Soldier stared intently at him, then raised his hand to his forehead, pulled it down into the thumb-and-pinky stretch. Why?

Steve blinked. Was that a joke? “Good one,” he said finally, to zero reaction from the Soldier. He gestured to Sam, who had set down one of the boxes he’d assembled in the control room on the floor, but kept the sheaf of printouts under his arm. “This is Sam. You—met him, once before.” He cast Sam an apologetic look.

“Yeah, I’m the one with the wings,” Sam continued easily. He leaned against the wall, his thumbs hooked into his pockets. “You remember that?”

The Soldier squinted, then nodded. Other than his eyes, which traveled in juddering hitches from Steve, to the box, to Steve, to Sam, whom he seemed to inspect, and then back to Steve, his body was still.

“Good. No hard feelings, then,” said Sam. “I’m not here to hurt you. I ain’t mad. I’ve got some stuff in that box right there, things that are gonna make this place a little more comfortable for you. Do you understand?”

The Soldier looked over at the box, and cocked his head, like he had when he’d seen the images to Howard and Maria.

“You can go and look, if you want,” said Sam. “Your choice. And I’ve got some water for you too, since you finished off that other one.”

“I’m going to be gone for a little while,” Steve interjected gently, feeling the need to explain Sam’s presence. “I’m coming back. But Sam’s going to look out for you. Okay?”

The Soldier’s attention had peeled away from the box the second Steve had started talking. Frankly, that’s what happened the second Steve did anything. Now he stared at him, with those small folds at the corners of his eyes, the crinkle of his forehead—he wasn’t entirely inscrutable, even with his face covered, but it was just so difficult to see him. How difficult must it be, Steve then realized, for him to be seen.

The soldier lifted his hands, touched all his fingertips together—more. Then the hand to the chest, the sign Steve would be seeing in his dreams, over and over again, moving in a circle: please.

“How do you call that again?” he asked, crouching down. The Soldier shrank back, even as his eyes focused even more intently on Steve. “More water?”
He shook his head, barely, remaining zeroed in. No.

“That’s what this is for,” Sam said, holding out the printouts in his hands. “We gotta get you some more words, man. When Steve comes back, you can explain. Okay?”

It took a second, but the Soldier did eventually look over at the papers. Sam flipped on around and held it up: hands, making some sort of gesture—

Steve saw the minute it connected. The Soldier’s eyes went wide, for once not with fear, and he actually leaned forward, as if to get a closer look at the words that were so close, so nearly in reach.

“Yeah, man, I got this,” said Sam in a low voice. “Take off, okay? Get some damn answers.”

“First things first,” Sam-the-one-with-the-wings says. He reaches over to the container and pulls something out of it. It’s cloth, blue and big and then socks. Socks that are gray.

“These are for you. I’m wearing actual clothes and I’m cold in here, jeez.” Sam leans down, drops the clothes, slides them forward with his foot. Clothes. “It’s just a sweatshirt, some socks, but if you want, you can wear them.”

They’re right there. It’s cold. It’s cold in here.

“Oh, that’s a good one, actually. Cold. Here, check this out.” Sam looks at the papers. The papers with all the hands. Two fists up to his chest. Wiggle the two fists. “That means cold.”

Two wiggling fists for cold. Make fists. Wiggle them.

“Yeah, I bet you are,” Sam says. “All right, you can—if you want—put those on. The socks and the sweatshirt. I got a blanket in here too, and a pillow that’s in the other room. I’ll leave ‘em here and you can use ’em.”

It’s cold.

The socks are there they’re right there.

*Is there anything worse than goddamn wet socks*

Reach out. Take a sock. It’s soft but not that soft. Pull it on. Fingers tap each toe. *One two three five.* And then the other sock. *One two three four five.*
“Nice,” Sam says. “Lookin’ good.”

Thumbs up. Good.

“Okay, so I’m not an expert or anything,” Sam says. Good one sarge. “But these signs are gonna help. So, now that you’ve got some socks, we’ll learn ‘em together.”


“Can you show me what you already got?”

Look up. Sam is sitting now not standing. Where did the time go. Across the room three meters. Head hurts. Water goes too fast. That was a request. Can you show me what you already got. The words.

Nod for yes. Shake for no. Hand in a circle for I don’t know. Thumbs up for good. Thumbs down for bad. Flat hand for neutral. Fingers together for more. Fist in hand for help. Three fingers spiked out to the forehead for water. Flat hand on the chest, in a circle, for please. Please please please. Thumb and pinky stretched apart, slipped away from the head for why.


Thumbs up for good. He didn’t ask but the thumb goes up anyway. Thumbs up for more words. Focus. Head hurts. Throat hurts. Coughing can’t open teeth the cough goes straight through. Focus for the new words.

He laughs. “Yeah, thumbs up, right back atcha. Okay, so, I’m gonna stay right here. You can reach out and get those. It’s written, uh, it’s written what they mean, so if you look at the sign, then show me the paper, I can tell you what it means.”

What. What what. What is this. Focus. Sam is giving more words but doesn’t know them. Where are they coming from. Where did Steve Rogers go. Steve where are you. Steve where are you come on.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to. If you want me to show ‘em to you, I can do that too. Your choice.”

Eleven words. Use ‘em pal. Come on. Hand in a circle I don’t know thumb and pinky why fingers together more.

Sam smiles again. Eyebrows go up. Make eyebrows go up too. “Look at you, man, been signing for a day and you’re already putting sentences together. Nicely done. Okay, the reason we’re doing more signs is because we want to help. I want you to be able to communicate, until we can get that mask off you.”

What. What. Can’t—can’t—can’t—wasn’t it always there no it wasn’t he was awake—

This will shut him the fuck up

“Easy—easy—I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have sprung it on you like that.”

Sam. It’s Sam. Sam is talking. “I’m sorry,” he says again, and shows him a paper. A paper with hands on it. Fist with a thumb on top. Like please but a fist.

“This means sorry,” Sam says. He does it. He does it to his own chest with his own fist. Sorry. He is the one saying sorry.
There are more signs. More papers with hands. Focus on them. Not on the mask it hurts it hurts it hurts—

“This is an important one,” Sam says. He is not smiling. The smile is gone. Eyebrows are not up. “This is the most important sign, got it?”

Mouth dry. Head hurts. Most important sign. Nod even though the head hurts to move. Nod for yes.

“Good,” Sam says, and says thumbs up at the same time. “This is it, here you go.” Both hands flat. Left hand level, like neutral. Right hand up and down and it chops down on the left hand. Move the hands to match. Left hand flat, right hand chop.

“It means stop,” says Sam.

Stop.

“It is the most important sign, okay? You say stop if you want somebody to stop, to back off, whatever it is. All you gotta do is—”

He says, stop.

“Do you understand?”


“I want you to try it. Look, I’m gonna get up, I’m gonna stand, here—”

Stop.

Sam stops.

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*art by quietnight*

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Chapter End Notes

*The Sword in the Stone*, the first book of *The Once and Future King* by T.H. White,
was published in 1938.

Thanks to everyone for your amazing reception of this story. I realize we didn't get to the bank vault here, but my man Sam had some things to say. Hope you enjoyed, new chapter coming later this week. Targeting a twice-a-week posting schedule.

For those of you with knowledge of ASL, please do not hesitate to reach out if you have corrections or suggestions. I try my best, but I'm not a speaker.
Chapter Seven

Chapter Summary

Steve and Tony kill some time on their way to DC, where a familiar face meets them.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

despite the threatening sky and shuddering earth (they remained)

Part 7

“So, what, you’re gonna sit there in silence for the entire journey of—of—forty-five whole minutes?”

Steve twisted in his chair to look at Tony dead-on. The jet flew itself, and Tony—in the span of ten hours—had gone from a gaunt, unwashed mess to at least a gaunt, showered mess. “What do you want me to say?”

“I don’t know. Entertain me. Road trip games or something. I spy with my little eye—”

“Tony.”

“Jesus,” Tony sagged back in his chair. “Are you really that mad about the, uh—the Soldier?”

“What, no cutesy reference?”

“They’re wasted on you.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “I’m mad about the Soldier, I’m mad about god damn HYDRA, I’m—worried about what we’re going to find.”

“‘God damn,’ huh? God damn.”

Steve said nothing, just clenched the strap of his clipped-in safety belt in his fist.

“It’s not like I’m—Look, I’m harboring your pet murderer, Steve. If that’s not helping—”

A rush of air left Steve’s lungs, and he jerked his head to stare at Tony. “‘Pet murderer,’ Tony,
really? You saw—"

“Yeah, yeah—”

“—even if we didn’t know about the—the implants, and whatever it is in his brain—”

“—I know,” Tony stopped him. His voice was low, serious. “I know, okay? I know. I’m not the bad guy here, Cap. I’m not trying to be the bad guy. But I’m not going to let him—” he cut himself off, frustrated. “Look, I’m trying, with Bruce.”

Steve’s brow furrowed. “What does Bruce…?”

“He’s not board-certified, per se,” Tony explained. “But he’s got more doctorates than I do. And half of those are in biomedical engineering, biophysics—”

“So you’re saying you want to put the Hulk in a room with the Soldier,” Steve said flatly. “You don’t think that might go badly? He’s scared of me, he’s scared of you—”

“No. I do think that. That it might go bad. Why do you think we all agreed you were the only one who was allowed to get within spitting distance of him?” Tony fluttered a hand in Steve’s direction. “Super soldier. And you beat him once already.”

“Twice. Barely.”

“Don’t admit to that, come on. What’s wrong with you? But the only person more indestructible than you—

“—and Thor—”

“—is Bruce,” Tony finished. “Unless you want Thor to provide medical care.” He snorted. “Though apparently he has a fake medical degree hanging around somewhere.”

Steve inhaled deeply. “And Bruce isn’t, uh, ‘board-certified,’ but…?”

“He has practical skills,” Tony explained. “Theoretical and practical. We have to do this in increments, Cap. Build trust. As my overpaid therapist once said.”

“That’s what we’re doing—”

“No, you’re trying to build his trust,” Tony corrected sharply. “I’m talking about mine. I’m responsible for lives, here. I’ve got a nurse on my payroll with a cracked skull and a shattered radius. Or ulna. Whichever—” he held up his arm, rotated it slightly, jerked his chin towards his elbow—“this one is. Thing is, I’m on board. I’m on your side. You say jump, I say how high.”

“Pull the other one.”

“Yeah, that’s not true. I didn’t mean that. But point I’m trying to make here is that there’s a plan. Bruce is—he’s almost on board. He and JARVIS went over the scans with—a few consulting physicians. Well, mostly JARVIS.”

“I thought you said Bruce had ‘practical skills?’”

Tony’s expression went tight. “Yeah, well.”

“What?”
“He looked at ’em, the films I mean, for about two seconds.” Tony lifted his shoulder in a half-hearted shrug, and gave Steve a smile that was all teeth and utterly humorless. “Almost a full Code Green.”

Steve closed his eyes. “The evidence of torture…?” JARVIS had walked them through it, later, shown them the areas of accelerated bone growth, the odd precision of those healed over breaks—

“No. He’d seen them before.”

Steve blinked. Before he could open his mouth, Tony bowled him over with a torrent of words. “Not all of them. Not the arm, not the—implants. Nothing identifiable, like the replaced ribs. None of that. But photographs of cell regrowth over time, after—injuries, films showing bone density, that kind of thing, yes. He’d seen it before. Old scans, data, research notes, all of it was part of a docket of research materials he got access to when he won the grant from the MRMC. The, uh, the Army Medical Research and Materiel Command.”

It took Steve a second before the pieces clicked. He chest went cold. “The serum. His research on the serum.”

“Bingo.” Tony over-enunciated and drew out the word, and then hesitated briefly. “They told him—they told him the materials were from the 40s. They told him it was you.”

“Jesus,” Steve breathed, suddenly exhausted and not wanting to consider the fact that not only did this guy go back fifty years, not only sixty years, but maybe— "Jesus," he said again. “So Bruce recognized them, and…”

“No full Kafka, just a little—light puce. But he got it under control.” Tony cleared his throat.

“There’s also the question of samples. He believes—he suspects, anyway, that some of the tissue samples he based his research on—”

“Came from the Soldier,” Steve finished dully. It didn’t take a genius.

“So, he’s—not thrilled. About the Other Guy, of course, and that he might have been working for HYDRA, and didn’t know it.”

“He and I have that in common,” Steve retorted bitterly. To his credit, Tony said nothing.

Steve pushed down the rage, the frustration, deep into his gut. It wasn’t helpful. It wasn’t. “So Bruce is our option for medical care, and he can’t look at the Soldier without…?”

“He’s doing his thing,” Tony said with false levity. “Adult coloring books, Enya, Himalayan healing crystals. And, like I said, he and J consulted. There’s a plan for nutrition, there’s a plan for the GPS trackers—that one’s on me—and I’ve got a very well-paid neurosurgeon pinging me about better scans on the mask.”

Steve felt the odd urge to lift his hand flat to his chest, please, and tamped it down. “Thank you,” he said finally. “You’re doing the right thing.”

“Yeah, well, whatever,” Tony prevaricated. “I always say: when in doubt, do the opposite of Nazis.”

A bubble of laughter in his chest caught Steve by surprise. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, I like that one.”
With DC airspace shut down to all but government aircraft, the Quinjet landed itself on a private airfield about twenty miles south of their objective: the bank in Crystal City. Steve had his gear on already, and it was the work of a moment to flip the shield—drudged from the sticky riverbed of the Potomac a few days earlier, thanks to drones deployed by Stark Industries—onto his back. The saved time gave him the opportunity to watch as the elements of Tony’s suit flowed and spiraled from their hidden compartments and cascaded into place around him.

For all he had his differences with Tony, Steve was man enough to appreciate the skill, the artistic eye, that it took to create that miraculous clockwork, that harmonious precision.

And it was just neat.

“Let’s hit it,” said Iron Man, and dropped out of the back of the jet; Steve followed.

He had no sooner landed in a three-point stance than Iron Man’s faceplate had snapped up. “Intruder,” he called out. “I rented this airfield for private use only. Me. You’re not me.”

Natasha offered them her practiced Mona Lisa smile. “Hello, boys.”

“I’d have thought you’d have your hands full,” Steve said as Natasha steered, shifted, and clutched the car into submission. “What with the hearings, and all.”

“Oh, that old thing?” She shot him a little glance from the corner of her eye. “Please.”

Steve didn’t question the rush of fondness that swept him. It would have startled him ten days ago; now, this friendship felt familiar, deeply rooted in the way he had forgotten how to miss. “You sure
“Steve,” her voice was stern. “We talked about this. You’re the good guy who saved the day. I’m the spy who spilled the United States government’s secrets out for the world to see. Leave me to my gray area.”

“What they’re saying about you—”

“—Is fine—”

“—Isn’t right,” Steve said, frowning. “It’s not.”

“And when did that stop anybody?”

He sighed, and stared out at the passing streetlights. “Hill was surprised. When you stayed here instead of…”

“Playing psychologist to the most notorious assassin who ever lived?” Natasha finished pleasantly. “Did it occur to you I might be jealous?”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Nat—”

“—that my feelings might be hurt—”

“If you were an assassin, you’d be my favorite,” Steve interrupted loyally.

The crack didn’t have its desired effect; her mischievous expression faded. “Well, that’s the thing, Steve.” she said. “I was.”

“Nat.”

“You didn’t ask me, what I thought you should do with him.” She was focused intently on the road, or appeared to be. “If you had, I would have said—” she clicked her tongue.

“What?”

“I think you know.”

“You don’t think he deserves a chance?”

“It’s not really about what he deserves,” she returned calmly. “It’s about what the world deserves.”

“You mean its pound of flesh? You know that he was—”

“I know what he is. And I don’t mean justice, Steve. I don’t mean revenge. The world’s a better place without dangerous people in it. Without him in it.”

“People can change.”

“I thought so,” she said, with a wry twist of her lips.

“You did.”

“Did I?”

Steve sighed, thinking of I guess I can’t tell the difference anymore and the reek of smoke on their clothes, the odd incongruity of scrambled eggs and bacon cooking downstairs, and the sudden
realization of: here’s the person inside Natasha; she was there all along.

“I believe you did,” he said firmly. “And I believe he can.”


“I don’t have a gun,” said Natasha. “And since we’re breaking into a privately held facility—”

“JARVIS is working on that. He’s on layer—JARVIS, what layer are you on?”

“32, *sir.*”

“32,” Tony proclaimed. “Buying up shell companies, with our own shell companies, it’s a whole—y’know. Shell game.”

“Good one,” said Steve mildly.

“Regardless,” Natasha continued, as she led the way to the service entrance in the back of the building. “EMP in three—two—one—”

It wasn’t the most viscerally exciting break-in which Steve had ever participated in his life. No, that
honor still belonged to The Ritz in Paris, March of ’44. This place couldn’t be more different. It was empty for one, just as the scans had showed. Steve was almost disappointed.

The first floor looked like a bank. It had cubicles and corner offices, an unused, empty row of tellers’ desks, a protective cage around them. Counter-height stations for filling out deposit slips dominated the lobby, and Natasha wandered over to inspect a bulletin board.

“Well, I guess we know when this place was purchased. She leaned in to scan the faded flyers. “Hey Steve, wanna go see a surf garage show at d.c. space?”

“I want to search the rest of it.” Steve’s tone was short; now that they were here, he was antsy and revved for a fight. It’d been hours since he’d left New York, and left the Soldier with Sam, and seen the look of disbelieving jubilation in his eyes that he was going to be allowed to learn more signs—

“Elevator,” Tony’s voice carried. He wasn’t in the suit. Steve and Natasha turned back followed the sound through the teller space and back into the employee hallway.

The Iron Man suit stood motionless, facing the service entrance. Tony himself had his hands in his pockets as he leaned against the elevator doors. “My guess is HYDRA secretarial pool upstairs, evil torture dungeon downstairs.”

“That’s usually how it works,” said Natasha lightly. The elevator dinged. “Let’s go.”

They were deposited into a well-lit hallway, and easily spotted the tarnished brass sign identifying one set of double-doors: VAULT. The doors were unlocked, and they walked right in.

It didn’t smell old. It wasn’t dusty.

It was cluttered, but not in the way that old places collect boxes and old furniture. It was a small, functional space, burdened with banks of computers and file cabinets, oddly claustrophobic with the rows and rows of safety deposit boxes in the walls, and—

“Steve.” Natasha’s voice was low and emotionless, artificially steady, familiar from when she was at her most performative, and their circumstances the most dangerous.

“Well, that’s—ominous,” said Tony, walking towards it.

Steve couldn’t help but follow. It was a chair of some kind, hooked up to a series of monitors and gadgets, with a swinging arm and a nest of cables—
“Steve,” said Natasha again, and he looked back at her. She stood in the doorway, her gaze fixed on the mess of technology that had captivated both his and Tony’s attention. Her fists were clenched. “Don’t go—don’t go near it.”

Something dark and acrid curled in Steve’s gut, a frisson of dread that danced its way up his spine and throat. “What?”

“I’m afraid of it,” she said, pronouncing her words carefully, deliberately. Her face remained as impassive as ever. She hadn’t taken one more step into the room.

“You’re afraid of it? Tony leaned his weight on the worn leather seat of the thing, peering into its coils and cables. “Of this?”

“Why?” Steve asked her finally. “Why are you afraid of it? What does it do?”

She made eye contact with him then. For the first time he could recall, she looked young. “I can’t remember.”

Chapter End Notes

The wonderfully talented quietnight has produced an amazing illustration of a key scene in the last chapter. Go and check it out ASAP! You can find it here, and be sure to leave all the love and kudos and comments it deserves--it's a stunner.

Hope you enjoyed--and don't worry, Bucky's back in the next chapter. Thanks to all for your kudos and comments! I love hearing from you. <3
For a beat too long, Steve stared at Natasha. And then, nearly unconsciously, he swiveled his head to look back at the chair.

It certainly didn’t look like anything he’d ever seen before, not that his span of experience was especially robust. For all he knew, it could have been some sort of—high-tech dentist’s chair, or a kind of—scanning device, or even a bizarre bench press. But not for nothing did Natasha’s carefully controlled admission echo in his mind. The words rolled over themselves, again and again, and he prodded at them like he might a canker sore in his mouth. Back when he still got those.

*I can’t remember,* she’d said.

His eyes catalogued the solid open claws of what could be restraints, waiting for the thing—the *person*—they were meant to restrain. He saw the uncomfortably narrow seat, the obvious hydraulics and hinges that hinted at the chair’s ability to move its user where it liked. And he saw the foreboding semi-circle that would hang over the head of someone strapped into it.

Tony had stepped away from the thing too, the moment Natasha had warned them off it. He stood with one hand twitching in his pants pocket, and the other fidgeting in plain view. Abruptly, he kicked at the bottom of it. “It’s bolted down,” he said. “Here. If I had to do, uh, back of the napkin calculations—” he peered down to look at the base more closely. It was as hardy as the outriggers on a fire engine. “It’s about—say, 6 square feet surface area, based on the look of this hardware, it’s probably—10,000 PSI.” He looked back up at Steve. “Pounds per square inch, to move it. How
much do you deadlift, Cap?"

Steve didn’t reply. For one, he didn’t know. Two, he was focused on Natasha. “It’s nothing good, is it, Nat?”

She shook her head, just once, slow and smooth. “No.” And she inhaled, just a touch too deeply for it to be natural. Her locked down expression flickered briefly and she precisely, deliberately, stepped inside the vault.

She could handle herself, and Steve doubted she would appreciate him monitoring her. He turned his attention to the rest of the room, while Tony carefully telegraphed his movements as he stepped back to the chair.

Steve forced his tactical brain to digest the rest of the room. The contents of all the security deposit boxes would need to be examined; Natasha was stepping over to the computers, better her than him; a sheaf of printouts on the floor behind the monitors on wheeled bases looked like they might have medical information, they’d need to scan them; on the long desk beside the computers, a series of binders, and hanging on a cheap plastic hook, the kind with adhesive on its back—

He stepped over to it and reached down to the side of the desk, plucking the D-ring from the hook, along with the laminated sheets it bound together.

WS-001 BLOCK 03 (B)

HANDLING SIGNALS, FY2006—PRESENT

Table of Contents

1.0 List of Figures............................................ii
2.0 Instructions for Use.................................1
3.0 Statements...................................................4
4.0 Interrogatives.............................................9
5.0 Objects.........................................................11
6.0 Miscellaneous...........................................19
7.0 Reportable Incidents..............................21
8.0 Index...........................................................A-1

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Steve’s chest went tight with horrible suspicion. He flipped to the next page, and the next, knowing exactly what he was searching for. He stopped. A ragged curl of laminating plastic had begun to peel away from the paper on the bottom right-hand corner. But there it was: simple, bold line-work, though the drawing had gone a little fuzzy from repeated Xeroxing:

The index and middle fingers, both curled; the ring and pinky fingers, tucked in to the palm; the thumb straight out, accompanied by careful arrows indicating motion and the instructions: Shake hand twice in lateral motion to complete the signal.
Steve felt sick. He remembered every detail of that first initial “conversation” with the Soldier. He’d told him \textit{you tried to kill me twice}. “Sorry,” the Soldier had apparently said. \textit{Sorry}.

“They kept him here,” he said finally, looking up at his two companions. He held up the—what, the operating instructions? This pathetic \textit{vocabulary} that comprised the Soldier’s entire ability to communicate? — for them to see. “This confirms it.”

“Custom hand signs,” said Natasha, glancing up from her screen while her fingers kept on flying over the keyboard. “That’s what we thought.”

“Yeah,” said Steve. “Yeah, I guess it’s what we thought.” He set down the manual. \textit{Handling Signals}. For Christ’s sake. “What have you found?”

“Not much.” Her voice was cool. “This encryption’s from the 70s, looks like a McEliece algorithm. My usual tricks aren’t quite good enough. Stark, a little extra juice from JARVIS would be appreciated.”

“I thought the older it is, the easier it is?” Steve offered stupidly. “Code-breaking, I mean?”

“Nah,” said Tony, without looking up from where he was poking into the mechanical guts of the chair. “Not always. Screwed around at an MIT hackathon at a few years ago, tossed a HYDRA enigma at ‘em, you know, seven or eight rotors instead of the usual three or four. Just the software, not an—” he grunted a little as he maneuvered something inside the frame—“actual enigma. Took ‘em four days to get a single word. And that’s from \textit{ye olden days}, Cap, back when you were in your prime. McEliece, huh?”

Steve exhaled heavily through his nose, and clenched his jaw. Hackathon? Enigma? Rotors? \textit{What}? “That mean you can’t break it either?”

Tony’s mussed head popped up from behind the chair. “Of course I can do it,” he said indignantly. “Just gotta take those—” he gestured at the computers—“with us.”

Natasha leaned back from the workstation. “Well, there’s still the surveillance footage,” she said. “It’s on a separate system. Easy.”

“Yeah, I wanna see that,” said Tony. “Maybe there’s some footage of this thing in action, see if it matches up with the demand spikes. Got a feeling it does, based on the size of these cables. 10 kV, at least.” He stood up and wiped his hands on his tee-shirt. “Punch it, Nat.”
It did match up.

Natasha had navigated in the security system to the morning of the attempts on Fury’s life, the first time Steve had encountered the Soldier, when he’d shot Fury through the wall.

There were three cameras covering a span of about 80% of the vault. The cramped room had been bustling with lab coats and sport jackets, with a couple of familiar faces wearing tactical gear and bearing standard-issue M4s, all ten of them leaning up against the safety deposit boxes and looking bored. One had a bad habit of biting his nails, which they watched in 8x for a few minutes until the tenor of the room changed completely.

“This is… T-12 hours, from the first attempt on Fury,” said Natasha professionally, adjusting the settings so that the video played at normal speed. “And shortly before one of the demand spikes. The building’s energy data is captured in 15 minute intervals, so we’ll start here and see what happens.”

The tension in the room was easy to perceive, even lacking audio and accounting for the detachment that came from watching security footage.

The lab coats pressed themselves against the walls and clustered together in groups; the nail-biter and his buddies all stood up straight, their index fingers displaying perfect trigger discipline. The hustle of busy people slowed to a crawl; every single one of them with their eyes trained on the east-facing wall, where there was a steel door Steve, Tony, and Natasha hadn’t yet investigated.

The Soldier appeared on the screen, suspended between two additional guards, a third following behind, with a gun trained on the back of his head. He was half naked, his hair so wet it adhered in clumps to his face, to the mask, and they half-carried him into view, staggering as they labored to manipulate his dead weight. When his head rolled back so his face was visible on camera, as ever, the mask hid everything but his eyes.

“Drugged,” Natasha commented.

But while the Soldier didn’t seem exactly lucid, he wasn’t calm, either. His eyes were wide with panic, the whites bright and round. The claw-like fingers of his flesh hand convulsed and clenched around empty air. When he tried to get his weight under him, tried to stand, or, Steve realized, dig his heels in, his legs trembled and collapsed under him.

They manhandled his weak, unresponsive limbs into the chair. He surged forward, attempting to get away, but the restraints snagged him, locked him into place—

Steve reached forward, across Natasha and pressed pause. “Nat.”

She was stock still, staring transfixed at the playback just like he and Tony were. “Steve,” she retorted, and snaked her hand past his to press play.

They watched as the Soldier struggled impotently against the shackles, and how his spectators rustled and recoiled at every shake and shudder of the machine as their captive gave his all to escape it.

“They’re afraid.” Tony’s voice was serious as Steve had ever heard it. “Jesus, he’s—like that, and they’re still scared of him.”

The men with guns, the techs, the goddamn computer geeks, they were all focused on the Soldier,
and all as physically far from him as it was possible to be.

The chair in the video tilted back, heedless of its struggling victim. Not twenty feet away from them, the same chair waited, motionless and silent.


10 kV, Tony had said.

The halo rotated and spun, a curved panel settled into place around his scalp and face, and abruptly, the Soldier’s body went rigid. Electrical light flicked from under the contraption pressed to his head. The tendons and veins and muscles of his throat bulged.

“What is it—what is it doing,” Steve bit out. His stomach roiled. This was—there was no sound, and there would be no sound coming from the Soldier anyway, but not for lack of trying.

“Torture,” said Tony flatly. He was leaned forward, both hands pressed against the desktop, fingers digging ineffectually against the artificial wood surface. “That’s torture.”

Natasha clicked something on the screen, speeding it up to 2x. Several long moments later, the Soldier’s body finally went limp. The machine retracted from his skull, and the restraints opened. He sagged, his muscles unnaturally slack except for a persistent twitch and flutter in his right thigh and his biological arm. His chest shuddered and heaved.

With the procedure complete, the room erupted into activity. The weedy scientists and doctors—if they could even be called that—approached the Soldier confidently. One reached down and inserted an IV into still-spasming right arm. Another one placed electrodes on his chest. The Soldier’s head lolled, his eyes dull and drooping. Tendrils of sweaty hair clung to his forehead.

Nausea surged in Steve’s gut. “They’re not scared anymore,” he said finally, through the sour rush of saliva in his mouth.

“I want to know what’s in there,” Tony said, nodding towards the steel door. His expression was hard. “Let’s see where he came from.”

It had clearly once been a men’s bathroom.

The four stalls had been removed, along with their toilets, but the plumbing openings still remained, along with two urinals. The tile was disrupted in the center of the room, where it looked like the floor
had been torn up and a new drain installed.

A large, stainless steel table stood over the drain. Ceiling-mounted surgical lights had been installed above it, and along one wall lived a bank of small metal carts, which were stacked with blank monitors, medical supplies, and other equipment Steve didn’t recognize. In the opposing corner, there was an oddly incongruous tool chest. In the other, a strange—tube, taller than Steve, locked into heavily built stand against the wall. There was, he realized, a handle on the outside of it.

“Tell me that’s not what I think it is,” Tony breathed, stepping over to it and trailing his fingers along the thick rope of cords and cables that extended from behind it to a complicated looking panel and box installed in the wall.

“What do you think it is?” Steve asked dutifully, stepping inside the room to examine its contents more closely. It was claustrophobic, the ceiling too low, the lights too bright. He blinked, and let his eyes drag over the room. He spotted a pile of crumpled clothing by one of the surgical carts.

He went over and crouched down beside the little heap. Tactical pants, he realized, a perfect match for the ones the Soldier had been wearing before they’d exchanged them for scrubs. On his next inhalation, he winced. Urine.

He stood back up, feeling unsettled, and leaned back against the table, waiting for Tony.

He didn’t wait long. “This,” Tony announced a moment later, standing up, “is a cryostasis tube.” He reached a hand up to the back of his neck, his expression pinched. “They froze him.”

Time stuttered. Rushing water, freezing cold, shards of ice in his chest, the cells of him bursting.

Steve forced himself to swallow, and blankly cast about for something to say. “But it looks like—an operating room,” he managed, numbly.

“Look again,” said Tony grimly. “Did ORs come with manacles in your day, Cap?”

Steve jerked his hands away from the table, and stared down at where they had been. Open semicircles, a perfect match for the chair, waiting, as the chair had been, for a victim.

“Fellas,” Natasha called. “Got something.”

Natasha rewound the tape again. “Is there anything we can do to get sound?” Steve asked again, frustrated. “Or—can JARVIS lip-read, or something?”
“I don’t know if you noticed, Steve, but he’s wearing a mask,” Natasha offered lightly.

“Nat.” Steve gritted his teeth. “This is—we need to know what they’re saying.”

“Gimme—the thing,” Tony demanded. “With the signs.” On the screen, Alexander Pierce was frozen, paused, in the process of grabbing a handful of the Soldier’s hair and yanking his head nearly to a 90-degree angle. “JARVIS will translate what Jason’s saying, at least.”

Steve snagged the laminated guide from the end of the table and slid it over to Tony, who reached into his pocket and unfolded an impossibly delicate little device that was no doubt packed with electronics. He perched it—a headset of some kind, Steve realized—onto his face, one half of the world’s most advanced pair of eyeglasses.

Quickly, methodically, Tony flipped through each page of the booklet. “Got it, J?”

JARVIS’s quiet, tinny voice emanated from the headset. *I do, Sir.*

“Let’s bump that up,” said Tony matter-of-factly. “Piggyback on this workstation for me?”

*Here, Sir,* now coming from the computer’s speakers. *“Ready when you are.”*

“Let’s do it.”

Nat rewound again. Inert, the Soldier sat on the chair. He was shirtless, again, and seemed to take no notice of the technician operating hand-tools deep inside his arm. Tubing from an IV pole wound its way to his flesh arm. Moments before, he’d had those fingers around another technician’s throat.

Alexander Pierce swept into the frame, his back to the camera. Seconds later, he reached forward, threaded his fingers in the Soldier’s hair, and *jerked.*

*“Sorry sorry sorry,”* said JARVIS in a monotone, in time with the frantic movements of the Soldier’s hand. *“Sorry sorry sorry.”*

A short pause.

“*Why target,”* said JARVIS. *“Why target.”*

Another pause.

“*Please target,”* said JARVIS. The Soldier’s fingers fluttered and twisted. *“Please why target mission.”*

Something cold and slick filled Steve’s throat, his lungs, an awful imprecise foreboding creeping through his veins as he watched the Soldier’s straining eyes, the pleading there, the confusion.

*“Please why mission,”* said JARVIS colorlessly. *“Please why mission.”*

Pierce turned to a technician at his elbow. His lips moved; that, Steve could pick up. *Wipe him.*

*“Sorry sorry sorry,”* said JARVIS. *“Please sorry sorry.”*

Two technicians pushed him backwards in the chair. Dazed, he didn’t fight back. The restraints locked him in place. His chest surged, like bellows, and—

Tony’s hand darted forward, stopped the playback. “We’re done,” he said. He was pale, his dark hair and goatee contrasting dramatically against clammy skin. “We’re done, we’re not—I’m not
watching that again.” He turned his body to Steve, away from the screen completely. “We’re getting him help. Let’s get him some help.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone for your comments and kudos! So appreciated! Please consider liking and/or reblogging on Tumblr. <3
Chapter Nine

Chapter Summary

The Soldier wakes up. Steve has some questions.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

despite the threatening sky and shuddering earth (they remained)

Part 9


Nothing changed in the cell when—when—

Open eyes. Small box, made of—_cardboard_. With clothes, and a blanket, a book, and socks, and a shiny white board. All in the corner so he could see it. Blanket with a zipper—a bedroll—a _sleeping bag_ is what Sam calls it—still in the same place. Warm. On top of it.

And a pillow. Under the shoulder. A pillow.

Word pages still there, in the corner. Next to the sleeping bag. And the empty water bottles. There are four now. The word pages are where they were when—


He’d slept.

Of course he’d fucking slept. That’s what—that’s what this is. _Jesus_. Get it together. _Focus_.


It all hurts. Ribs wrist elbow _shoulders_. _Shoulder_. Head.
Wipe him.

Left hand flat, right hand chop. Stop. Knock it off.

Still hurts.

Before—right hand, toss it over your shoulder, yeah, kinda like you’re high-fiving somebody backwards, I guess, or throwing a ball behind you—there was more water, and a blue drink Gatorade, and more words, and Sam read a book.

d’Artagnan

After—to be honest man, I’m not sure what the difference between these two signs are, so we’re gonna go with—let’s do this one, you put your hands flat in front of you, stack ‘em in front of each other like this—right—and pull your right hand forward—it was “Try to get some sleep, okay?”

Try to get some sleep. Sure where is it then.

And then. Sam stood up. Said roll this out, get comfortable and turned around but—but—come on where’s Steve—don’t leave not yet—

Hit the floor. With the fist. Very loud. Gotta do it. Not supposed to—not supposed to—what did he do—focus—

But Sam turned around. Smiled.

“What’s up man?”

Steve Rogers. Steve Rogers, where did he go and when is he coming back—is he coming back—come on Steve please

Right fist went up, not the left one, so Sam wouldn’t think he’d—he didn’t want to—further aggression will not be tolerated soldier—right fist up, the left, flat, pull around in a circle, in front of the fist, push it all forward, a block, it’s the shield, come on—

Eyebrows went up, mouth dropped open. Surprise. “Holy shit, that’s—you’re asking about Steve?”

Yes. He made up his own word. His own.


Sam smiled. “Well done, wow—just—that’s great. Steve’s in DC, man. Doing some work, looking into some things to help you. He’ll be back tomorrow. Okay?”

That was before, tossing a baseball over your shoulder.

Come on buck how about that slider huh

He’d slept. That was before. This was today. Everything where it was before. Nothing moved, not even him. Sleep warm not cold. Empty water bottles. Keep still. Blink. The eyes hurt. It all does. He’ll be back tomorrow. When is that. Hand in a circle for I don’t know.

hurts the whole head where it is pressed to the ground. Be still. Be still except the hand. Tap. Tap.

Movement. The door. Rush of air. Footsteps. Look at the empty water bottles. Look there not
anywhere else. Don’t move—don’t move—

*Jesus fucking Christ he pissed himself again*

“Hey, pal,” says Steve Rogers. “You up?”

Steve. Steve it’s me. Steve Rogers is here. Not up but he can get up. Sit up. Sit *up*.

Oh shit—oh fuck—the head, the *blood*—blink—blink—

“—some sleep?”

No no *no* don’t miss it don’t miss anything—what did he *say*—

Blink—blink—the *eyeballs hurt*, get *up*—focus—tap tap tap drag drag—

“Hey, hey, easy,” says Steve. “I didn’t mean to—I didn’t mean to startle you.”

Yeah, what the fuck Rogers.

*Focus*. Steve has one hand up. Palm out. The other has a—paper. It has papers. “Good morning.”
He touches his hand to his mouth, pulls his arm down and out. “Good morning,” he says again.
“That’s the, uh, sign. For that.”

*Take a goddamn nap why don’t you. Even you gotta sleep pal.*

“Can I—sit down?”


Steve Rogers sits. His legs are tailor-style. Cross the legs also. It hurts to move them but do it
anyway. Tailor-style like Steve, so he—so he—what you don’t wanna play for *keeps buck*

“—feeling?”

*Fuck* oh no what did he say *focus* and *look* even though moving the eyes is like—is like—

Fist, circled on the chest. *Sorry. Sorry. Sorry*. Sam taught *again*. Say *again*. One hand flat. Other
hand swoops in, touches the middle. *Again. Sorry*.

Steve’s eyes are big. Upset. He is upset. Nostrils go wide. Don’t move *don’t move*—“You don’t
need to—it’s fine. No apology needed. Just asking how you’re feeling?”


Please*. 
“Hurts,” said Sam in his ear. “You got that, Cap?”

Steve knew. Sam had spent twenty minutes quizzing him on all of the Soldier’s new signs before even considering letting him inside the cell—“we gotta put the same amount of effort in that he is, Cap. Run ‘em again.”

Hurts, he’d said. Well, the Soldier certainly looked like he was in pain.

They’d known he was awake thanks to JARVIS monitoring his vitals, but he’d rigidly held himself in his cramped, curled up position on top of Sam’s childhood bedroll with its faded cartoon turtles until the moment Steve had entered the room. And even then, it had taken several long, uncomfortable seconds for him to laboriously unfold himself from his childlike pose and rearrange his limbs to match Steve’s seated position.

His forehead was damp with sweat, his visible skin pale, he reeked with an unhealthy, chemical-tasting stench, and all in all he moved in the sort of way Steve had, once upon a time, when stricken by the flu or a flare-up of arthritis. Like it hurt to move. Like it hurt to breathe.

Hurts, he’d said. After a long, hesitating pause, where he’d repeated thirsty and his mismatched hands had hung in the air, suspended, before finally they fluttered into the smallest twist, his index fingers barely straightened.

“I’m sorry about that,” said Steve once the Soldier’s hands had dropped limply back to his lap. “Is it something specific that we can help with? An injury, or…?”

I don’t know, said the Soldier. Sorry. I don’t know. His eyes slid away from Steve as he answered.

The metal hand dug into his thigh.

“Hang on, let me—” Steve started, reaching for the folder he’d brought into the room with him and retrieving his pencil from his breast pocket. He flipped the folder over and quickly sketched out a cartoon version of the man across him, with crossed legs, socked feet, a dashed-off metal arm, long hair hanging over a messy oval of a face, and—

Steve hesitated. Frankly, it seemed—it seemed so cruel to draw the mask. Instead, he added a little squiggle for a nose, and an angled slash for a mouth, finished it off with a bit of rough shading and then flipped the folder around so the Soldier could see it.

The Soldier stared at it, actually leaned forward, towards Steve, his entire attention locked onto the little drawing. He was entranced.

“It’s you,” Steve said unnecessarily, and then watched as the Soldier’s flesh hand almost instinctively lifted from his lap and pressed to his own chest, as if to say, hey, that’s me. Steve swallowed. “Can you show me, on the drawing, where you’re in pain?”
The Soldier glanced up at him, and deliberately flicked his eyes to the pencil. Steve grinned. “Good point. Here.” He held it out, eraser first.

Several beats passed. “You can take it,” Steve said. “It’s okay.”

Finally, the biological hand tentatively reached forward. The acrid stink that clung to his skin grew stronger as his hand approached Steve, who carefully schooled his face into neutrality. It certainly wasn’t the Soldier’s fault.

Almost delicately, the Soldier plucked the pencil from Steve’s grasp. He flipped it around, as deftly as he’d handled a knife, and the pencil settled comfortably between his thumb and his index and middle fingers.

Steve stared. Not even two days ago, he’d held the marker like he’d never seen one before, like it was a weapon, but the pencil—

The Soldier pulled the drawing closer to himself, and pressed the tip of the pencil to the surface. Slowly, he dragged a single, unbroken line around the little figure of himself, a confident loop, then set down the pencil and withdrew his hands.

Steve lined forward, his stomach going tight with sympathy and dismay. “Everything?” he asked after a moment of staring at the circle in which the Soldier had imprisoned the cartoon version of himself.

Yes. The Soldier nodded.

“I’m sorry,” said Steve gently. “I know that some of it’s—our fault, keeping you here. And that we don’t know how to…” he struggled for the words. Handle him? Manage him? Operate him, in the way the binders of material at the bank had instructed? The thought tasted bitter. “But we’re trying to help. Sam told me—you asked where I was yesterday?” Steve performed the little sign that Sam had demonstrated for him, the fist and the circular sweep of the extended palm over the fist, that the Soldier used for Steve. Sam had been giddy about it—“he’s in there, man, he’s smart, if we just give him a chance—"

The Soldier tensed, staring at the Steve sign, and then nodded again, very slowly, yes. He held himself stiffly, his bloodshot eyes fixed in Steve’s direction, but not on his face.

“We found where Hydra was holding you,” said Steve. “No mincing words, no euphemisms, just—let’s be straightforward with him,” Sam had said.

The Soldier didn’t react. Though if it were even possible for his muscles to go tenser, Steve doubted he’d be able to tell.

He cleared his throat. “We were looking for information. You’re learning sign really fast, that’s good—” the Soldier’s eyes flicked up at him—“but to help you, to make you feel better, to know how to help, we needed more information. Does that make sense?”

I don’t know.

“All right,” said Steve. “Well—I’d like to—I’ve got some photographs here. I want to show them to you, and ask you some questions. If you don’t want to answer, you don’t have to. If you want to do this later, we can wait. But you’re—you’re not looking too good, pal, and we want to help now.”

At first, it seemed as though the Soldier hadn’t heard. Steve waited. And then, the Soldier reached forward, picked up the pencil again, and leaned forward.
The little cartoon mouth, the angled slash. The Soldier pressed the tip of the pencil to the end of the mouth, pulled it carefully upwards, a small deliberate curl. The soldier leaned back and pushed the drawing towards Steve.

He’d given himself a smile.

Steve couldn’t help but grin back. Either it was a joke, his second joke, or he was trying to show that he was really smiling. Steve peered at the Soldier’s face, tried to find evidence for one at the corners of his glassy eyes, but there was nothing. “Nice,” he said finally. “I like it.”

He flipped the folder around, lifted the front cover up. A photograph of the exterior of the bank. He handed it over to the Soldier. “This is where we went. Does it look familiar?”

The Soldier carefully set down the image. I don’t know. He hesitated, then raised a trembling hand to his face, covered his own eyes, while the metal hand was locked in a fist—

“They blindfolded you?”

Both hands dropped, the metal one to his right foot, crossed under his left leg, hidden by his thigh. Steve could hear it straining, whirring, the mechanics of it loud in the silent space evidence of the Soldier’s anxiety. Yes, he said.

“Oh, okay,” said Steve, swallowing. “How about this?” The cramped, dank little men’s bathroom, with its bolted down table, the rows of metal carts, the medieval-looking cryotube.

(“It’s got signs of struggle,” Tony had said, during their second walkthrough before packing up the computer hard drives and heading back up the jet. “Inside, Cap. Signs of struggle inside of it.”)

It had been a miserable little room in person, and in the photograph it seemed somehow even more bleak, with its severe lighting and green-tinged tile and years of accumulated dirt.

The Soldier didn’t take the photo. He just stared at it, his eyes unfocused, and finally Steve set it down in between them. “Do you recognize this?”

The Soldier’s metal hand was twitching as it gripped his socked foot. The other hand lifted in a fist, a wiggle; cold. He didn’t look at Steve. Cold.

“Yeah, okay. That’s what we thought,” Steve said, feeling ill. “Last one.” He took the cryotube photo back, set it to his left. “Last one,” he said again, even as his own gaze hitched and stopped at the sight of the chair. In person, it’d been ominous, unnatural; in a picture, it seemed like something out of a nightmare.

“Here you go,” Steve said, flipping up the photo.

Steve could hear the Soldier’s sudden, sharp intake of breath, could see the way his body stuttered, an aborted flinch, animal panic compressed into muscles. “I’m sorry,” he said, the words feeling grossly inadequate. “I’m sorry, I know you must be—you must be scared of it.”

The Soldier wasn’t listening. He’d lifted his biological hand to his chest. Sorry, sorry, sorry, he was saying, shaking his head, no, no, no, sorry, sorry, sorry—

Steve didn’t think. He leaned forward, extended his arms, folded his hand over the one pressed to the Soldier’s chest, rested the other on his shoulder. “It’s okay,” he said. “It’s okay.”

The Soldier sagged into his touch, the weight of him—less than when they’d fought—pouring
forward into Steve’s hands, he was warm, too warm, and he smelled, but he was flesh and blood just like anybody else, just like Steve, and where Steve’s hands met the Soldier’s skin there was a racing pulse, either the Soldier’s or his own, and he could feel the Soldier’s quivering, shuddering muscles —when was the last time he’d been touched out of comfort? Out of compassion?

“I got you,” Steve repeated again and again, trying to keep his voice calm, his tone kind even as rage churned in his gut. “I got you, it’s okay, pal, it’s okay.”

Slowly, the Soldier’s breathing evened out, and he dragged his shaking hand away from Steve’s, up to his forehead, pulling it away, the pinky and thumb stretched out. His eyes gleamed dully. Why, he wanted to know. Why.

Steve swallowed, one hand still on the Soldier’s shoulder. “What does it do?”

The Soldier’s eyes squeezed tightly shut. His chest heaved in three short breaths, and he opened them again, focused. He reached forward for the folder with his flesh hand and doggedly clawed at the pencil with the metal one. He’d dropped it on the floor at some point, and it was too small even for the remarkable dexterity of the prosthetic. The metal hand snapped it in half trying to pick it up. The Soldier finally captured just the end with the eraser.

He flipped the folder over. The cartoon with its smile stared up at them. He leaned forward, his breath loud and rancid smelling in the small circle of space they shared, and attacked it.

Steve watched, realization dawning thick and slow and sick, as the little cartoon disappeared from the page in violent, rough drags of the eraser, the metal arm digging so deeply that it carved trenches into the card-stock.

The Soldier stopped. The broken pencil dropped back to the ground. He pushed the ruined drawing back to Steve, and curled back up on himself, his body trembling, his eyes flat.

It erases, he was saying. It erases.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone for your kudos and comments! <3
The Soldier stared at the wall of glass-enclosed shower stalls. His eyes tracked slowly over everything, from the bank of lockers and low benches to the rows of sinks and mirrors, pausing on the heated shelves of stacked towels and empty laundry bins. It was the same systematic, predatory evaluation of his surroundings Steve had seen the Soldier perform on the freeway and later, on the helicarrier.

Dressed as he was in a faded, overlarge Knicks sweatshirt, scrub pants, and combat boots—his own, which Steve had returned to him once it became clear they were leaving the panic room on a field trip—and of course the angular, close-fitting mask, he ought to have looked ridiculous. Yet once again, the Soldier surprised; weak and ill and confused he might seem, but given a mission, he rallied.

“We’ve got a plan,” Sam had told him, back in the cell. “The plan is to get you feelin’ better, get you healthy. It’s got a couple steps. The first step we’ve already been doing, you got any guesses about that?”

The Soldier had made brief eye contact with him, though his gaze was as inscrutable as ever, and raised his right hand, mechanically opening and closing it like a puppet’s mouth. If it was possible for someone to sign sarcastically, that had been it.
“Yeah, yeah,” Sam had said, laughing. “Nice one. We got a real Chatty Cathy over here, Steve, that’s two signs on his own, ‘Steve’ and ‘chitchat.’”

“I’m flattered,” Steve had replied dryly. The Soldier had looked at him then, his eyes going glassy in the way they often did when Steve drew his attention. Sam had speculated that he was dissociating, subconsciously readying himself for combat somehow, maybe that a part of him still saw Steve as his biggest threat.

“But he’s been getting better,” Steve had protested at Sam’s suggestion, feeling oddly dismayed by the logic. “And he asked about me.”

“Maybe he imprinted on you, Cap,” Tony had offered up unhelpfully. He’d been down in the control room after updating them on the slow progress of decrypting the hard drives they’d taken from the vault. “You know. Like a duck. Quack, quack.”

“Isn’t it geese that do that?” Sam had asked curiously.

“I think it’s all birds.”

“Huh.”

“Shouldn’t you know that?”

“For the last time, it’s a call sign—”

“He’s not a bird,” Steve had interrupted sourly. “We’re trying to get him to trust us, that means we shouldn’t be scaring him, and if I am—”

“I think us existing probably scares him,” Sam had said, scratching at his chin. “But I watched some of that tape, Steve. He was fighting back, when they took him out of—” his jaw had clenched—“the cold. Cryo. He ain’t fighting us, not yet. I think that’s the best we can hope for.”

“So, like we said,” Sam was saying now, “this is the locker room. It’s got showers, towels, shampoo, body wash. You don’t need to worry about any of the trackers, Stark’s got ‘em spoofed and feeding out dummy data to anyone who’s listening. You can clean up, take a shower, spend a couple hours in the hot tub, whatever you want, man.”

They weren’t sure how much of what they said made sense to the Soldier, considering the chair, what Tony was grimly calling Old Sparky.

(“You really think this is the time for jokes?” Sam had asked, disgusted. “Seriously, man?"

“I’m not joking,” Tony had spat back, looking up from his panel of computer monitors, diffuse rage making his entire body tense, his expression carved from stone. “It might not kill him, but it kills what matters.”)

Steve wasn’t sure he believed that. Or maybe he just didn’t want to believe it. The Soldier was a person inside there, he was confused, and he could learn. If he could learn he wasn’t dead. If he could make jokes—rudimentary though they might be—he couldn’t be empty.

But still, he didn’t ask a lot of questions. They weren’t sure if it was because he was so out of it or because he flat-out didn’t understand them, or because of what JARVIS had reported that morning—that the Soldier’s vitals suggested he was in the early stages of withdrawal from the pharmacy of drugs HYDRA had been pumping into him.
“Yeah, that checks out,” Sam had said, expression tired and a little sad. “That smell comin’ off him, Cap, sort of—metallic? Chemical?”

Frankly, there were a lot of smells coming off him, none of them pleasant, but Steve still knew the one he was talking about. “That’s withdrawal?”

Sam had just nodded. “That’s how I lost a couple of my vets,” he’d explained tersely. “Drug addiction. Helped one or two of ‘em through it a few times. It ain’t good.”

Of course, at the moment there was no way to know for sure that the Soldier was in withdrawal or in some other kind of medical distress. But that was the plan for the afternoon. Right now the plan was to get him cleaned up.

“You’ve got some privacy,” Sam continued. “We’re not gonna stand around watching you. But you can make some noise—” he demonstrated by rapping his knuckles against the tiled wall—“and we aren’t gonna be far away, if you need help. And we got more clothes for you, remember?”

Steve held up the clear plastic bag: it was all brand new, tags removed, soft pants and athletic gear that he’d been informed was loungewear, not pajamas.

“Got some nice threads waiting for you on the other side,” Sam continued. “It pays to have Stark on your side. Or I guess, he pays. Gotta get me some of these.”

The Soldier stopped his slow, rolling inspection of the locker room, snapping his gaze back to the two of them. His brow was furrowed. His right hand, apparently unconsciously, gripped and twisted at the hoodie he was swimming in.

“You can keep it, man,” said Sam. “It was a gift.”

The right hand tightened further. The Soldier’s gaze flicked back at the row of showers, at the sinks. His stance was off-kilter, awkward.

Steve was getting pretty good at reading his body language, or at least he thought he was. “Is the mask going to be a problem? In the water?”

Something imperceptible flickered over the Soldier’s visible face, a flash of something gone as quickly as it had come. His right hand released its death grip on the sweatshirt and lifted slowly to his face, settling over the perforations there, sealing up the mask from outside air. His right hand dropped, the metal hand lifted, hurts.

It took a second. Then Steve’s brain went a little fuzzy, a little cold, the phantom crush of icy water rushing his throat—

Sam sucked in air through his teeth in a harsh little whistle. “You don’t need to submerge,” he said, somehow keeping his tone light. “No shower either, if you don’t want. You can scrub down with a washcloth. Your call, man.”

“I can show you,” Steve said abruptly. “It’s nothing like—it’s not going to be like what they did, okay?” He moved forward, failing to telegraph, failing to wait—

The Soldier’s body tensed. He surged backwards, in jerky uncontrolled steps until he was outside of Steve’s range. He was dialed in, his eyes a little wide, with something dark in them, not quite resigned, but focused. STOP, his hands said, in violent exaggerated chops, STOP, STOP.

You’re his biggest threat, man, Sam had said.
Steve froze. “Sorry,” he said pointlessly. “Sorry, I wasn’t trying to—”

“How about you let the man shower in peace, Steve,” said Sam. “Get him some Gatorade or something. I’ve got it from here.”

“This lever controls the temperature,” says Sam. Pay attention. Head hurts. Pay attention. The door is open. It is all empty here. It all echoes. It’s empty.

“It gets pretty hot, so be careful. I’m gonna turn it on, all right? Just to show you.”

Turn it on. The shower. Nod even though the head hurts jaw hurts keep it still. Yes.

“’Kay, back up a little, you don’t want to get soaking wet with your clothes still on.” Sam isn’t looking at him, it’s an order but it isn’t, like most of what Sam says—if you want, he likes to say, your choice. No tricks. No lies. Your choice.

Good one Sam.

No he doesn’t want to get wet. Not with clothes on. Not now that the sweat is dry. Step back. Too close to Sam anyway, even if it’s your choice, even if—

“Cool,” says Sam. Cool. “All right, here you go—”

Water comes on. Fast spray, instant steam, the rush of moving water, hits the tiles, a hiss.

*Thank the Virgin fuckin’ Mary, we got three hots and a pot to piss in*

Not here because it’s empty but it’s there, in the head, where it hurts. Not the ears.

“You can test the temp like this,” says Sam. He holds out a big brown hand, pale palm, not to him, not to his body, but under the water you finish that book yet?

Hand in a claw, against the mask. The left one because he forgot fuck. Rip it away like it hurts your mouth, Sam said. Hot.

“It’s not too hot,” says Sam. “Here, I’ll get out of the way—push your sleeve up, maybe—and you can test it too.”

He backs up. Wet hand out in front of him, dripping. Other hand in his pocket. Legs shoulder-width apart, easy, knees locked, training shoes. Favors his chest.
Whip of hair around the face—bullets and fast footsteps—gun in hand—

Palm pressed flat to the chest. Sorry. No sign for the next one. Make it up. Thumbs together. Palms down. Flap hands, up and down. Wings. Supposed to be wings.

Sam looks at the hands carefully. Sorry. Say sorry again.

Sam’s hand goes to his own chest like he’s gonna say sorry but he doesn’t. “It’s okay, man,” he says. “It’s okay. I mean, did you mean to?”

Mean to what? Mean to—yes, he meant it, Yes, nod.

Sam laughs. “I meant—would you do it again now? If you could do it over?”

He does everything over. Over and over and over and over. Again and again and again. One hand flat. The other one swoops in to the middle. Again.

“—what you mean,” Sam is saying. Losing time. Focus. “You mean, you wouldn’t do it again, or…?”

Do what. Do what, Sam?

Sorry, hand flat, on the chest. Hand in a circle, I don’t know. He doesn’t—what is the question—what are they—what does he—the water, it’s still going, and steam—water everywhere, all around him—

Hand on the forehead, pull away into a fist. Forget. Steve taught it. Forget, for if it’s okay if you don’t remember some things, Steve said, just let us know, if you’re confused, here, this is the sign—

Sorry, hand to the chest, forget, hand on the forehead, can’t breathe, pull away into a fist. Sorry, just keep breathing—

“Hey, hey, it’s okay,” Sam is still here, two meters away, he backed away, Sam’s hands are in the air, easy, easy, only it’s not—it’s not him—

“No apology necessary, man,” Sam says. “You were messed up. We’re cool. How about that shower, huh? Can you focus on that for me? Test the water temperature, like I did?”

It’s an order but it’s not. Reach hand forward. Breathe. Flesh hand, in the water, not sharp, skin still there, warm.

“How’s that? That okay?”

Other hand. Thumbs up. Good.

“Glad to hear it,” Sam says. “All right, so, I’m gonna—I’m gonna stay right here, in case you need me. Take your time, water ain’t running out. You can pull off your clothes, maybe toss the sweatshirt on the bench so it doesn’t get wet, and—”

Not an order but do it. Boots off. Sweatshirt off, even if—Sam goes away, comes back—sweatshirt’s off, toss it on the bench, like Sam says, hurts to move, the shoulder, the elbow, the wrist, it lands—next the—

Pajama shirt

And pajama pants
And socks

“Easy, easy, not a race,” Sam says.

Naked. No clothes. Cold but not, next to the steam. Then you’re in it. Water in face. Running down, warm little rivers, doesn’t hurt, not against the back or the shoulders or the face, breathe—

“Feels good, huh, man?”

Thumbs up. Good.

“There’s some—here you go,” Sam’s brown hand, a bottle, purple and green, little spiky plants, take it. “It’s body wash. And there’s a cloth in there.”

Stand in the water, like a—like a—

Don’t close eyes, just in case. It’s warm. Whole body, lungs big, hot warm wet air, through the mask. All hurts, but against the neck, all warmth, going out to—going out to the toes, and fingers—the shoulder—and back—

Bottle. Markings. Hey, B. B is for—

Open it up, the smell, through the mask, sharp, like—a forest, like the cold but so warm, like—

Grab some off the sill, for me, won’t you sweetheart

And—and—it hurts, in the chest, and the hand squeezes the bottle in his hand, and it slides, everywhere, slips slickly on the body, cold streaks of it, slimy, and the scent floods up around him, a cloud of it, like the ice, but not cold, but hurts as much, and a face smiles at him oh, thank you my darling, and if you would please—

His heart, his heart and his eyes, and he can’t breathe, Ma, please Ma, please—

“—in there?” is a voice—

A woman humming, low-pitched I’m a contralto, beloved and whispering small soft words—he can’t them make out, they roll and pitch, the sound of them, and the scent, the spice of it, sweet, piney, in his eyes and mouth and chest—

“Buddy, I’m gonna need you to breathe for me,” says the voice, and he is

on the floor, tile, warm and wet, back plate clinking against it, a hard cold metal scrape, sharp hot rain, steaming, on him, and his ma—his ma—

Can’t open his mouth, he wants to, he wants to, please Ma—

“—not coming in,” says the voice “but I—”

No, no, no, get away, please don’t, but the mouth won’t—his mouth won’t open, his jaw hurts, pulls, aches, but he’s trapped, please, Ma, come on, I want my ma, it hurts Ma it hurts—

“—no, what happened?”

“—the water—”

A wooden spoon, dark brown meaty spicy, blue eyes crinkling, sweaty dark hair, curly, sticking to
the forehead, a red cloth, tying it all back—*How does it taste beloved*

“—a good idea, man—”

“—pal, you okay?”

That’s him, *pal*, and it’s—it’s *Steve’s voice*, he’s *here*—

Is he here or there, he was never there was he, where did he *go*—

*Hey pal and you okay Buck* and—and—and—

“Hey, I’m coming in, all right?”

And it’s—turn the face away, back in the corner, the shower’s still—sorry Steve, *sorry I’m such a fucking mess*—

“I’m going to help, okay? I don’t know if you’re hurting, or what, but just breathe for me, and we’re going to get you cleaned up and out of here, okay?”

*Okay*, thumb and forefinger, middle ring and pinky up. Okay, Steve.

Big warm hand, long fingers, he loves those hands, holding the cloth, with the stuff, pale cream, warm, on his flesh shoulder, rub in circles. Steve’s hand. *Just breathe for me Buck*.

Ma’s not here is she Steve


Okay, Steve.

“Good job,” says Steve. “Almost done. This still okay?”

Flap hand a little. Get on with it. Legs like jelly. Arms like—*army noodles*. Hair wet hanging down over the face and mask and—it’s steamy and he can’t see, but—

Steve’s hand, on his back, same old circles—

—the *scent*, it’s *soap*, and it’s not *Ma*, mother, he has a *mother*, but—

Steve’s hand, on the leg—

—and the other one, the left arm, grimy, and—

Steve—
The water finally ran clear at the drain. Steve was soaked through, but the Soldier was clean, and not hyperventilating and not crying, Jesus Christ, like he had been, in horrible huffing choked-off breaths, only now he was—

“He’s checked out, huh,” said Sam, as Steve finally shut off the water and looked up at him. Sam was seated on the bench, leaning forward on his knees, looking shaken and jumpy. “Dissociated.”

“Think so,” said Steve, standing up from his awkward crouch and wringing the washcloth out. The Soldier still sat on the tiled floor, his legs splayed out, staring vacantly. The only movement on him belonged to the droplets of water rolling down his body, down the mask, and the faint shake and shudder of his stringy, wet hair.

“Come on, pal,” said Steve gently, carefully placing a hand on his flesh shoulder. He’d just washed him completely, but there was no reason not to be careful, not to be gentle. “Can you stand up for me?”

The Soldier’s upper body plunged forward suddenly, the metal hand catching himself on the tile in an abrupt, ear-piecing squeal, the hand digging in, crumbling the tile like chalk. Steve stepped backwards as the Soldier mechanically clambered to his feet, his movements pained and uncoordinated, a tremor in the legs that were still ropy with muscle.

“Here’s a towel.” Sam handed it over, and Steve grabbed it without looking away from their charge. Steve offered to the Soldier. “Can you dry off, or do you need me…?”

He stood there, motionless, eyes unfocused, and Steve heaved a deep breath, forcing down the sympathy and anger in his chest, the visceral disgust at what had been done to this man. He swallowed it all down and reformed it into professionalism and efficiency, like he’d learned from his mother, wrapping the towel around the Soldier’s body in careful, smooth movements.

He and Sam worked together then, urging the Soldier forward and out of the shower stall. They led him to a dressing area that wasn’t soaked with water, though it soon would be, thanks to Steve.

Sam kept up a running litany of comforting chatter, explaining to the unresponsive Soldier what they were doing, what was next, that it was okay if he needed them to stop. In that way, they got him mostly dried off and dressed in boxer briefs, sweatpants, a long-sleeved shirt.

Steve leaned down and pulled on a new pair of socks over the Soldier’s damaged feet. The combat boots were next, and their reek contrasted sharply with the pleasant aroma of rosemary that had suffused the Soldier and the entire locker room, thanks to the entire bottle of the stuff that they’d used.

“Step two down,” said Sam tiredly. “It’s goin’ great.” There was no trace of sarcasm, not really, as his commentary was meant to reassure the Soldier and not to entertain Steve, but still. “You’re cleaned up, you’re feelin’ good, that means it's time for Step Three, okay, bud? Let's go meet Bruce.”

Chapter End Notes
Holy shit, friends. Your response to this story and to the last chapter in particular has really been amazing. I can't thank you enough for all your kudos and comments. <3 I am stunned anything of mine has reached 1000+ kudos, that is just bananas! So thank you very much for your support and kindness -- it really does a body good. :*
Chapter Eleven

Chapter Summary

Tony and Bruce have information about the mask. The Soldier creates a new word.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

despite the threatening sky and shuddering earth (they remained)

Part 11

It would take them five minutes to journey up six floors, down the hall, and through the labyrinthine series of rooms that led to the cell. As it had been for days now, the entire tower was locked down and cleared of all but essential personnel.

Throughout the entire walk, the Soldier maintained an easy pace, his head on a swivel, unfocused eyes scanning his environment with reflexive vigilance that Steve found exhausting to witness.

(“Treat him the same,” Sam had said to him in a low tone, as he’d pushed open the door of the locker room. “Even if it seems like nobody’s home, let’s treat him the same.”)

“Almost there,” Sam said once they were in the elevator. When the three of them had stood in this same elevator 90 minutes earlier, the Soldier had been palpably tense, his arm whirring loudly, his
breathing agitated.

This time, though, he and his arm were silent and still; a listless automaton, waiting for instruction.

When they made it back to the empty control room, Sam simply opened what Tony called the “airlock” and waited for the Soldier to go back inside. He didn’t.

“Go on, man, it’s okay,” said Sam after a minute, gesturing to the open door and the little room that in the past day had been equipped with a small cot, two more chairs, and a table. “This is temporary. We’re gonna get you some better digs soon, but for now…”

The Soldier walked inside the cell in careful, efficient steps. Once inside, he chose the chair with its back to a corner and sat down smoothly, hands coming to rest on his knees. He stared at nothing. Water from his wet hair was soaking into the collar of the Knicks sweatshirt.

The set of doors closed in sync, sealing the Soldier inside.

“I’m staying here,” Sam said, leaning against the wall and looking down and appearing almost bewildered to see his own clenched fist. Steve watched as he consciously extended his fingers and shook his hand out, as if he’d thrown a punch.

Or, Steve realized, as if he were getting ready to.

God knew he could relate. He thought again of the Soldier’s shuddering and shaking body, the wet sound of his breathing through the mask, his awful helplessness in the face of whatever he’d been experiencing in his own mind.

He hadn’t even been able to tell them what was wrong.

Steve swallowed past a dry throat. “We’re meeting in a few minutes.”

“Yeah, I know.” Sam looked away from his hand, and back through the viewing window to their charge.
The Soldier was hard to look at. That disquieting calm, the unnatural placidity — Steve found it far more frightening than anything else they’d seen out of him.

Except, perhaps, for the sagging figure in the shower, his chest hitching and jerking in uneven, quiet sobs, that Steve had been able to *feel* under his fingertips even if he hadn’t been able to *hear* them.

“He shouldn’t be alone,” Steve said after a moment. For the last hour, he’d been searching the Soldier’s body language, his visible face, for any sign at all that he was even *aware*. He hadn’t found one. Not yet, anyway. He was locked away in his own head. But that didn’t mean he had to be alone on the outside.

“I’m sticking with him,” Sam said wearily, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Do you think he’s gonna…” Steve trailed off.

“What?”

Steve cleared his throat. “Will he be okay?” It felt like a childlike question, naïve and stupid, and he’d long had enough of people thinking that’s what he was, that he just didn’t get things, like everybody was just waiting for a chance to roll their eyes at him.

Sam didn’t roll his eyes. Instead, he heaved a long, exhausted breath. “I don’t know, man. Do I look like I know? I don’t know if—what we’re doing is right, if it’s— *making it worse*, or…” He trailed off a little helplessly. “It was just a *shower*. It was just supposed to—“ He stopped to scrub at his scalp in rough, frustrated strokes. “I don’t know.”

Steve’s new phone dinged then, the little chime that let him know he was nearly late for something. It didn’t seem to matter whether he ignored it or not, the notification would just keep going, faster and faster. No doubt Tony had designed it that way for a laugh. He hadn’t bothered figuring out yet how to stop it. So far, he’d mostly only considered the direct application of force.

It dinged again.

“We’re helping,” Steve said, digging the phone out of his pocket. “We’ve got to be helping. He’s
“Yeah, that’s—“ Sam swallowed. “I can’t do it, man. I can’t—” he looked back at the Soldier, who was still staring blankly ahead. For the first time, Steve noticed that his head and upper body were rocking faintly back and forth, off-tempo with his breathing.

“Do what?”

“This shit—recruit me to blow up a helicarrier, sure, but that—” Sam waved his hand towards the ceiling, indicating the upper floors, where they were due to meet the team. “I don’t need to look at more x-rays and see whatever else they did to him that we don’t even know about yet. I’m sure Stark’s cracked their encryption, right? Or he’s about to?”

“That’s what he said. He’s halfway there, he’s got some info for us.”

Sam’s mouth flattened into a straight line. He gave two decisive, violent shakes of his head. “No. He just--had a goddamn breakdown in the shower. He needs me here.” Sam rolled his shoulders, stood up straight. “Gonna see if I can help him.”

Because he hadn’t been able to, back in the showers, Steve realized. He’d walked in with a couple of Gatorades to see Sam crouched by the open glass door, speaking urgently, quietly, trying somehow to reach the Soldier even though by then he’d been completely unresponsive.

That others may live, Steve thought absently, and realized he’d found somebody who handled helplessness as poorly as he did. He turned back to his friend. “Thanks, Sam. For looking out for him.”

“Somebody’s gotta. Steve?”

“Yeah?”

“Tell Stark we’re not doing anything except what’s medically necessary until he’s—” he jerked his shoulder towards the Soldier “—back in his right—well, until he’s back.”
Tony and Bruce were both waiting when Steve arrived at the small, glass-walled meeting room adjacent to a rash of mostly unused laboratories.

“Captain, at last,” said Tony as he leaned back in his chair, loudly chewing on something he’d taken from the bag in his hand. He choreographed checking his empty wrist and then let his eyes flick from Steve’s hair—still wet, after he’d done nothing more than towel it so it wasn’t dripping—to his change of clothes. Tony cocked his head and sampled the air with two exaggerated sniffs. “Getting up close and personal with a Christmas tree, there, Cap?”

“No,” said Steve flatly. He pulled out one the wheeled chairs tucked under the conference table, and sank into it. He’d been going nonstop for what felt like weeks now. And after everything in that locker room—

He took a deep breath. “Bruce, good to see you. Tony, Where’s Hill?”

Tony folded his hands behind his head. “Where’s Wilson? And—”

Of course, the Soldier didn’t have a name, and to see Tony falter like that was evidence he was shaken. He must have found something awful, then, just as Sam had suspected.

“Philippe?” Steve tossed out, wearily filling the silence. “Zorro?”

Tony tsked him, and popped another shriveled little—something from his bag into his mouth. “I already used Zorro. Philippe?”

Bruce gave a small cough. He looked rumpled and tired. “Alexandre Dumas.”
“Man in the Iron Mask?” Tony gaped at Steve, half-amazed, half-revolted. “Really, Cap?”

“Hey, Bruce had to explain it to you,” said Steve, drumming his fingers on the table. “Getting slow in your old age, there, pal?”

Tony snorted. “Please. That reference is two hundred years old —”

Steve frowned, and prepared to argue, no, barely a hundred, and abruptly shut his mouth with a click. Tony didn’t need that ammunition.

“Anyway,” Tony drew out the word, “I know where Hill is, but Wilson’s not joining? Is he photocopying HIPAA forms and—”

“The Soldier had an episode,” interrupted Steve flatly. “In the shower, he…” Weirdly, explaining to them that he’d collapsed to the tile crying felt like an invasion of his privacy. “He dissociated,” he said finally. “He’s still not, uh, back.”

Bruce frowned. “Did he become violent, or…?”

“No, just…” Steve thought back to Sam’s words. “Nobody home. Where’s Hill?”

“In D.C.,” Tony responded promptly, flinging a hand at the glass panels that separated their meeting room from the empty laboratory. The glass blinked to life with a faint blue glow, and Steve rubbed at his stubbly chin as documents flickered across the display. “I own the vault now, free and clear, all mine. Mi casa. In a manner of speaking. J found that the rabbit hole went a little deeper than we thought, so we just… dipped in a couple of documents, made a couple of alterations, forged a signature, and…” He shrugged.

“You stole it?”

Tony sucked in air through his teeth, tilted his head. “Well, it doesn’t look like I stole it.” Across the table, Bruce massaged at his temple. “Come on, it’s not as though HYDRA’s asset manager is going to go call up FinCEN about it, are they?”
Steve didn’t know what that meant. “And so you own it, and now Hill’s down there, doing what, exactly?”

Tony’s gaze hardened. “She’s still a federal agent. She’s gone dark, yeah, but she never resigned, never got fired. What do you think she’s doing in the vault? It’s a crime scene. She’s collecting evidence.”

Steve stared at him, feeling abruptly betrayed. “Tony, you saw—he isn’t responsible for —”

“Evidence of crimes against him, Steve,” Bruce cut in mildly. “All the security footage, which was on its own network. The hard copy files, the clothes, the medical gear. The—” he winced slightly, “uh, apparatus.”

Tony’s tone was dark. “We can’t leave that machine there, for anybody to walk in and take a look at. That thing, in the wrong hands, or, uh, wronger hands?” He shook his head sharply. “Not happening.”

“So she’s down there so it’s all by the books,” said Steve slowly. “And so even if we take everything, all the evidence—”

“—can still be logged as evidence. Proper chain of custody. Logged, processed, stored here, of course, since you broke, uh, the government. I haven’t read any lawyers into this situation yet, but.” Tony grinned mirthlessly. “The guy’ll be set for life, by the time this all taken care of.”

“And for the files we do have,” Steve continued thoughtfully. “You found something?”

“We’ve been looking for more details on the mask,” said Bruce. “I’ve been consulting with a few actual physicians—” he shot a look at Tony, who rolled his eyes and tossed another little dried blob from the bag into his mouth— “and they recommended a G tube, um, with a stoma, right about here.” Bruce demonstrated on himself, pressing his fingers against his wrinkled shirt, right below the notch of his ribcage. “Since the mask complicates things. But—”

“Thanks to the whole broken government thing,” Tony continued, “We know not to do that.”
“Why not? Were there files on him in—”

“They tried it on you, Steve,” said Bruce patiently. “When you were…”

“Thawing,” Steve realized. “So, with the serum—”

“Your body kept rejecting it, pushing it out,” Bruce confirmed. “So, we’re back to the NG tube, and the mask, which is a carbon fiber blend that we can cut through.”

“So why aren’t we just cutting it off?" Steve asked, frustrated. “We’ve had him now for days, why —”

“We can’t jeopardize the integrity,” said Tony seriously. “Vibranium-tipped dremel, to minimize the vibration from the tool, for a couple seconds it takes to make space for the tube? That won’t be enough to set anything off. But Dr. Do No Harm over here doesn’t want to touch it until we get all the schematics, and until we get better scans on his noggin, which hopefully, today.”

“I’ll take that nickname,” Bruce said dryly. “Steve, if you, uh, take a look at what we do have on his brain—” he nodded towards the display. “JARVIS, uh, zoom in on--yes, thank you.”

The scans of the soldier’s brain took over the displays, 10 times larger than actual size. There were only a few images; they’d been with some sort of handheld device that had been a casualty — along with the nurse using it — of the Soldier’s initial violent wakeup.

“Tony, how’s your neurology?” Bruce asked lightly, making small gestures to zoom in on the shocking white-- thing inside the Soldier’s skull, and the bright white little lines, like wires, that extended out from it.

“About as good as Cap’s.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “What are we looking at?”

“It’s a brain, Steve, Jesus. I take back my compliment.”
Steve ignored him.

“These are lesions.” Bruce pointed at dark grey spots on the Soldier’s brain, or in some cases blobs of black. “Neuron death. Without a doubt, related to the electroshock torture. I thought there might be something there, too, explaining his aphasia, but we don’t have enough images here to tell for sure, and I’m not a neurologist. See these wires?”

Steve definitely did. Some of them terminated near the lesions that Bruce had pointed out, and others —

“I’m pretty sure at least a couple of them lead back to the mask,” said Bruce quietly. “And that the explosives we’re worried about…”

“Not so much a danger to others as a danger to himself.” Tony drummed his fingers against the table in an agitated, rolling rhythm. “So that’s why we need to be sure.”

Jesus Christ. Steve dug his thumb and index into his eyes, massaging away the sudden exhaustion headache. “So what have we got, then? How close are we?”

“Well,” said Tony, his chair squeaking as he eased it back down on the floor from its tilted position. “We found why they put it on in the first place. He escaped.”

Dread bloomed in Steve’s throat. “When?”

“Early 2000s, seems like. It’s not all there.” Tony’s mouth twisted in annoyance. “Anything older than the past year or so is triple-encrypted. Original data broken into chunks, split apart, stored separately, re-encrypted. Like a shredder. And if it’s not that, it’s documents hand-encrypted to look like other stuff. Invoices. Inventory. Schematics. All fake. It’s a mess. JARVIS can brute force it, he already has with some of it, but, his processing power was meant for bigger and better things.”

“But you found out that he escaped,” said Steve dully.

“Or went rogue, or some schmuck took him for a joyride. That’s the hypothesis, anyway. Haven’t pieced together the entire fire.” Tony nodded back up to the screen, which was displaying a scanned
Top Secret — Sensitive Compartmented Information” emblazoned across the top. He’d seen a thousand documents just like it, in the past year of working for SHIELD.

Steve leaned in. “‘This incident of extreme noncompliance poses a serious risk to continued secrecy of operations,’” he read aloud. “‘As well as a severe detriment to the organization’s capability to maintain mission integrity and reputation among contracts within the domestic IC.’”

“I know what IC stands for,” Steve said, irritated. “So HYDRA was… contracting him out?”

“Yes,” said Tony. “Or really, SHIELD was. Deployed him on some sort of mission—not sure which one yet, it’s not in the file, I’m cross-referencing mystery deaths, disappearances, et cetera—and somehow the agency — 95% level of confidence that it was the CIA — assets handling him lost him. And he talked, I guess, looks like he blew the cover on whatever they were doing, or on HYDRA, or…” Tony shrugged. “That’s the gist.”

“And what happened? Did he actually escape?”

“Yeah. Did a runner. The reason for the loan was some kind of dummy assassination in Europe somewhere, looks like the Baltics, Lithuania or Estonia. You know, rile up the locals, make ‘em think the big bad Russian Federation was gonna start rolling tanks any second. They picked him up in Poland.”

“And the CIA agents?”

“Anybody involved was…” Tony drew his index across his throat in a single sharp slash. “Take a look.” He nodded towards the screen. Next to Steve, Bruce winced.

A crushed skull; awkwardly splayed limbs; gravel and mud. Steve leaned in towards the gruesome image. “‘Target sanctioned with extreme prejudice,’” he read aloud, feeling ill. “So she was CIA, or HYDRA, or…?”

Tony smiled thinly. “Don’t know. Does it matter?”
Betrayal and anger curled sourly in Steve’s gut. “No. I guess it doesn’t. It says, ‘preventive measures recommended.’ That mean what I think it means?”

“Pretty much,” Tony confirmed. The photograph disappeared, and was replaced with what looked like a simple log of events, mostly written in some sort of scientific shorthand that Steve had trouble parsing.

Bruce fiddled with his folded hands. “They, uh, reworked the drug regimen, performed extensive electroshock torture, ‘installed’ the mask, and ‘placed the asset into storage.’” His jaw snapped shut; he chewed at his lip.

“Their *hypothesis,*” Tony picked up, “was that the CIA was running a sting. Intelligence gathering, or maybe had inside information. Interagency politics. They didn’t want the possibility of him talking to *anyone,* not even inside HYDRA.”

“If he’s the only witness,” Steve realized, thinking of Natasha’s dire warning — *credited with two dozen assassinations* — “then the only person who could expose the crime…”

“Is him. Yeah.” Tony’s tone was short. “But this is good news, Cap.”

“How?” Steve asked bleakly. To think that the Soldier had *escaped,* had *made it to freedom,* only to be captured again—how many times had that happened? How many times had he gotten away, only to be dragged back?

“They didn’t start the, whatever, the Old Sparky routine with the *escape,*” Tony explained. “We know that much. Remember the utility data, the energy spikes, the readouts on protocols?” He made a complex, manic gesture in the air that resulted in the screen displaying everything they had on the Soldier, taking up the entire wall of glass. “They zapped him before cryo and after,” he continued. “And he escaped *anyway.* He remembered *anyway.*”

“The serum,” Steve said faintly. It always came back to the serum.

“Whatever they did to him,” said Bruce, his voice quiet and carefully controlled, “whatever formulation of the serum they gave him, it’s what let him survive that chair in the first place. He should have been a vegetable, permanently, based on the data.”
“2000 volts,” Tony said. “And anywhere from 900 to 4000 milliamps. Straight to the brain, for minutes at a time.”

“But he remembered anyway,” Steve said, unsure if he felt appalled or amazed. “He remembered enough to get away, and to pose a ‘risk to continued secrecy of operations.’”

“And if he remembered then,” continued Tony, “then he’s got a fighting chance now. His brain might heal itself. He might be a person in there. He might even have a life after all this.”

“He already is a person, Tony,” said Steve wearily. He thought of a frightened man’s pounding heartbeat under his hand, as he tried to wash him, and an unfocused, blank stare, and the video: *please why target.* “He never stopped.”

“—talk every night, deep into the darkness. They say about how they were taken, about what they can remember of their homes: about their lineage and the great deeds of their ancestors, about their training and what they have learned and will learn—”

*Wart. A fish, and a knight, and a— I want be the Dog Boy!, a girl shrieked, and Merlyn.*

“—a shame that they should be kept prisoners and hungry. Well, they do not really understand that they are prisoners, any more than the cavalry officers do. They look on themselves as being dedicated to their profession, like an order of knighthood—”

*Joust with me, Bucky,* the girl demanded, eyes bright and blue, and, *I’m going to be King Arthur!*
Funny noise, metal on plastic, start it again, tap-tap-tap—

“They are in training, you know, and like everybody in strict training, they think about—”

Food—five taps, then scratch, scratch—

“—Food. How soon can I begin? You can begin now, if you want to. My insight tells me that Hob has this minute—oh, hey man.”

Look up. It’s Sam. Smiling. Back up against a wall, knees up, with the book, the book that—

“How’re you feeling?”

He lost time. He lost so much time. He was in—he was in the water, feels good man, and the stuff, in the bottle—

“—with me?”

It’s a question. Nod yes. Whole head heavy. Body numb, except for the knees, and shoulder, and head. Sitting in chair, hands flat on thighs, how long—

“Scared us for a while, there,” says Sam. Holds up book. “The Once and Future King. You like it?”

No, it’s—it’s—

Hands in front of you, before telling them to, between spread knees, holding an imaginary sword, pull pull pull—come on, Sam—

Sam, who is smiling. Still on the floor. “You read it before?”

It goes tight, in the chest, and the throat, the same as—the same as before, and—no, no more time, don’t lose time, focus—

“It’s all right,” says Sam. Folds the corner of the page and god damnit Steve can you use a bookmark like a goddamn civilized person and puts it down next to him. “You remember the plan?”


“The shower was supposed to help,” Sam says. “We’re tryin’ to help, remember? Step one, get you some words. Step two, get you cleaned up, some new clothes. Only, it didn’t go so well, did it?”

Don’t—what is he supposed to say—hand in a circle, I don’t know — sorry—

“You didn’t do anything wrong. You got nothin’ to apologize for. Hey, can you—you don’t have to, but if you wanna look at me for a sec?”

It’s not an order, it’s a Sam-order, look up, you didn’t do anything wrong, what did he do, look up, Sam’s not smiling, the same as this is the most important sign, got it, pay attention. Clench hand, deep into the leg, focus.

“You didn’t do anything wrong. We’re not angry,” says Sam. “Sometimes things get overwhelming, right? I’ve been there.” Sam’s mouth makes a click sound. “Not exactly where you are, I’m not saying that, but the point is, we’re trying to help. We don’t want to do anything that’s gonna—

Sam stops.

Gonna what.

We’re trying to help.
“—anything that’s gonna hurt you, or scare you. Do you understand?”

No. Shake head for *No*.

“That’s all right. We’ll get there. Can you tell me anything about what happened? About what made things go bad, back in the locker room?”

Did it—was it *bad*, or—

— *Crouch for me please, beloved, I can hardly fix your tie from down here* —

*Forget* —if he forgets, it’s the *hand on the forehead, pull away into a fist*. For *forget*.

“Are you saying you forgot what happened, or…?”

No. No he remembers the shower. No Sam. Shake the head. *No*.

“Okay, okay. Explain it again, all right? Start from the beginning?”

*Forget* is hand on the forehead, pull away into a fist.

Start with the fist, right by the head, pull it back, slide it back to the forehead.

— *Jesus fucking christ how long does it take for him to get back to normal after a wipe* —

“Do it for me one more time,” Sam says, and he is—look up—his eyes are open, big, a little wrinkle of skin, between them, lines on the forehead.

Hand on chest. *Me*. 
The fist, by the head; slide it back to the forehead.

“You remembered something,” Sam says, his voice is—different, his voice is—

Hands drop don’t you dare forget to write a letter every day buck —Bucky—

Nod for yes.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to all of you for commenting and leaving kudos. Wow. I continue to be amazed and grateful for this response -- thank you. And a massive thanks to my friend JHSC for stopping me from shredding this chapter in a fit of frustrated rage. :)
Chapter Twelve

Chapter Summary

The soldier meets Bruce Banner -- and makes some decisions.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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despite the threatening sky and shuddering earth (they remained)

Part 12

“Hi. I’m Bruce.”

When they’d entered the little room, the Soldier had been holding his ragged copy of *The Once and Future King*, pinching it between his thumb and other fingers, curling the pages back, releasing them, and watching them zip by, like a flip book. First with the left hand, then with the right. Now, he held the book in both hands, closed, thumbs rubbing at the paperback’s embossed cover. He held it like it was a prayer book, and he was waiting for the nun to tell him what page to turn to.

His eyes were locked on to Bruce.
Bruce wasn’t a big guy, not in this incarnation. The first time he’d ever met him, Steve had found that he carried himself with a certain lack of commitment; he listed to the side, or away from whomever was closest, held himself to the edges of a room. He seemed perpetually ready to run, the kind of person who never quite locked his knees.

Steve wondered what the Soldier saw, when he looked at Bruce, who had stepped inside the room and found a way to unobtrusively slide into one of the molded plastic chairs. With his ankles hooked behind the chair’s two front legs, and his hands folded easily in his lap after setting down his small case, he looked about as non-threatening as anyone could.

(He hadn’t, at first; he’d appeared in the control room in his laboratory coat.

“No way,” Sam had said flatly. “Take it off. Half the motherfuckers in that vault wore those. You crazy?”

Bruce had taken one of his deliberate, ritualized little breaths, and pulled off the coat as he exhaled. “Steve, you’re coming in with me.” He’d quirked an eyebrow. “Protection.”

Steve had been almost insulted on the Soldier’s behalf. “He hasn’t been violent.”

Bruce had given him a small, pained smile. “For him.”

“I’m one of Steve’s coworkers,” Bruce went on. He leaned forward, and reached out his right hand towards the Soldier, who was seated cross-legged on the camp bed, his slumped back pressed against the wall. “It’s good to meet you.”

The muscles of his forearm tensed with the approach of Bruce’s hand; his fingers, partially hidden behind the book, spasmed. For a second, the Soldier simply stared.

“It’s a handshake, pal,” said Steve, trying to disguise his discomfort with gentleness. “What you do to say hello.”

As ever, the Soldier’s eyes flashed to Steve. His brow crinkled; for a fleeting second, Steve thought he saw scorn there.
(“He was trying to tell me he remembered something,” Sam had explained earlier, during their late lunch break, rubbing at the back of his neck. The tic was one of his sure signs of stress, even when his face bore the odd, incongruous blankness that Steve had uncomfortably associated with shell shocked boys in the war. “Steve, he reversed the sign for forget. We didn’t teach him remember, so he…” Sam’s hand had dropped from his neck, flapped a little in the air. “He figured out how to tell me anyway.”

“What did he remember?” Steve had asked, almost afraid to know. The more they learned, the more difficult it was to keep treating him the same. That was Sam’s mantra, and it was the only thing that seemed to be getting the Soldier to trust them. But god damn it, was it hard.

“I’m not sure,” Sam had replied miserably. “He got distressed, trying to explain. Held his own chest, rocked his arms together like it was baby. I thought, maybe a kid or something, but he said no.”

The thought was grotesque. A kid. But then again, what hadn’t HYDRA taken from him?

“We’ve only taught him… what, thirty words? Forty?” Sam had gone on. His palpable disgust at at the Soldier’s predicament, at themselves, hung in the air like a sour, invisible cloud. “They had him—for however long they had him, Steve, and you saw that cheat sheet. Fifteen words and phrases. Fifteen fuckin’ words. Who does that to a person, locks them away in their own head like that? Who does that?” He’d kicked at the legs of the serving table they’d been standing beside, laden with food they weren’t hungry for.

“He couldn’t tell me what he had a flashback about, man. He couldn’t explain, even though he was trying. He was fucking trying.”)

He was trying now, too, as he stared at Bruce’s extended hand—trying to stay calm, maybe, or trying to find the willpower to reach out and take it. The fingers clenching his book were white with exertion.

“You don’t have to,” Bruce said pleasantly instead, letting his hand drop to back to his lap and intertwine with his other one. He exhaled deeply, a conscious, careful attempt to relax, to diffuse the impossible tension. “It’s your choice. Did Sam or Steve explain anything about why I’m here?”

The Soldier didn’t respond. Instead he looked in Steve’s direction, at his midsection. Slowly, carefully telegraphing every unwasted movement, he drew his flesh hand away from the book, extended it upwards, a perfect match for what Bruce had done; thumb up, four fingers loose, slightly
Something shocking and cold, discordant, settled onto Steve’s shoulders. He swallowed it down, swallowed down the questions—what did he mean by that, why Steve, what was he trying to say—and instead, he took the few steps forward, reached out, and took the soldier’s hand in his.

“Hi,” Steve said simply, and squeezed, very gently.

The Soldier’s fingers curled around Steve’s hand. His hand was hot and a little sweaty, about the same size as Steve’s, and in the places their palms touched Steve could feel worn-smooth calluses, a match for his own.

It was hard to believe that less than a week ago, Steve had seen that hand flip a knife in his direction and thought, Oh, this guy might really get me.

The Soldier mirrored him, and squeezed back. Hello.

Steve withdrew his hand, looked back at Bruce, whose elevated brow was evidence of his polite curiosity at the strange exchange. He clearly wasn’t bothered by the Soldier’s snub.

Steve cleared his throat. “We didn’t explain, no,” he replied finally, feeling oddly shaken. He stepped backwards and found his way to the floor. He extended his long legs in front of him and crossed them at the ankle. “This is step three, though,” feeling like a poor replacement for Sam, who’d needed a break by the time Steve and Bruce had made it back to the control room. “Step one—” he performed the Soldier’s chitchat sign—“getting you some words. Step two, getting cleaned up. Step three, helping you feel better.”

The Soldier’s gaze slid fluidly from Steve back to Bruce. “I have some simple questions for you,” Bruce began simply. “And I have some information for you, things you might not know—uh—about,” he faltered slightly, and gestured at his upper body, at his own face. “The mask, first of all, but some other things first. Do you understand?”

He dropped his head and lifted it back up in a laborious nod. Yes.
“Does that hurt?” Bruce asked lightly. “Your head, I mean, to nod or shake?”

The Soldier’s brow furrowed; he stared at him. Slowly: Yes.

Steve’s chest went tight. All this time—

“I can imagine,” said Bruce with real sympathy. “Dehydration, still, though I know we’ve been doing, um, better, about that. Any headaches, maybe shooting pains—” he lifted an index finger, “or even a dull ache?” Two fingers.

The Soldier looked hard at him. His flesh hand, the one he’d just used to shake Steve’s, formed the mirror of Bruce’s: The second one. The fingers dropped to a fist; the index went up by itself. The first.

“Both?”

Nod. Yes.

“Try this,” Bruce suggested, displaying own fist and shaking it up and down from the wrist. “Like your head’s your hand, see? That’s another way to say ‘yes.’” He reformed his fingers into a new shape: his index and middle up—the V for Victory sign—and stretched out his thumb; quickly, he pinched them all together, and then repeated the whole thing. “That’s another way to say ‘no.’ Make sense?”

Still watching Bruce intently, the soldier raised his own fist: two precise little nods, Yes.

“How about your hands—either of them? Any pain there?”

The right hand, his biological hand: No. Then, his left: Yes.

He’s in there, man, he’s smart, Sam had said, and reiterated that sentiment on what felt like an hourly basis. It made Steve feel strangely sad, though obviously the fact that he could communicate
and adapt and extrapolate was good. The Soldier was smart, and even something as simple as that—instantly dialing in on how to clarify his meaning, how to add nuance even with a vocabulary limited to barely 40 words—it was impressive. It made everything done to him seem worse, somehow, like even more of a monstrously cruel waste. But maybe even that was unfair. Maybe it was an artifact of the days where to be worthwhile, you had to be useful.

Steve gritted his teeth, and carefully schooled his face.

“Sorry to hear that about your prosthetic,” Bruce was saying. “Does the entire thing hurt—” he held one palm flat, and circled the other around it, in a smooth orbit—“or just your hand?”

Again, the Soldier understood immediately. All, he signed back, the metal hand acting as the sun to his other hand’s earth. All, he said again.

Bruce’s tone was thoughtful; matter-of-fact. “From what we could see from your scans, it looked like that might be a possibility.”

The Soldier’s body went visibly tense; he halfway lifted his right hand. It fluttered abortively in the air. The skin between his eyes pinched together.

“Go ahead, it’s okay,” Steve encouraged, drawing a glance from Bruce. “What’s your question?”

No, the Soldier’s fingers said, pinching together. No, he didn’t have a question, Steve realized. He was trying to tell them something.

Slowly, the Soldier crossed his hand over his body and rested it on the metal shoulder, fingers stretching wide and unnaturally over as much of it as possible, reaching from the deep red star to the place where his collarbone, if he’d still had his natural one, would terminate.

“Your shoulder?” Bruce inquired softly. “Does it hurt more than the rest?”

The hand slid away from the shoulder in an odd, whispy slide, and formed a fist. Yes.

“When you first arrived,” Bruce began slowly, “the medical team took some images of you.”
The word *medical* was a live wire, touched to his skin, to his muscles, which contracted into sudden rigidity. The Soldier’s eyes shot wide; they instantly darted back to Steve.

Steve’s gut clenched. “Nobody’s going to hurt you,” he managed to say through the sudden and unexpected rage that boiled over at the sight of the Soldier’s obvious fear, and why he was so afraid. “Or touch you, without your permission.” He swallowed. “Which, uh, I did, earlier. In the shower. I’m sorry.”

“When we say ‘you consent’,” Bruce said, “we mean you have to be able to understand—we’re not going to make you do anything you don’t understand. And we’re not going to make you do anything you’re unconscious or unable to communicate meaningfully.”

For a long, frozen moment, the Soldier did nothing but let his eyes travel back and forth from Bruce, to Steve, and to Bruce again. His chest rose and fell unevenly.

Steve watched as Bruce’s own hand worried at the plastic edge of his seat, fingertips digging into it until they went pale.

Steve’s hand dropped. The Soldier was staring at him, his hand still in the air. He’d snapped his fingers to get Steve’s attention.

Steve couldn’t tear his eyes away, feeling his gorge rise with every word: *I don’t know — why — good — help — why — good — please —

*We’re the good guys*, Steve had told him only days ago. He thought he might punch that version of himself now, if he could. *We’re the good guys,* he’d told this captive man, as if that would mean *anything* to him. He closed his eyes tightly against the rush of anger and self-disgust, and dug his thumb and index finger into his eyes. *Jesus fuckin’ H,* Bucky would say, almost admiringly, if he were here. *You really put your foot in it, Rogers.*

A *snap,* loud in the silent room.

Steve’s hand dropped. The Soldier was staring at him, his hand still in the air. He’d *snapped his fingers* to get Steve’s attention.
“Why are you helping,” he’d been trying to ask. “Why do you care. He wanted an answer.

“The way you were treated by HYDRA was wrong,” Bruce said firmly. “We want to help because it’s the right thing to do.”

The Soldier didn’t acknowledge Bruce. His eyes, bright blue irises and bloodshot whites, were fixed on Steve.

He was waiting for Steve to answer, but if Bruce’s answer wasn’t enough, then what was he supposed to say?

“You have no reason to trust me,” Steve said finally, the words feeling heavy and insufficient. He gestured to the room, and to Bruce. “Or any of us. But we’re trying to help.”

Something dark and frustrated bloomed in the Soldier’s visible face, in the way he squeezed his eyes shut, very briefly, but tightly enough that his eyelashes crumpled against his skin. His hand dropped back to his lap.

Steve would be dissatisfied with that answer, too.

“I’d like to show you some things, first,” said Bruce after a moment of pregnant silence. “Before we do anything else. Is that okay?”

The Soldier didn’t lift his hand from his lap, just formed a fist. Yes.

He seemed suddenly tired, instead of in pain, or wary, or confused. Just—tired.

“The screen over here,” said Bruce, stepping back from the chair to walk the few steps towards the viewing window, “It’s going to display some things. When you arrived, these are the images we were able to get together…”
It’s the inside of the body.

The ribs, some pale some bright, and the big white arm and the head, just a mask, the whole face and eyes fuzzy except the mask. His head.

Fingertips, on the side of it, the seam between his face and it. Trace the edges, stop, this is where—

—this pin robust enough for the zygomatic arch?—

“—that’s an x-ray of your upper body,” says Bruce. He is standing now. Points at the picture, looks back, talks more, looks back, counts the ribs, there is no point in trying to reconstruct the scapula, “we think these are artificial muscle fibers, and—”

“Hey, pal,” says—

Steve —

“You okay?”

Blink. Blink and breathe. Steve is talking, waiting for him to talk back, pay attention. This is—looking at pictures. Pictures of in the inside of the body, with Bruce, who tried to say hello, and then Steve. It all—hurts. It is cold and—like the air can’t get through the mask. It hurts.

“You with me?” Steve again. He isn’t sitting either. Steve is in front of him. Steve is crouched down, close but not too close, elbows on his knees—

I can catch anything you throw at me!—
— a little girl, spitting out a bloody tooth—

A little girl, bloody —

No, no—pay attention —Sorry, say sorry.

He is not sitting on the floor. He is on the camp bed. Steve is in front of him, big blue eyes. Bad dream, pal, you all right? And—hot coffee —so hot it burns the tongue. Press tongue to the top of the mouth.

Head hurts. Chest doesn’t—it won’t expand, it is crushed —the ribs —

“Come on,” says Steve. His hand is out again. “Let’s stand up.”

It’s a handshake pal. It’s Steve’s hand, right there, it’s not too close. Take it—Steve pulls and he’s up, head goes heavy, too heavy—sudden—

“Just breathe,” Steve says, his hand still there, it’s warm and, just keep doing that, Steve, feels good —Come on, focus.

Just breathe. Okay.

“Breathe in for one—two—three—”

This is—he remembers this. Like a baseball over the shoulder, before. Steve’s hand, on his shoulder, just like—

His hand, still holding his—a handshake that didn’t end, even if he’s standing up — even—

“Good job,” says Steve. Thanks. “I want to give you a break, pal, but you need help. We need to talk you through some of this stuff. If it’s too much, just close your eyes, and we’ll—we’ll stop.
Okay?"

Talk through what.

“I’m sorry,” says Bruce, who is still here. Look over. Hands in his pockets, he has fists in his pockets, arms tense, he is— *angry* or— “I didn’t think of how—it might upset you, to see those.”


Head goes thump, thump, *thump*. Steve’s hand, still there, his fingers. *You know I’d hold your hand if I could*. Drop it. Drop it, get back, this is—this is—Relax. *Focus*.

Steve’s hands up. “Easy,” he says. No it’s not.

The pictures, on the window. *Sorry*, start there, then—the *fist*, by the head, pull it back, across the forehead. *Remember*.

Index fingers, pointing to each other, *twist* for *hurt*. Hand, to the side, to the— *white ribs* —back up. *Hurts*. Hand, to the shoulder, back down, *hurts*.

*Does it just paralyze him, or…?*


Those are—he can’t *remember*, but he knows—those pictures, it *hurt* before, he doesn’t want it—don’t let it hurt now—please don’t, Steve. Add that, add *Steve*, the shield.

“Does it—” Bruce says, and stops.

Does it what.
Look at the picture again. Pale ribs, *white* ribs, white arm —shut eyes—no, open them—don’t—

Step back, back flat against the wall, it’s cold, arms are free—he can move, he *can*—


“I know,” Bruce says, and he’s mad, but—it’s a little *thread* of it, not mad all the way, but it’s there, whole body quivering, and he is stepping back, away—

“The important part for today is this,” Bruce says. The ribs go away. Just the head. “Soon, when we can do it safely and without hurting you at all, we want to take the mask off.”

The mask *off*—

*What the fuck, he’s one scary motherfucker with that thing*—

Don’t—don’t—

Stop it, *focus*—dig hand into shirt, pinch thumb and index together, *tap tap*, rub rub rub—

“Right now, if you look at this image—” circle, an ellipse, gray blobs, little white square, little white lines—the mask *off*—

“This is your brain,” says Bruce. He points at it. The brain, and the mask. “We think that you’re recovering memories because your brain is healing.”

It all heals. It always does.

“—need some more images, to try and figure out what’s going on with this—”

Bruce points at the little white square, in his *brain*, don’t remember that—*don’t remember it*—
“And we can do it here, without any invasive tests, and it won’t hurt—”

Hands on his jaw, over the mask—shake back and forth—well it’s not going anywhere—

No, it’s his hands on the mask, feel it, the top of the nose, where it pinches, and to the side, the edge, the hard bore and strange pressure, the thing the muscles pull against—

“—some nutrients.”

Fuck, fuck—what did he—did he lose time, or was it—the fucking mask—

“We can go over it a few times,” says Bruce.

Go over what, go over—

“We’re going to do this in a few steps,” says Steve. Hey Steve. “You with me, or you need a break right now?”

Sorry, say it again, sorry. Again. Please.

Look at Steve. He is—upset, mouth a flat line, wrinkles between his eyes, it’ll get stuck like that pal.

“The goal is getting the mask off,” says Bruce, who is talking. Look over at him not Steve. “That will let you eat and drink normally. But to get the mask off, we need more scans. Then, later today, we’ve got a plan to get you some nutrients.”

Step 1, more scans. Step 2, nutrients. Step 3, mask off, and he could—he could—

“Do we have your permission for the scans?” Bruce again. What is—what—
“It’s okay,” Steve says. “It won’t hurt.”

Please Steve. Please, is this—say Steve, with the shield—

“Yeah?”

Say it again, Steve, then the fist in the palm, help — me, stay here please, stay here, point at the floor, here.

Wait and wait, Steve’s eyes are big—

“Yeah,” Steve says. “I’ll be right here with you.”

Okay.

Okay, pal.
Chapter End Notes

Massive thanks to my friend JHSC (for yet again rescuing me from the miasma of despair!) and to the wonderfully talented Quietnight!

And to all for leaving comments and kudos -- your enthusiasm for this story is so inspiring and motivating. Thank you!

And finally, a squee-slash-thank you to the lovely sallysparrow017, who has started to podfic this story and is doing an incredible job -- check it out here: despite the threatening sky and shuddering earth (they remained) podfic
Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Summary

Steve, Bruce, and the Soldier work together.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

despite the threatening sky and shuddering earth (they remained)

Part 13

“It won’t take long,” Steve said, feeling a little foolish. The Soldier’s attention slid from the monitors—still displaying some of the images of his own body—over to Steve. He was seated in one of the chairs, his mismatched fingers laced together and hanging between his knees. His thumbs were fidgeting. The sheer normalcy of it—particularly in contrast to the unsettling black mask covering his features—was startling.

For a moment, Steve imagined him doing the sort of things he’d seen normal people do during his fifteen- and twenty-mile runs in DC: the Soldier, wearing the same blue athletic shirt and gray sweatpants, mowing his lawn; waiting in line at a coffee shop; taking a photograph of himself with his phone, maybe with the Washington Monument in the background — all with the mask on. The
thought reminded him of a bizarre popular art exhibition, the kind that Steve had wandered through at the National Gallery and not really understood.

“Bruce, I mean,” Steve clarified belatedly, after a beat too long. Bruce had left only a few minutes before, to retrieve the load of equipment he’d assembled and thought better of bringing with him into the cell in the first place. With no questions to ask the Soldier or information to communicate, sitting in silence with him just felt strange.

But he’d asked for Steve to stay, and Steve had agreed — and he had no intention of breaking his word, even if a little silence was uncomfortable. No doubt it was worse for him.

Steve wondered if he had things he wanted to say, but couldn’t. If he had questions he wanted to ask, but gave up on because just stringing together the most basic of sentences using his limited vocabulary felt like an impossible task.

“Hey, uh, JARVIS,” Steve called out, inspired. “Could you show us—could you pull up some more signs?”

“Certainly, Captain Rogers. Any specific requests?”

At the sound of the AI, the Soldier stiffened noticeably.

“Uh, how about feelings?” Steve suggested, casting an apologetic glance over to his charge. “Happy, sad, angry, scared, that kind of thing?”

Without another word—Steve wouldn’t put it past JARVIS to have recognized the Soldier’s discomfort when the AI spoke—the screen displaying x-rays went blank, and reappeared with the first sign and a looping video of a woman providing a demonstration.

**HAPPY**

With a wide smile, the woman angled her flat palms towards her body and circled them toward herself, brushing them twice against her chest. Steve took it in a few times, and then tried it himself.
The Soldier did nothing, just watched, and it took a second for Steve to realize why.

“Happy,” he rushed to explain. “Sorry. That means happy.” He demonstrated the sign once more for good measure, though far more clumsily than the woman and without the smile.

The Soldier just stared. And Steve was saved by the faint mechanical hiss of the panic room door opening.

“Okay,” said Bruce as he walked inside, his arms full of a great deal more equipment that Steve remembered him gathering on the console in the control room. No wonder it had taken him so long.

Both Steve and the Soldier stood up: Steve to help Bruce offload, and the Soldier startled to his feet, upright yet swaying from exhaustion or hunger or pain — perhaps all three. A sudden swell of anxiety, as tangible as a second skin, hung heavily on his shoulders. His eyes tracked each item that Bruce and Steve placed onto the table.

Bruce noticed, and began explaining: *this is lidocaine for the NG tube, this is the receiver for the handheld scanner, this is the device itself* — but it didn’t seem to help, and Steve could hardly blame him.

“This won’t take long,” Bruce went on, with the kind of distracted unflappability that Steve suspected was a carefully constructed act. “And we can stop at any time.”

Almost absently, the Soldier’s hands fluttered into position: left hand flat, right hand chop. *Stop.*

“Do you want to stop right now, or were you just using the sign?” Bruce inquired conversationally. From across the room, Steve could see the Soldier’s adam’s apple roll in his throat as he swallowed. His left hand flickered into motion: his index and middle fingers, *two*. The second option.

“Understood.” Bruce unclipped the case and lifted out a small, sleek console. “There’s something else you should know,” he said to the Soldier. “This room—everywhere you’ve been—it’s all been recorded,” he explained calmly. “You are *still* being recorded. Initially because you were considered a detained hostile, and—” his teeth clicked shut; his forced casualness disappeared.

Motionless and still standing, Soldier simply waited for him to continue.
“—and since we determined that you’re a victim, the surveillance has continued so that we could monitor your health and create a documentary record of your physical and mental state,” Bruce finally went on, his tone rehearsed and flat. “I have also consulted with several specialists, who signed non-disclosure agreements, regarding your medical care.”

This time, the Soldier didn’t flinch from the word medical. Steve supposed that was progress.

“And that’s another thing you should know,” Bruce continued doggedly. He attempted to make eye contact with the Soldier, but to no avail; his gaze remained fixed on the contents atop the table, flitting from device to device. “I’m not a medical doctor. I have some training, and a lot of theoretical knowledge, but that’s it. I’m not a doctor.”

A heartbeat of stillness; then, the soldier’s metal hand lifted: thumbs up, for good.

Steve snorted out a little laugh that startled both of them. There it was: joke number three. He couldn’t help himself. It was funny. This entire situation—this guy, a mask nailed to his fucking face, somehow cracking jokes—

“Sorry,” he wheezed, getting himself under control. “Sorry, that was—it was funny.”

The Soldier was looking at him now. There was something there, in the corners of his eyes, in the pinched crow’s feet, and for a second Steve imagined that it was him smiling instead of the usual confusion and wariness.

“Sorry,” he repeated again.

The Soldier lifted his hands and circled them towards his chest, once, twice. Happy.

Steve blinked. Was he asking a question, or was he trying to express himself? “I’m happy we’re getting you some help,” he replied finally. “And if you were making a joke just now, well…” He shrugged. “I thought it was funny.”

The Soldier offered a thumbs up that slid fluidly into a single raised index finger.
“Good one.”

“Yeah,” Steve said faintly. “Yeah, good one.”

Bruce coughed a little to get their attention. “So,” he began, “You have the right to decline to be surveilled,” and held up one finger, “you also have the right to decide who sees your medical information,” he held up another, “and finally, you have the right to request care by a licensed professional.” Three fingers.

The Soldier regarded him blankly.

“First thing,” Bruce went on. “Do you have any questions about it? About the surveillance? Would you like us to stop?”

The Soldier hesitated, in one of the small body language tells that Steve was beginning to feel fluent in. His weight shifted, just slightly, and his left hand twitched a bit, but clenched back into a fist instead of a sign.

Bruce saw it too. Steve wasn’t surprised; he suspected that Bruce might be the most observant person he’d ever met. “Any answer you give is fine,” he said.

*I don’t know*, the Soldier finally said, *why — me.*

Every lingering trace of Steve’s amusement abruptly fled.

Bruce inhaled deeply, and settled his shoulders. “Because,” he said, very carefully, “While it probably doesn’t feel like it right now, you’re in charge of your own body.” He gestured to himself and Steve. “And we will respect your decisions.”

The Soldier remained still. He blinked very slowly, and lifted his palm to his chest, in the same place that he would to say please, only this time his hand remained motionless: a reflexive expression of his doubt, or perhaps his disbelief; *me*, he was saying, *me.*
Steve took his cue from Bruce, who was silently waiting.

The Soldier’s other hand finally moved. *Two.*

“You have the right for your medical information to remain private,” Bruce said. “So if you want just me to see your information, or just the physicians I’m consulting with, that’s fine. And you can revoke your consent for anything at any time, so if you want Steve to leave, for example, even if you said it was okay for him to stay before, that’s fine too.”

His response was instant. A quick pinch of his two forefingers and his thumb: *no.*

“Okay,” said Bruce. “I’ll ask again if I need to involve any other specialists.”

The Soldier’s eyebrows raised a fraction of an inch and his head tilted, the faintest expression of incredulity Steve had ever seen. He wondered just how long it had been for the idea to even *occur* to someone to ask the Soldier for permission — about anything.

“Number three,” Bruce went on. “You can ask for someone other than me, someone who’s fully qualified, to help you.”

Another quick *no.*

“Okay. Then let’s get started.” Bruce reached over to his workstation, and began explaining the plan, step by step: first came the brain-mapping scan, which involved a skullcap of sensor electrodes for transmitting the Soldier’s brain activity in response to test stimuli to Bruce’s workstation. The next part required a Stark tech prototype, an uncharacteristically clunky handheld device, to then scan specific regions of the Soldier’s brain in greater detail.

“Bruce,” Steve interrupted after a few moments.

He looked towards Steve at the sound of his name, and blinked. “Right. Okay,” he said, and turned back to the Soldier. “You ready?”

The barest flutter of the Soldier’s right hand: *Yes.*
“I’m going to need to approach you,” Bruce informed him calmly. “And this may be easier if you sit down. Your choice.” He precisely telegraphed his movements as he twisted back to the table and its gear, fumbling with some of the cables and wires spread out over it.

The Soldier stood stock still.

He took one dragging step forward, and then another, and another; until he reached the closest plastic chair. The metal hand came to rest on the back of it, gripping with such strength that Steve wouldn’t be surprised if the plastic cracked.

Bruce turned around, holding the skullcap with its wire frame and electrodes and wires trailing back to the console in his hands, and Steve’s stomach sank at the effect the sight of it had on the Soldier. He could hear his surprised exhalation, through the mask, and see his weight come down on the chair as his other hand moved to join the metal one, gripping onto it like it was a lifeline.

The Soldier’s reaction was enough to remind Steve of just what kind of day it had been so far. Automatically, he catalogued the dark purple bags beneath his eyes, the whites of which were rife with irritated blood vessels, the pupils oddly dilated; the deep grooves of exhaustion on his forehead; the chalky paleness of his skin. For all that he’d had a shower not even a few hours ago, his hair already seemed damp with sweat.

He looked awful. And asking him to sit and subject himself to Bruce placing that apparatus around his head, when Steve had seen what that chair had done to him, what the prospect of electrodes near his face would feel like to him — he felt sick.

“Stop, no, hold on,” Steve said as his own hands formulated the sign for stop, his dismay growing as the Soldier’s chest began to hitch in the same pattern of fast, shallow breaths that he’d felt under his hands earlier that day. He couldn’t put him through that again. He couldn’t.

“Steve?”

“Can we—I know you said scans first, nutrients second, but Bruce, come on. If that—” Steve gestured to the halo of electrodes and wires “—isn’t medically necessary right this second, can’t we just—let’s get him some food, okay? So he’ll at least start feeling better. And then, if he’s okay, then we do the other stuff.”
Bruce looked down to the mess of gear in his hands, the red and yellow and blue wires, the cage that would encircle the Soldier’s skull, and closed his eyes, breathing out slowly. “Of course,” he said after a moment. “Of course.”

The Soldier dislodged his right hand from the back of the chair. Sorry, he said, his fist to his chest. Sorry.

“You don’t have anything to be sorry for,” Steve said firmly. “We should have thought through this a little better.”

“Steve’s right,” Bruce added quietly, setting the cap back into its case, and snapping it shut, out of view. “I didn’t think.”

The metal hand let go of the chair; the Soldier swayed a little. His leveled his index fingers, pointed them together, twisted them. Hurts. He stared straight ahead, at the closed case. Hurts, he said again.

“We won’t hurt you,” Steve said, at the same time that Bruce asked: “Right now? Or something in the past?”

The Soldier didn’t reply. Instead he swung his body around and laboriously lowered himself into the chair. He had performed the same motion not even a half hour before, but this was the effect of adrenaline and fear on a man who had reached his limits days ago; it looked as though he had aged decades in only a few minutes. Sorry, he said again, once seated. Sorry.

“It’s okay,” Steve replied. “Bruce?”

Bruce cleared his throat. “Okay. You need nutrients,” he said, and then began to explain, in far more careful language than he’d used for the brain scanning, each element of the plan: the vibranium-tipped dremel, which they would need to use only in short bursts so as not to trip the mask’s anti-tamper mechanisms; the process to insert the tube; how it would feel (uncomfortable); and how it would taste (it wouldn’t); and what would be in it (a diluted nutrition solution, designed to be easy on the stomach).

“I won’t lie to you,” Bruce repeated, once he’d explained everything. “It won’t be comfortable. I have lidocaine for you, but if your body metabolizes that the way Steve’s does, it won’t last long,” he said. “I’m sorry, but we just don’t have a topical analgesic that will work long enough for either of you. But if you need me to stop…”
The Soldier’s hands: stop.

“Exactly,” said Bruce. He inhaled deeply, and exhaled through his nose. “Are you ready to get started?”

Something like determination rallied in the Soldier’s eyes, and in the way he consciously settled his shoulders.

Bruce lifted the little drill. “This is the sound it makes,” he said quietly, and turned on the device: an unpleasant, high-pitched whirr filled the room. He clicked it off. “When I touch it to the mask, you’ll feel it,” he went on. “Hopefully, with the vibranium, you won’t feel it much, but you’ll hear it and the sound may conduct through the mask, and the pins, to your bones. If you get scared…”

Stop, the Soldier’s hands supplied again.

“Right,” said Bruce. “We’ll stop. You ready?”

The Soldier swallowed. His eyes flicked from the drill to Steve, and then—

Steve, he signed. Steve.

“Yeah?”

The Soldier stretched out his fingers, all ten of them, before curling them back into fists. Then, the right one: chitchat — please.

Steve found it suddenly difficult to swallow. “Yeah,” he managed. “Yeah, sure, pal. I can talk.”

Abruptly, his mind went blank.

“How about how we met?” Bruce offered. “I’m going to mark on the mask where I need to drill,
He’d explained it before, but the repetition didn’t hurt. The Soldier nodded.

“I think you’ve probably had enough of helicarriers,” Steve said, directing his words to the Soldier, who somehow stiffened even further as Bruce reached out and used a silver marker to carefully mark a spot that had to be right beneath the Soldier’s nostril. “How about—uh, how about I tell you how I got here?”

Immediately, the Soldier’s hand: okay.

Steve cleared his throat, and dragged over one of the other chairs so he could sit down across from his audience. “It started…” he began slowly. “It started at a fair, actually. I was twenty-four years old, and I was real mad the Army wouldn’t take me—”

(Quietly, Bruce said, “When I start to drill, I’m going to use this suction tool to capture any dust or filings, okay? This is what it sounds like—”)

It wasn’t a story he’d ever really told before—everybody seemed to know it already, or think they did—but the words spilled out easily enough, and Steve found himself focusing on the Soldier’s eyes.

“—I’d tried enlisting a bunch of times before—”

(“I’m going to try the dremel. Remember, you can tell me to stop if you need a break—”) 

“—I thought I was going to be arrested—”

(The Soldier somehow managed unflinching eye contact, despite the high-pitched whine of the drill —)

“—they gave me a train ticket for the next day, that night I was more nervous than I’d ever been—”
And so it went. Steve told him the whole story, from saying goodbye to Bucky—God, did it hurt to say his name—at the fair, to struggling his way through the selection program, and that morning in the car, with Peggy, all the while listening to the careful rhythm of a single, delicate touch of the dremel to the mask; the Soldier’s involuntary, fearful inhalation; the drill clicking off; the suction tool; and then the drill again.

“—chased him down to the waterfront, barefoot and wearing clothes I was lucky didn’t rip right off me, it was a mile at least—”

“Steve,” came Bruce’s voice, and for a second, Steve tuned it out. Then, a small touch to his arm prompted him to tear himself away away from the Soldier’s intensely focused gaze and blink stupidly at Bruce instead.

“All done,” Bruce said, setting down the drill. “You did very well. Steve, you…”

“What?”

Bruce smiled faintly at him. “Just now, when you were telling your story,” he said. “You sounded like you were from Brooklyn, is all. You don’t, normally.”

No. That had long ago been trained out of him—left behind in 1943 with everything else Steve used to be. “You all right?”

The Soldier swallowed again, and he nodded shallowly. Sweat beaded at his temples. He lifted a hand and rotated it in a quick circle.

“Get on with it, huh?” Bruce said mildly. “Okay. I’ve laid out everything we need…”

With an equal mix of dread and discomfort pooling in his throat, Steve paid close attention as Bruce went over each item: the tube, the syringes, the test strips, the lubricant. And the Soldier seemed fine, calm, until Bruce actually held the lidocaine syringe to the hole in the mask, and asked him to tilt his head slightly.

The Soldier’s hands burst into sharp, exaggerated motion —
His eyes were tightly squeezed closed, the only sounds in the room his suddenly choppy breathing and the sound of his hands, one flesh and one metal, hitting each other—

“Stopping,” said Bruce immediately, pulling back his own hands and holding them in the air, so that the Soldier — if he opened his eyes — would see that they were nowhere near the mask. “I’m sorry, I’ve stopped.”

The Soldier’s chest heaved, raggedly, for air. With the mask breached, his gasps seemed louder than they ever had before. His hands kept talking — stop — no — and finally, please.

“Hey, pal,” Steve said, through a dry mouth, wondering suddenly if the way he’d been made — with a ladder of needles, the hiss of injection ports, the unceasing, consuming burn — was another thing he had in common with the Soldier. “It’s okay. We’ve stopped.”

The Soldier, panting with exhaustion and banked panic, let his head loll to the side, to meet Steve’s eyes. Then he dragged his biological hand, his right hand, up his torso, to press against his chest. Me. He circled it: please; tapped his hand to his chest: me. Again, please — again, me.

“You want to do it yourself,” Steve realized in a rush. “Bruce, can he—?”

Bruce seemed compacted, somehow, even as he continued holding his hands outstretched where the Soldier could see them; like he had gathered every part of himself and drawn it all tightly to his gut, submerged it inside. His expression completely impassive, he inclined his head in a nod. “He can. People do, all the time.”

“Then let him,” said Steve recklessly. “You want to try it?” he said to the Soldier. “You can. Bruce can talk you through it. Right?”
The Soldier’s gaze slid to Bruce, seeing for the first time his elevated hands, the syringe he’d withdrawn from the mask the minute he’d been asked to. Strands of hair clung wetly to his face. Steve thought for a moment that he might actually feel an unnatural heat rolling off him — the withdrawal, maybe, Sam had said it might come with a fever —

“Okay,” said Bruce. “Do you want to try it with the lidocaine? In case that might help?” He tilted the syringe in his right hand to show the Soldier what he meant.

A quick, sharp shake of the head; no using the sign for no, not this time.

Bruce set it down, and instead retrieved the length of tubing he’d already prepared, and extended it towards the Soldier, who plucked it from his hand. “You ready?”

A nod, as deliberate as his no had been.

In low, measured tones, Bruce walked him through it, and Steve did his best to watch. It was difficult not to gag when the Soldier did, as his eyes streamed and his throat convulsed as it tried to reject the intrusion, but each time, the Soldier somehow managed to calm himself and push through.

After nearly a week in this new captivity, Steve realized, regardless of the obstacle he’d simply kept on going, just as he was now, just as his body did even when his mind was overwhelmed. Steve found himself thinking that while the Soldier was a super soldier, it was this that set him apart: truly superhuman endurance.

So Steve watched it all — every moment of the Soldier’s uncomfortable, difficult struggle, until finally Bruce said, “There you go, you’re done,” and the Soldier’s hands dropped back down, his shoulders quivering with each abortive breath he took.

Steve let out a gust of air he’d held in his lungs, partially from the nerves and partially to quiet the roil of nausea in his gut.

“Nice job, pal,” he said tiredly. “Well done.”

The Soldier didn’t seem to hear him, not this time. His gaze was glassy and unfocused, and the length of tubing hung down from its entry point into the mask. “I’m going to test the pH,” said Bruce gently. “Is that okay?”
The Soldier’s metal hand: okay.

Bruce movely quickly, surely, inserting something into the end of the tube and withdrawing it, doing something with what he’d described as a test strip and finally saying: “I’m going to tape the tube to your mask, unless you want to do it yourself.”

Okay, the Soldier’s hand continued to say. Okay.

Bruce didn’t hesitate, just reached up with a bit of medical tape and efficiently taped it down so that the tube followed the curve of where the Soldier’s cheekbone had to be, under the mask. “I’m going to hook up the solution. You shouldn’t feel anything, except maybe some small discomfort once your stomach starts getting full,” said Bruce. “But it’ll even out.”

Okay, said the Soldier.

And finally, a few moments later, it was done.

Steve felt nearly as exhausted as the Soldier seemed, and all he’d done was talk to him. Jesus Christ.

“Next up, the scans,” Bruce. “Let’s just get through this, okay? And we won’t use the sensor cap,” he added. “Just the handheld. All you need to do is keep doing what you’re doing, sitting nice and still. Is that okay?”

The Soldier failed to react.

“You okay, pal?” Steve asked, his throat feeling rough and sour thanks to the stomach acid he’d before forced to swallow back down. “You still with us?”

Blearily, the Soldier lifted his head and made brief eye contact, his eyelids drooping. His metal hand lifted and swooped in the air in an odd little wave, and then: Steve.

It was a wave, Steve realized. That’s what he was saying: Hi, Steve.
“Hey,” he said back. “You with us?”

The metal fist: Yes.

“Do you need a break?”

No, the hand said, and then twirled in the air, yet again telling them to get on with it, just as Bruce had translated earlier.

“Want me to talk?”

Yes.

So Steve did. He continued where he’d left off, using the calmest tones he could muster — and a little self-conscious, too, of his accent — as Bruce fiddled with his other equipment. He finally picked up the handheld device, which came alive with an arpeggio of electronic beeps that made the Soldier’s sagging shoulders contract with sudden tension.

As they had what now felt like hours earlier, Steve talked and Bruce described his actions in a low murmur, warning the Soldier when to expect the sound of the device by his temple, his ears, the mask, his chest, his spine. Steve tuned it out, centering himself instead on the Soldier’s slow blinks and the way his body seemed to lean towards Steve’s, even separated as they were by at least a yard.

The scanning took a long time; Bruce had to check and recheck the images and mutter irritated, quiet curses at it when the device glitched. By the time he set down the scanner with an air so final that it managed to cut through Steve’s concentration on retelling what was one of his most-requested stories (“What was the Paris train mission really like?”), Steve’s wristwatch informed him that more than forty minutes had passed.

“Well done,” Bruce complimented the Soldier, as he dragged the cell’s third chair over to the console and sat down. “Thank you,” he said, pressing the fingers of his flattened hand to his mouth and pulling his palm away from his face in a smooth quarter-arc. “That’s thank you. I know it wasn’t easy, but you did very well.”
The Soldier didn’t seem interested in Bruce’s gratitude, ignoring it in favor of turning to back Steve. His mechanical fingers lifted up, pressed to the perforations on the mask where his mouth would be, and curved away in an arc that matched the one Bruce had done. Thank you.

Steve’s stomach squirmed; his jaws clamped shut. What had Steve even really done? He’d sat here and just talked to him, he’d done his best to treat him with simple decency—to accept thanks for that felt obscene, somehow, like Steve was just a part of the system that had done this to him in the first place.

Of course, in a way, he had been. It was because of him that HYDRA had attempted to recreate the serum, again and again—and by their measure succeeded, with the Soldier. It was because of him that Bruce was seated next to him, that he had been forced to find a way to temper his boiling, unceasing rage with the innocuous veneer of mildness and calm. In a way, all this was his fault.

“You don’t have to thank me, pal,” he finally managed, after forcing his jaw to relax so that the Soldier wouldn’t think he was angry at him. “I’m here to help. We all are.” The words felt utterly inadequate.

The Soldier inspected him for a brief moment, eyes trailing over Steve’s face down to his clasped hands—where Steve knew he was doing a poor job at hiding his outrage at everything, clenching them as he was with the kind of force that would break another man’s fingers. He stretched them out. He doubted it fooled the Soldier, who seemed never to miss anything.

“Should we take a look?”

“Yeah,” said Steve. “Yeah, get on with it, right?” He gestured a shoulder towards the Soldier, tried for a smile that he felt sure came out more as a grimace.

The corners of the Soldier’s eyes crinkled; his right hand, yes. One day soon, Steve would be able to see if that faint micro-expression was really a smile, as he found himself hoping it was.

“I figured,” said Bruce. “Let’s take a look.” He scooted his chair to face the table and its temporary workstation, and tapped at the keyboard until the viewscreen behind them came to life again, this time showing the new films. Unsurprisingly, Bruce had chosen to look at the scans of the Soldier’s brain first, rather than the ones of his chest or stomach, where Steve knew Howard Stark’s empty, decades-old device was still lodged—along with God knew what else.
His body still slumped with exhaustion, the Soldier somehow found the energy to tilt his head up and pay attention to the screen.

Bruce clicked through the images—many of which were so similar that Steve had a hard time even discerning the difference between them—so quickly that he was reminded of Tony’s blasé description of Bruce, once upon a time: “Oh, you know. Me, Banner, Hawking, Richards, Pym—and then Einstein.”

Even Steve had understood what he’d meant, even if all the names besides Einstein were Greek to him. “Well?”

But Bruce didn’t get a chance to explain, because in the next moment, the Soldier erupted.

Shocked by the suddenness of it, Steve watched, frozen, as the Soldier staggered to his feet and careened backwards blindly, away from the chair, away from them, his right hand gripping the NG tube apparatus and the other one, the metal one, covering the mask, digging into the mask—

“Whoa, whoa,” Bruce burst out, standing himself, holding his hands up just as he had when the Soldier had asked—or begged—him to stop. “I’m sorry—JARVIS, turn off the monitor—I’m sorry, did the images scare—”

But the Soldier had barely been looking at the monitor, Steve realized, at the same time as he he saw the Soldier’s throat bulge and contract, his eyes go wide with pain and fear and panic, and—

“Shit,” Bruce swore, a short, cut-off little exclamation, “It’s okay—you’ll be okay,” and he stepped towards the Soldier, who went wild with fear, the control and awareness bleeding from his eyes as his abdomen heaved, and the metal hand began to claw at the mask—a sour smell suffused the air—

“Bruce—the mask,” Steve managed to croak out, “the anti-tamper—”

“Fuck,” Bruce swore again, and that was the end.

The Soldier lunged forward as some element of his animal brain chose fight over flight. His metal arm struck—it all happened in an instant—
Steve could only watch, his heart pounding in his chest, as the unstoppable metal hand closed violently around Bruce’s throat, as the Soldier propelled him backwards, as Bruce’s back crashed against the wall, as the Soldier’s expression went vacant of everything but raw anger and unfiltered terror—as he couldn’t breathe, and as vomit bubbled out, foul and viscous, from the perforations in the mask, and the hand around Bruce’s neck drew tighter and tighter—

To Steve, time stuttered, and came to a stop.

Chapter End Notes

Massive thanks to JHSC, Quietnight, and all the sprinters of the Stucky discord, without whom I would have flung myself to the floor in paroxysms of self-loathing rage...
multiple times, on this chapter. <3

Also thanks to everyone following, commenting, and giving kudos -- you are a tremendous inspiration to me. <3
Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Summary

The Soldier, Steve, and Bruce in the panic room.

[Chapter-specific content warning in the End Notes.]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

despite the threatening sky and shuddering earth (they remained)

Part 14

_Protection_, Bruce had said hours ago.

For him. _For him_.

“Please,” Steve heard himself saying past the crushing rush of blood in his ears, his voice shocked into a rasp. Somehow it still cut through the awful wet gurgle of the Soldier struggling to breathe through the compromised mask, and Bruce’s choking gasps, and the whir and whine of the metal arm as its hand bore down.

Adrenaline flashed bright and hot in his chest, a klaxon searing in counterpoint to his thudding heart. They didn’t have _time_, and Steve had sworn to _help_ him, he couldn’t—
“Please, pal, come on,” he appealed again, desperately, his feet carrying him forward as he numbly registered the mottled green flaring and fading on Bruce’s visible skin, the harsh shine of the silver hand, immobile around a discolored neck, the heave of the Soldier’s gut as he retched again.

“Captain, I can activate the cuffs—”

“No,” Steve interrupted, somehow drawing from the reserve of calm that lived deep in his belly, which ordinarily he could only ever find at the height of combat. “Don’t touch him, JARVIS, don’t hurt him,” and he was now so close, he could see the Soldier’s neck, red and sweaty and straining as he fought not to vomit again, or maybe to swallow it down, his biological hand digging ineffectually at the mask, too-long fingernails scoring invisible lines as they scrabbled for purchase, fuck, how long did they have?

The Soldier’s gaze was still locked on to the man who, if he didn’t somehow master himself, if he didn’t somehow hold on, would crush him—

“Mask,” Bruce wheezed, strangled and sibilant, his eyes enormous with the unhindered terror and dread of someone who knew, intimately, the awful consequences of losing control.

“Pal,” Steve croaked out again, wishing wildly, hysterically, for this man’s real name, Jesus Christ—what would Sam do?—and he lifted his hand to his chest, please, “Please let him go, pal, please don’t hurt him—”

Steve twisted his index fingers towards each other, hurt—

“Just let me help — please let me help you—”

His fist, with the thumb up, brought down into his palm—

“The room is equipped with defensive measures, Captain—”

“Only if he transforms,” Steve bit out, and was Bruce growing larger? He had to focus on the Soldier, just the Soldier— “Please let me help you—I’m so sorry,” his fist against his chest, in a circle, “Please, pal, we didn’t mean for this to happen, please just listen to me—”
The Soldier’s eyes, inflamed and watery, finally—finally—turned to Steve. The skin where mask met flesh was reddened and bloody, and for a second, just a second, he stopped pulling at it and swiped at the perforations instead, more vomit oozing out of the hole Bruce had drilled, god, he couldn’t breathe—he was swaying, even as he held Bruce up against the wall, his arm and anger and fear the only things keeping him conscious, surely—

“I can help you,” Steve scraped out, his own chest feeling as tight and compressed as the Soldier’s had to be, and Bruce’s, all three of them suffocating in this room, from fear and panic and the result of Steve trying to help, “please just let him go, he’ll leave the room, he won’t touch you, this was an accident, pal, please just let him go—”

He couldn’t look at Bruce, couldn’t look to see if he was transforming, if the Hulk was about to take on that metal arm, if—if—if—

“I can deploy measures that will not have a lasting negative effect, Captain—”

Steve violently shook his head, but maintained eye contact with the Soldier, extending his own palm towards him instead, like before, like the handshake, “Let me try to help. Please let me try.”

To his right, he could hear Bruce gagging and struggling, but not the Hulk—not yet—

The Soldier’s metal arm slid away from Bruce, who crumpled to the floor, still Bruce, somehow, he was still Bruce. He coughed and spat, his shoulders trembling and spasming, but he remained himself.

The Soldier stumbled forward, towards Steve, and Steve’s hand caught the metal one, the smell of him rising acidly into his nose and eyes, stinging, forcing Steve to swallow down a gag, the Soldier’s body unwieldy and slack, his other hand still fixed on the mask. Steve planted his feet, and the words ran out of him, urgent and low, “Get out, Bruce, get out—”

His field of view full of the Soldier, Steve didn’t look up and just waited for the rustle of Bruce’s clothes as he clambered to his feet, and the hiss of the door opening, and the fading away of uneven, staggering footsteps.

“Hang on, hang on, hang on,” bubbled out of him, here Steve was, alone with him—the least prepared of anyone in this entire tower to help—the least qualified—Christ—
Steve eased the Soldier down to the floor, his heavy body sinking down without resistance, the metal hand gripping his own like a vice—somehow he doubted even his fingers could withstand it indefinitely—and the Soldier’s body was so hot, damp with sweat, through the blue shirt fouled by drips and globs of vomit he’d managed to expel through the mask, through the hole that Bruce had so carefully made—

Steve maneuvered the Soldier so his back was against the wall. “Pull it out,” he told him, and gestured at the tube with his free hand. “At least pull out the tube, do that, I’m going to—I’m going to—”

The Soldier’s gut convulsed again, and he tried to cough wetly, he tried to breathe through the burbling suffocating mask—and Steve had had pneumonia enough times to know the sound of someone choking on fluid in his lungs—

“Your hand, let me go,” Steve pleaded. “Pull the tube out—”

“Steve,” Bruce’s voice, hoarse and breathy, came from the overhead speaker, “Steve, the vacuum—”

“I know,” Steve snapped at the air, and the Soldier’s head lolled up at him, vomit caught in his hair, eyes piercing and blue beside burst blood vessels, and the metal hand finally released his.

Steve launched himself at the work table across the room, at the neatly boxed kit of everything they’d needed for the drill—behind him, the Soldier still struggled to breathe.

His hands, somehow still steady, found the small black vacuum unit in the box and he threw himself back to the Soldier, crashing to his knees next to him, fingers fumbling to assemble the fucking thing however Bruce had done it before.

He glanced up to see the Soldier’s legs splayed out before him, the muscles of his thighs twitching, and the NG tube abandoned at his side. He’d done it, he’d pulled it out, but now he’d latched both hands onto the mask, he was pulling at it—

“No, no, fuck,” Steve moaned. “No, don’t—”

“The mask is going to detonate, Steve, you’ve got to stop him—” this time it was Sam’s voice—JARVIS must have notified everyone—if only Sam were in the fucking room—
“Please don’t,” Steve implored him as the tool finally came alive with the hiss and whoosh of suction, “Here, just please, please let me—”

But the Soldier wasn’t looking at him, not any more, or at anything at all, as his body twisted and trembled. He was insensate to everything but the panic of asphyxiation.

“Please,” Steve gasped out again, hearing distantly— “Steve, we gotta try something”— and he pushed the suction device forward, threading it through the clawed fingers, trying not to see the bloom of blood and bruises as his metal fingers gouged himself—connecting with the holes in the mask, extracting the foul mix of nutritional solution and nauseating bile and—

“Just hold on, pal, e’mon, please—”

But the Soldier struggled against Steve, torqued his head and body away from him, weakly, desperately, the red flush fading from his skin, the lack of oxygen and the ascending panic dulling his strength, but not his fight.

(“We’re doin’ it Cap, it's gonna hit you too—”)

Steve reached forward, blindly, covering the Soldier’s right hand with his own, and—

“Do it!” he shouted. “Do it, Sam!”

A great flood of sound struck them both: massive, vibrating, shrill and bright and awful, an overwhelming violent clamor as visceral as a physical blow, and Steve could hardly see or think or move.

Instinctively he clapped one hand to his ear, a pinprick of awareness keeping the other one steady, as it held the suction device, and it was so loud he couldn’t breathe, and the Soldier’s hands fell away from the mask and they seized his own ears, and his head craned backwards, a reflexive, frenzied attempt to escape from the awful noise, and some part of Steve dimly noted the way his sick had trailed through the healthy growth of stubble on his neck.

And then the sound faded into nothing but ringing. Even the high-pitched rush of air from the
vacuum tool was gone, and Steve’s head ached and pulsed, and was the fucking thing broken, god, after all this? No, it—he could see it working, he could see the Soldier’s chest starting to rise and fall, unevenly but moving, and his ears were ringing, piercing, dissonant and disorienting.

Steve felt slow and overwhelmed. He tried to speak, as the metal hand released the Soldier’s ear and trailed back to the awful black appliance that was as much his captor as anything else, and he said, “Please, the mask will hurt you if you pull at it,” but he couldn’t hear himself, his words just a low blur of vibration in his throat and jaw, opaque and indistinct.

He watched the metal fingers dig in again, and no, god, he couldn’t— “Please,” he said anew, and the Soldier didn’t react, and he said it a second time, “Please don’t,” and his own right hand somehow found the Soldier’s again, and he curled his fingers around it, and drew the Soldier’s hand to his body, flattened his own palm, pressed it against his own chest so tightly Steve could feel his pounding pulse in his fingertips, and the Soldier looked at him.

He was dazed, fearful, and so Steve said, please, and said it again, rubbing a circle into his chest, please, and then he formed a fist, sorry. Sorry, Steve said, again.

His flesh hand suddenly closed over Steve’s, heavy, sweaty, as Steve said sorry, and the Soldier’s fingers trailed around the edges of Steve’s fist, and pressed into his chest, and Steve said sorry, and the Soldier punctuated each circling motion of Steve’s hand, each sorry, with a small, deliberate squeeze of his own.

Steve couldn’t hear himself breathing, he could only feel the rapid, shallow flutter of his own lungs, and he couldn’t hear the rasp of his jeans where his knees dug into the floor, or if the door behind them had opened, or if Sam was still talking through the intercom. He couldn’t hear the Soldier, either, he didn’t know if the suction was really working, or if the Soldier’s sudden composure was really lethargy, because he was fucking suffocating.

If he leaned in, he might be able to feel if the Soldier was breathing, and so he did, one hand still holding the tool to the mask, automatically and methodically moving from perforation to perforation, the other pressed to his chest — sorry — and then, at last, the metal hand dropped from the mask to Steve’s shoulder.

The Soldier stared at him. His eyes were still too wide and too bright, too red, but the panic was receding, and Steve sluggishly realized that the metal fingertips were pressing hard into his trapezius, almost enough to hurt. It was the thumb and the index, keeping pace with Steve’s too-quick breathing, and so he slowed it down, and so did the fingertips, and Steve kept saying sorry, with the Soldier’s other hand still squeezing his fist every time, and the Soldier’s fingers kept pressing into the muscle, eventually easing into an odd little alternating rhythm, soothing and random.
It was them alone, with just the ringing, for a few seconds or minutes more, Steve couldn’t tell. The adrenaline was fading from his system, too, leaving him feeling shaky and sick, but it was okay: they were both okay, this was nearly over. And then the metal hand suddenly clenched down, hard, on his shoulder, so shocking and painful that Steve could feel the startled yelp that burst from his mouth even if he couldn’t hear it.

The hand wasn’t the only thing to have gone suddenly rigid. The Soldier’s entire body, slumped as he was against the wall, flexed unnaturally, and Steve pulled back, alarmed because he’d seen men have fits before—men who’d gotten knocks to the head—but the Soldier had been fine, he’d been breathing, and the hand that had been covering his own, the one squeezing every time Steve said sorry, it fell away in an awkward clutch, fingers curled in like claws, and he was shaking, his eyes rolled back, and Steve could only watch.

But he hadn’t been pulling at the mask, Steve found himself thinking, feeling oddly betrayed. It wasn’t fair. The Soldier’s hand had been on Steve’s shoulder, nowhere near the mask—the mask shouldn’t have—it shouldn’t have—

He felt numb and distant as bodies rushed in, lab coats, one of them Sam in a sweatshirt, wearing green sneakers, and somebody pulled him back, and hauled him to his feet, silent fingers snapping in front of his face, a mouth moving, and he said, “I can’t hear you,” and the person holding his bicep squeezed it, reassuring, and he watched, as the mass of white-clothed arms and legs rotated the Soldier on the ground, as somebody set aside the little vacuum tool and replaced it with something clean and white and sterile.

Steve stumbled backwards until his spine hit the wall, in the same place that Bruce had been trapped only—he didn’t know how long ago, it felt like hours, but that couldn’t—that couldn’t be right, and his head hurt, and his ears hurt, and the ringing just kept going.

Sam appeared before him. Steve blinked at him. He had to smell. The Soldier’s vomit was still all over him. Sam touched his arm, his mouth moved. “I can’t hear you,” Steve repeated, and looked over Sam’s shoulder to what parts of the Soldier he could see through the huddled throng of doctors, he realized, medical professionals, and the Soldier’s legs had stopped jerking, and they were lifting him onto a gurney, placing a mask with a—bubble, over his mask, forcing air into his lungs, and they were taking him away.
Here's Chapter 14, a whole... several days early. :) You all were brilliant about that cliffhanger. I spent several hours just straight cackling at the flailing and screaming. ;) Thank you for reading, commenting, and kudos-ing! It's a delight to tell you guys this story.

Thanks again to the Stucky discord and my dear friend JHSC! <3

**Chapter-Specific Content Warnings:** A character vomits.
Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Summary

Steve struggles to recover. Tony, Steve, and Sam work together.

[Chapter-specific warnings in the End Notes]

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

despite the threatening sky and shuddering earth (they remained)

Part 15

Sam’s lips were moving.

Steve blinked up at him, tried to concentrate, tried to parse out the low ebb and flow of choppy, indistinct noises, but it felt as though his brain was the wayward private who had fallen out of step with his marching platoon.

His stomach pitched and rolled; not just from the lingering stench of vomit but, he thought, from the sound, whatever it had been, that had very nearly incapacitated them both. His head pulsed with pain. “Can’t understand you,” he mumbled, feeling the vibration of his own voice in his head, each word reverberating like a rock dropped into a pond.
Everything was ringing, a piercing wail that just went on and on—

Steve felt a tap to his jaw. He opened his eyes. When had he closed them?

Sam’s face, talking again, no—his hands, they were moving—

Sam: You — hurt — bad, with his eyebrows lifted in inquiry.

“‘M’okay,” Steve said. “The Soldier?”

Sam wiggled his palm in a so-so gesture, and then talked again, but this time flickering and fuzzy blue words suddenly appeared, hovering, over Sam’s right-hand shoulder.

**HE’S ON HIS WAY TO THE MEDICAL SUITE. THEY’LL KEEP US POSTED.**

It took Steve a second too long to fully read through the two brief sentences, squinting in an attempt to make the the hologram’s low framerate less hard on his eyes. “The sound?”

**LOCALIZED SOUND CANNON. THE EFFECTS SHOULD GO AWAY IN A FEW HOURS. YOU WERE RIGHT IN THE LINE OF FIRE, AND IT WAS MEANT FOR THE HULK.**

“And the Soldier?”

Sam’s hand, on his shoulder now, squeezing where the metal hand had gripped him. It hurt. Steve opened his eyes to see Sam trying to disguise his alarm.

**YOU ALREADY ASKED, MAN.**


**CAN YOU SIT DOWN FOR ME, STEVE?**
Steve stared hard at the words, and then looked down at himself, his stomach swooping and contracting like a stretched rubber band. He found himself leaning hard against the wall, his knees locked, his back cold where it pressed against the strange synthetic tiles. His head hurt.

“Yeah,” he said, and lurched forward towards one of the plastic chairs—the same one the Soldier had been sitting on, in fact, when he’d choked and gagged his way through inserting the NG tube—and abruptly careened sideways, as off-balance as if he’d just spent the last minute—or hour—spinning in a circle.

Like they’d used to do as kids, Steve recalled dully. Spin around to see who could go the longest without throwing up.

He used to lose, at that game. He lost now too.

It was a combination of the adrenaline comedown, the unpleasant sour reek hanging in the air, his own nausea, and the vertigo that did it.

Steve parked his hands on his knees and stood there after it was over, diaphragm quivering, throat vibrating with sound. He must be groaning. His head pounded slowly, in time with his unnaturally low pulse.

A gentle pat to his back. He couldn’t see JARVIS’s hologram from down here. Surely Sam was talking.

He looked up, blearily, and sure enough, saw the words:

**GOT TO GET YOU CLEANED UP AND CHECKED OUT. YOU OKAY TO WALK? YOU WANT TO GET A ROLLY CHAIR?**

Gingerly, Steve raised himself up to standing. He resisted the urge to tear his elbow away from Sam’s solid grip, to gripe at him, *I don’t need anybody’s help*, the way he would have, once upon a time.

He’d been injured since the serum, of course. But never had he felt this *ill*. It was amazing that he
could ever have forgotten what it felt like.

He looked up. The question still hung in the air. He lifted one of his hands—still splattered with unspeakable muck—and mimed walking with his index and middle fingers, before realizing he could talk.

Jesus Christ.

**OKAY THEN, LET'S TAKE IT SLOW.**

Somehow, Steve managed to follow Sam out of the room, leaning heavily on him to stop from slamming into walls and doors, barely able to concentrate on anything but the discordant ringing in his ears and the awful rolling nausea, which wasn’t helped by the faint scent of something medicinal and antiseptic in the air as they made their way down—

A hallway. He was in a hallway. Had the medical team taken their patient this same way? What if he—

“Sam, he’s gotta be afraid,” he mumbled out, still unable to hear himself, his tongue and lips feeling strangely fleshy and unfamiliar as he concentrated on forming the words.

What the fuck had they been thinking?

**JARVIS** didn’t have hologram projectors installed everywhere. But he didn’t need words to understand Sam when he tapped at Steve to make him look up at him. Sam mimed taking deep, slow breaths, and exhaling according to an easy three-two-one count, the same way Steve had once done as a fearful child fighting his way through a asthma attack.

After a few minutes of careful breathing, Steve was able to lipread Sam’s “you good?” and he nodded, wincing anew at the pain in his head. He clenched his hand into a fist, feeling keenly aware of how many yes or no questions they’d asked the Soldier before Bruce had picked up on the fact—in about two seconds flat—that it hurt him to nod.

Just another on Steve’s long list of fuck-ups.
It took more than fifteen minutes for them to make it two floors to the medical center. Steve threw up twice more on the way, head spinning, mumbling pointless apologies for the mess into the ringing silence. The elevator had been a bad idea. So had walking, or moving in general.

Steve swayed precariously with each step as they entered through the glass doors, the bright lights painful and nauseating. He scanned past the rush of bodies in scrubs approaching him, past the clean lines of futuristic screens and opaque glass walls and racks of labeled cabinets.

No Soldier. He wasn’t here, was he—

“‘S’e okay,” Steve slurred, closing his eyes against the brightness, his eyelids flaring red, someone urging him down into a chair, the indiscernible rumble of noise beneath the ringing that might be voices, a touch on his arm he jerked away from.

He opened his eyes to see a woman with short grey hair talking at him. “Can’t hear,” he said. Didn’t they know by now?

The woman held up a screen:

**ARE YOU EXPERIENCING DIZZINESS? NAUSEA? EAR PAIN? HEAD PAIN?**

Steve thought of the Soldier’s hand, clasping the pencil, drawing a slow circle around the entire cartoon of his own body, and later: *all*, his hand moving in a smooth arc around the other one, *all*, for *everything*. Everything hurt.

“Yeah,” he said. “How long until—”

The screen flashed:

**IT MAY BE SEVERAL HOURS. WE’D LIKE TO DO SOME QUICK CHECKS, AND GET YOU CLEANED UP, AND THEN LET YOU REST.**

Dully, Steve looked past the woman—the *doctor*, her name tag said Dr. Moran—to where Sam stood, his arms folded. Sam’s eyebrows lifted in the kind of shorthand that Steve had only ever
managed with his brothers-in-arms.

*Listen to the doctor, Cap,* is what those eyebrows were saying.

Steve tried to ignore the press of people around him, moving, fiddling silently with plastic-wrapped instruments and metal trays, it all had to be making *noise,* and there were only two of them in this — examination room, he supposed, but it somehow felt like *more.*

“My pulse is normally slow,” he found himself saying nonsensically. Of course, they had his medical records, they had everything about him, they knew his measurements and his endurance and his strength, it had all been *tested,* again and again—

It was impossible not to think of the Soldier, somewhere in this place.

Because of Steve, the Soldier had nearly drowned in his own *sick.* Because Steve had pushed and pushed for the NG tube instead of the scans first. Because Bruce had given in. Because seven decades before, people had wanted the secret locked into Steve’s cells for *themselves,* and that poor bastard *somewhere* in this medical suite had paid the price.

He was *still* paying the price.

Steve made himself be still, warring with himself over the dual urges to simply curl up and shut his eyes and wait for his sickness and hearing loss to *go away,* and to jump up from the bed and see for himself that he hadn’t just killed a man who was supposed to be under his *protection.*

God, Sam had been right all along. Not that Steve had doubted him, but he certainly hadn’t understood what it meant that they were withholding proper care *from their prisoner.* And there was no mistaking the Soldier for anything other than that, Steve realized.

And they were supposed to be the good guys. Steve was supposed to be *the* good guy. Foolishly, he’d assured the Soldier of that exact fact, and realized later how little the platitude must have meant to him. And now he was realizing how right the Soldier had been to doubt him in the first place.

A *tap-tap-tap* to his arm, insistent and professional. Steve opened his eyes, finding a nurse removing a blood-pressure cuff from his arm, and a screen before him, displaying in muted tones he supposed to were intended to be easier on his eyes:
*LET’S GET YOU CLEANED UP.*

They led him to a large, attached bathroom, and Sam followed him in with a bundle of the same sort of clothes he’d gathered for the Soldier.

Had it really only been that morning?

Sam didn’t try to talk to him, or offer his assistance, as Steve pulled off his filthy clothes and carefully stepped forward into the shallow dip of the shower stall. There was a seat. He sat down and reached forward blindly for the lever, flinching only slightly at the sudden spray when he found it.

Taking a shower took longer than it should have, with Steve’s unceasing dizziness even though he was seated, but he simply gritted his teeth and powered through it, perfunctorily scrubbing at his face and body.

The water turned off.

Steve looked up, and saw Sam’s hand withdrawing from the lever, the other one extending him a towel, like he was an invalid.

Steve scowled. Sam was talking.

It was his bad ear all over again, but so much worse, and in both ears. The echoing bathroom made the already indistinct, blurry sounds even more unclear, the unpleasant steady whine in his ears even more piercing.

“What are you saying,” he bit out, knowing he wasn’t even close to disguising his short temper, and worse, that of all of them Sam least deserved to be on the receiving end of it.

He couldn’t help it. He was just so fucking *angry*.

But anger didn’t combine well with nausea. Steve breathed carefully, accepting the towel and
pressing it to his face, breathing and rebreathing the steamy air, hoping somehow it might settle his stomach and his pounding head and his rage.

He did finally look up, and starting going through the motions of drying himself off, and clothing himself, still slightly damp, in the soft sweats and tee shirt Sam had gotten for him, and accepting the toothbrush, and gripping the edge of the sink to keep his balance, and taking a deep swig of blue gatorade that clashed badly with the mint flavor of the toothpaste, and nearly retching again before controlling himself with a deep inhalation that he held in his lungs until the danger passed.

“Thanks,” he finally muttered to Sam, and there was no JARVIS in the bathroom but it didn’t matter because Sam just nodded, his expression drawn and serious.

Steve staggered back to the main room and collapsed back into the hospital bed he hadn’t noticed before. Somebody came around and fixed something to his index finger. He didn’t care.

The spins were worse with his eyes closed, but it was worth it over the sharp shock of pain from even the ambient light in the room.

Absently, he dug his fingers into the bruises that had blossomed in the muscle between his collarbone and shoulder, and thought of the Soldier somehow seeing that he was in distress, even though he could barely breathe himself, and doing his best to help.

What kind of person, Steve wondered as he felt the exhaustion finally catching up to him, still tried to help?

It was dark when Steve jerked awake.
He was disoriented at first, his body flushed with the vestiges of adrenaline from the lingering traces of a dream he couldn’t quite remember, of a restless sleep he hadn’t planned on.

Steve swallowed thickly, his mouth dry and foul-tasting, and took stock of himself. His headache had receded to a dull throb, one he could at least ignore enough to be able to concentrate, and the nausea seemed gone, but — if judging by the way the room whirled and spun when he sat up — the vertigo remained.

The ringing in his ears persisted, but he found that his hearing was improved when he cautiously asked, “Anybody there?”

No one answered. Or, he thought no one did. The midtones and trebles of his voice and the ambient noises of the room were at least perceivable, if not crystal clear in the way he’d somehow forgotten to be grateful for.

It was something.

Steve carefully set his bare feet on the tile floor and stood, gritting his teeth against the dizziness. His inner ears were the problem, he figured, remembering childhood illnesses that had left him staggering drunkenly. “JARVIS,” he called out.

“Captain Rogers,” the A.I. greeted, the words appearing on a panel that lit up with low-contrast text Steve supposed was designed not to hurt his eyes. “The team is just down the hall.”

“Is the Soldier…?”

“No longer in acute distress, Captain.”

Acute distress. Bitterly, Steve turned the words over in his head. Just the regular amount of distress, then.

He had to squint against the light when he opened the door. The hallway was dimmed, and empty of the hustle and bustle he’d barely comprehended when they’d arrived in the medical center earlier in the day.
“What time is it?”

“Shortly after midnight, sir,” said JARVIS, again the words appearing on the closest equipped surface.

Steve looked down the hall and spotted a row of doors and windows illuminated by a soft glow. He headed in that direction, assuming JARVIS would correct him if he was going the wrong way.

JARVIS was silent. And when Steve reached the door, he stopped short.

He’d found the right room all right. Both of them, visible through clear glass walls on either side of him: to the right, Tony and Sam, looking up from their shared screen to see him in the hall; to the left, the Soldier.

He was lying flat on his back in a hospital bed, some sort of—tube attached to his throat, below the mask, his eyes shut, hair lank and limp over his forehead, a bank of equipment behind him, his blue shirt gone, the silver of his arm shining in the dusky light, glinting red and green and yellow in the spots where it reflected the blinking lights of the monitors and devices and screens that surrounded him.

He didn’t look small, exactly. Just diminished.

The beeping in Steve’s ears wasn’t ringing, though the ringing still persisted. It was the sound the of the equipment hooked into the Soldier, monitoring his heart rate and oxygenation and God knew what else. The tones buzzed discordantly in his ears, synchronized but somehow just a hair off, like hearing twins speak in imperfect unison.

His body was entirely still besides the even, rhythmic movement of his chest.

“Steve?”

Steve turned to look over his shoulder. He moved too quickly, and had to shut his eyes to regain his equilibrium. When he blinked again, Sam materialized into view, with drooping shoulders and heavy-lidded eyes, holding the door across the hall open for him.
“Hey,” Steve greeted, standing still but feeling just as oddly off-balance as when he’d been lurching down the hallway, trying to master his vertigo with sheer stubbornness.

“Nurse just took a break,” Sam explained, nodding towards the Soldier. “He’s keeping an eye on him. And we’re right here, and it’s all smart equipment — you know, hooked into…” Sam fluttered his free hand in the air. “The building. JARVIS. Whatever.”

“He’s… all right?”

“For now,” Sam answered simply. “You gonna fall over? You look like you’re gonna fall over.”

“No, I’m...fine,” Steve replied lamely. He clearly wasn’t, and Sam didn’t even need to raise an eyebrow or scoff at him for Steve to see exactly how little he was buying was Steve was selling.

“Yeah, you’ll be huffing and puffing ‘on your left,’ any second now,” said Sam automatically, the ballbusting sounding too rote to have any real teeth. “Come here, man.”

“He lives,” Tony proclaimed loudly as Steve opened the door, swaying and clenching the door handle a little harder than was necessary. “You need—” Tony yawned massively, “—a barf bag. Cap?”

Sam trudged his way back to the chair he’d been sitting in when Steve had spotted him through the glass, and sank down into it. “So how’re you feeling?”

“Fine,” Steve repeated.

“Nurse is gonna wanna check you out,” Sam said. “Might as well get used to the question. You sleep?”

“You know he slept, we saw him sleeping,” Tony said, vibrating with the kind of strained energy that Steve was rapidly coming to understand meant severe lack of sleep. He bounced himself off his spot leaning against the wall and ambled towards Steve. “You’re standing and not falling over, you can hear, you’re not spewing all over my elevator—”
“Sorry—”

“Steve,” Tony said, flatly. “You were hit with an experimental sound cannon. I’m just checking on you. Tinnitus?”

“What?”

“Ringing.” Tony spun his index finger by his own ear. “In your ears.”

“Yeah,” said Steve, reaching for the closest seatback, dragging it to him, and sliding himself into the chair as gracefully as he could under the circumstances. “Experimental?”

“Not a lot of, y’know, super soldier guinea pigs lying around.”

An awkward beat of silence followed.

“Well,” said Tony. “The ringing should go away—”

“Tinnitus, you mean,” Steve corrected him in the closest approximation of his usual authoritative tone that he could manage.

Tony snorted. “Tinnitus—”

“What’s the, uh, thing?” Steve interrupted, gesturing to his own throat. “On him, what’d they do?”

“It’s a tracheotomy,” Sam said, leaning forward to rest both elbows on the table. “Tube down his windpipe, breathing for him.”

“He still can’t…?”

“He can breathe through the mask, but he had a seizure,” Sam continued. “You saw him shaking,
right? That was a seizure. We’re trying to figure out if…”

Tony ticked off on his fingers. “Could’ve been the mask, could’ve been withdrawal, could’ve been hypoxia—”

“—Not enough oxygen to his brain—”

“So which is it?” Steve asked, the banked guilt in his gut stoking up hot and quick. It was impossible not to see the Soldier’s fingers, clutching at the mask, tearing at his own skin, desperate to breathe— “I tried to stop him from—”

“You did the best you could, Steve,” said Sam firmly. “He should have been under direct medical supervision from the beginning.”

Tony said nothing, just looked up at the wall of monitors at one end of the room that were currently displaying a jumbled mess of code and diagrams and—

“What are you looking at the footage for?” Steve said, peering up at one corner of the screen dedicated to the white walls of the panic room, and the Soldier’s huddled figure partially obscured by Steve’s bulk.

“Wanted to see what happened,” Sam replied simply. “One of the doctors also wanted to check it out, see if she could spot any symptoms that the seizure was coming on, so we’d be able to tell if it— what’d you say, again?”

Tony cleared his throat. “If it synced up with any electrical activity the sensors in the room picked up on the mask, maybe we can eliminate the other possible reasons for the seizure. Seems like the tamperproofing on the mask is a one-time deal, so if it did go…”

“You could take it off him,” Steve realized with a jolt. “It could come off. And it wouldn’t hurt him.” Automatically, he swung his head over to look at the Soldier, just barely visible through the two glass walls that separated them, and couched as he was in a cradle of medical equipment. From here he could still see the Soldier’s chest, rising and falling with perfect mechanical precision.

“We could take it off,” Tony agreed.
“And the seizure, why would they…” Steve rubbed at his eyes so hard that he saw spots, half in a desperate attempt to ease the pain of his headache and half to do something with his frustration. “What’s the point?”

“JARVIS found some references to a ‘field wipe’ procedure,” said Tony heavily. “And we know his brain is healing, so…”

“We do?”

Yawning, Sam said, “Bruce’s scans. Check ‘em out.” The screens flashed and flickered, displaying now row after row of high-contrast blobs, all recognizably the Soldier’s brain thanks to the flashes of white wires and the sharp white edges of the object that belonged nowhere near the inside of a person’s skull.

“There are a couple of before and afters…” Tony whistled lowly. “Our guy’s got neuroplasticity on a level Bruce says has never been seen before.”

“Where is Bruce?” Steve asked abruptly. “Did he…”

“He didn’t—” Tony mimed an explosion, and paired it with a low-effort sound effect. “But he’s off, you know, doing his thing.”

The words floated up through Steve’s tired brain. “The, uh — healing crystals and colored pencils?”

“No,” said Tony. “Science.”

Steve exhaled. “Right. And you’re…?”

Tony tossed a shoulder in the direction of the hallway, and Steve spotted the glint and color of an Iron Man suit, standing guard.

“He’s been burning through the sedatives faster than his rich man meth lab can crank ‘em out,” Sam
explained, jerking a thumb at Tony. “He’s gotten close to waking up a couple times, and he’s not restrained, so. Just in case. The anesthesiologist is in the room next to him, monitoring remotely.”

“So you’re working up here,” Steve finished, looking from the Iron Man sentry back to Tony. “For protection. And you’re figuring out how to get that fucking thing off him.”

“Got it in one.” Tony’s tone was grim.

“So, the symptoms for a seizure,” Steve said, resettling himself in his chair and looking back up at the screen, still displaying the brain scans. “What did you find in the footage?”

“A lotta wrong angles, mostly,” said Sam, leaning back in his chair and folding his fingers behind his head. “You’re a big guy, Steve. Could stand to lose a few.”

He didn’t much feel like one, with the vertigo and the headache pounding in his skull. “Camera adds ten pounds,” he shot back absently, to a muffled snort from Sam. “I can help. I mean, I was there.”

“You were pretty out of it,” Sam said, which Tony followed with a muttered, “He probably still is.”

“I can help,” Steve repeated stubbornly, even as his vision swam a little. “What are we looking for?”

Sam started to explain. “Look out for rapid eye movements—”

“Muscle spasms, twitching,” Tony offered—

“—anything that seems odd,” Sam finished. “That’s what the doctor said, anyway.”

Without being asked, JARVIS called up the footage: the white room, the corner of Sam’s old bedroll, the plastic chair that had gotten knocked over. The Soldier, pressed up against the wall, clawing at the mask, and Steve himself stumbling into the frame, trying to assemble the suction tool.

The footage was hard to look at.
“How’d they, uh,” Steve started, still staring at the video, “How’d they make sure…?”

“It’s cleared,” Sam reassured him. “He’s not breathing through it right now, anyway.”

“Right,” said Steve, now watching as his other self loomed over the Soldier, all clumsy hands and overlarge shoulders. Jesus Christ. No wonder he hadn’t been able to calm him down.

As the Steve on camera leaned in more closely, Jarvis split the screen into two different angles: one from behind Steve’s back, so that the Soldier’s head was just partially visible behind Steve’s shoulder, along with his legs, sprawled out; and the other from the side, giving a clear view to where Steve had held on to the Soldier’s hand.

“And here’s where the BASS drops,” Tony chimed in. Steve glanced to where he was back leaning against the glass wall.

“What?”

“He thinks he’s clever,” Sam remarked dryly. “Big Ass—”

“Sound System—”

“That’s why it’s muted,” Steve realized, as his other self cringed and clapped his hand to his ear, keeping one steady on the vacuum device, and in high-definition he watched the Soldier’s eyes go wide and bright with pain.

He could have gone without seeing that again, frankly.

The sound had been indescribable. Loud, of course, but something about the tone and pitch had made it *unbearable*. Even now, seeing it happen silently on screen was enough to send a squeal of something stinging and unpleasant down his spine.

His other self brought the Soldier’s hand to his chest, the only thing Steve had been able to think of
in the middle of endless, senseless panic: sorry, sorry, sorry.

“That was smart,” Sam murmured. “Finding a way to communicate with him.”

“It was all him,” Steve said, lifting a hand to knead at the pinch and ache of his trapezius muscle. “I wasn’t that much better off.”

“Anything lingering, besides the ringing?” Sam asked quietly. “You were pretty green for a while.”


“Oh, so you’re completely fine, then?” Sam jibed, as the on-screen Soldier’s hand clamped down in the same spot Steve was now massaging.

Steve watched, as the shake and shudder of his own shoulders began to slow, his breathing settling in time with the Soldier’s hand, and the suction starting to work, and the trust in the Soldier’s eyes, still edged with fear but there, as he did his inexplicable best to calm Steve, and the moment where Steve thought, just for a second, that okay, the worst had passed, and the Soldier’s fingers, firmly pressing into Steve’s shoulder, and—

“—we thought maybe something was going on with his hand,” said Sam, very far away—

—first the thumb, digging into the hollow of his collarbone, pushing hard, three times, and then the metal index finger, curved over the muscle, two quick taps, the thumb again, twice, and then the index three more times—

“Steve?”

Steve’s own hand fitted carefully into the bruises left behind by the Soldier, and he followed along, this time five jabs with the thumb—a deliberate pause, and five more—it was something, it was just out of reach, it was—

The world stretched away from him, incomprehensibly distant. Somewhere in his brain, in the space of a heartbeat: a clockmaker finding the tiny gear he’d forgotten was even missing at all, and placing
it gently atop the careful collection of *he responds when you’re in the room* and *this is his word for Steve* and *please stay with me*—and on the exhale, at last, the delicate device clicking into motion, and it all

fell

into

place.

“Morse,” gasped Steve, vertigo swamping his senses, he’d stood up somehow, he couldn’t *breathe*, “It’s *Morse*, it’s—it’s—

A hot hysterical flood of blind, unreasoning panic swept and thundered through his body. He couldn’t breathe. It was Morse, it was Morse and it was —

3 - 2 - 5 - 5 - 7 - 0 - 3 - 8

Everything whirled and swirled around him, his own heart in his throat thumping hard and painful in counterpoint to the sway and pulse of the room, and the chair, he’d just stumbled over the chair, he had to get to—he had to get to—

“It’s Bucky,” he wheezed out somehow, his own voice thin and high and unrecognizable, and he crashed against the wall, if he looked through it he would see the *Soldier*, silent and still and *silenced* and *made still*—and he was *Bucky*, he had been—he had been *Bucky*, somehow, all along, how could Steve not have *seen* it, how could he—

“—having a panic attack. Hey. Buddy. Pal—”
C’mon, pal, Steve had said to him, and the Soldier had—Bucky had panicked, bright blue eyes gone
wide and Steve hadn’t seen—

“Time to breathe, Cap, let’s go. In and out. You know the drill. You’re fine. Gimme a good breath,
come on—”

Steve blinked and saw in front of him Tony, looking serious and out-of-focus and what had Steve
done—

“Take a deep breath. C’mon. You know who you are? Know where you are?”

“Steve,” Steve managed to say, and even to his own damaged ears he knew it sounded off,
dissonant, he had to—he had to—

Bucky, strapped to a table, panting out his service number, “Three — two — five — five—”

“Steve,” said the voice, firm and calm, “Take a deep breath, hold it for me, one—two—three—four,
nice, let it out—”

Steve did. And he did it again, his body feeling almost unbearably heavy even as his heart raced and
the muscles in his chest and gut shook and quivered—

“C’mon, pay attention to me, let’s go again,” said Tony, and—

He swallowed around a mouth gone dry. His throat seemed like it had forgotten how to work. His
headache had spiraled out of its low, ebbing throb into something searing and sharp, but somehow
the pain helped his thoughts coalesce into sudden, horrible clarity.

“Tony,” Steve he tested out, his voice unrecognizably numb and hoarse. “Tony. The Soldier is
Bucky.”
Chapter End Notes

Massive thanks to JHSC, Quietnight, and spitandvinegar. <3 Huge thank you to everyone following the story, leaving kudos, and commenting -- it makes my day every time.
Chapter-Specific Warnings: Non-graphic vomiting, panic attack
Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Summary

Steve reels, and he and Sam form a plan.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**despite the threatening sky and shuddering earth (they remained)**

Part 16

This is what happened: 69 years ago, Steve had failed Bucky. And as it turned out, he’d never stopped.

Steve’s mind had always worked quicker than most. For his entire life, he’d found himself making connections other people didn’t and retrieving information faster that other people could. The serum had refined the edge of that already-sharp blade; sometimes, it overwhelmed him, his mind moving as quickly as the people in the silent movies that were old even when he was a kid.

That’s what it felt like now. Bucky, on that table, incoherently mumbling his service number, strapped down, not for torture but for the kind of experimentation that amounted to the same thing—and in the next heartbeat, Bucky: chalky pale and scared, hanging on to the twisted metal railing, careening to his certain death—and in Steve’s mind, just as real as all the rest, Bucky: broken and in pain but **alive**, found by the enemy who went looking, instead of the friend who didn’t—

“Steve, you’re going to need to explain that one more time.”
Steve blinked up at Tony’s serious, still face. He could hardly focus on him at all, most of his body and mind somewhere on a speeding train instead, the world flashing past in a sickening blur, his hand outstretched, his powerful body suffused with perfect, unshaken confidence that he would reach him until the moment he didn’t.

His heart had slowed, but he felt every heavy beat of it like a column of rumbling tanks crushing rocks and roads and his own ribs.

“It’s Bucky,” he found himself saying, dazed and distant. “His service number. 32557038. Drafted in ‘40.”

He could hardly hear himself talk through the inexorable rush of blood in his ears.

Or maybe it was the wind. It felt just as ruthless, just as overwhelming, as the flood of sound that he still hadn’t quite recovered from.

Far away, he heard Tony: “JARVIS, you got a—can we get an ear match, maybe? Any photos of Barnes from back in the day—nothing high-res enough for a retinal scan but—”

“It’s him,” Steve said. He was sitting on the floor. He needed to get up. “It’s Bucky,” and the images flicked cleanly and crisply through his mind: the slope of the Soldier’s forehead, Bucky’s forehead, and the blue eyes that Steve could never have comprehended he wouldn’t immediately recognize, Bucky’s eyes, and the exact shape and length of his elegantly formed hands—hand—that he had offered to Steve, to say hello—

Steve clambered gracelessly to his feet, barely hearing Tony and Sam’s muted protests. His vision narrowed and the vertigo swelled and thrummed, everything churning in and out of focus. It was enough to nearly make him throw up again. He didn’t care. He would swallow it down, he just had to get to Bucky. He had to. The distance between them could suddenly be measured in feet, not decades, and he wasn’t going to let one more second pass without closing it. He couldn’t.

“I gotta,” he said thickly, to no one. “I gotta see him, I gotta—”

“Steve,” said someone. “You need to focus.”

Unthinking, Steve applied the same artless tenacity that he’d once worn like a badge of honor to a
lurching, bullish charge towards Bucky. He didn’t register Sam’s presence as he staggered to the door. He didn’t notice the weighty thud of Sam’s body hitting the wall, or his surprised grunt of pain, or Tony’s exclamation.

But the scene unfolding across the hall stopped him short, seizing every fiber and filament of his attention as as sharply as a knife to the gut.

A white coat, stepping urgently into the room, Bucky’s legs moving, an incoherent spectacle of flashing lights, he was all alone—

“I gotta,” he gasped out again, surging forward to grab at the door handle, but a hand closed over his forearm and diverted him at the last second so that he fell somehow even more off-balance. Steve planted his feet as best he could, and didn’t stumble, and jerked up to look at Sam. Whatever leftover numbness and calm he’d felt was capsizing rapidly into something dangerous and frenetic. His heart set a thundering pace he could feel in every part of him, his chest, his throat, his fingertips. “Sam—”

Sam had somehow maneuvered himself between Steve and the door, one hand gingerly prodding at his jaw and the other outstretched, his palm flat against Steve’s heaving chest: an intractable stiff-arm that would prevent an ordinary man from powering forward even an inch further.

Steve wasn’t an ordinary man.

Sam knew it, too. But he didn’t move. “You gonna bodycheck me again, Captain America?” His voice was hard and in control. “You gonna break down the door? Scare the doctors? I’m sure that’ll really help them give the Soldier the care he needs.”

The frantic energy that had spun up so rapidly in Steve’s body unspooled just as quickly. “Sam, he needs me, I gotta—I gotta help him, he’s Bucky—” Bile burned acidic and sour at the back of his throat, and the corners of his eyes stung, and the world spun, and Steve sagged sideways towards the same wall he’d—God, he’d slammed Sam straight into it, he could have killed him—

“Did I—” Steve cut himself off, tearing his gaze away from the flurry of activity across the hall to focus, and stay focused, on Sam. “Are you…?”

“Feeling like I just got popped in the face by a brick? Yeah,” Sam said flatly. “Don’t do it again. We’re on the same side here. You need to sit down, man.”
Bucky’s feet weren’t moving. Steve couldn’t see them moving. Had he been sedated again? Was he awake? Was he frightened? Did any of the medical staff know ASL? Had the seizure erased what progress they’d made, as the grotesque chair in the cramped basement of an old vault had, again and again?

*He had been Bucky all along.* The thought seared hotly through his skull, as fluorescent and deranged and nauseating as the strobing marquees of Times Square and just as baffling, just as incomprehensible.

“I gotta see him,” he finally managed, observing distantly that he sounded choked and hoarse and utterly unrecognizable even to himself. It was *Bucky*.

Bucky was alive. Bucky was the Soldier.

Bucky was *alive*. Bucky was *the Soldier*.

“You’re in shock,” came Sam’s voice. “Can you focus on me for a second?”

Sam’s tone was calm and firm. Steve looked up.

“I know this changes everything for you,” said Sam. “But you need to understand that nothing’s changed for *him*.”

Steve started shaking his head back and forth before Sam even finished, aggravating the headache that had finally begun to fade. “You don’t understand,” he choked out, knowing he had to seem demented. He didn’t care. “You don’t—you *don’t*.”

The fight left him, for a moment, and Sam realized it too. The tension in the hand blocking Steve from the doorway eased, and Sam moved it to rest on Steve’s shoulder instead, no longer a barricade, but a buoy.

It wasn’t the shoulder that Bucky had left bruises on, trying to tell Steve who he was, even though he was suffocating, even though he was scared, and *Steve hadn’t listened*. 
Sam squeezed Steve’s shoulder to recapture his wavering attention. “When he wakes up, we’ll ask him. We’ll ask him about the Morse, we’ll ask him about his name. We’ll confirm that he is who you think he is.”

The comfort of Sam’s touch abruptly drained away. Steve jerked backwards, his poor balance forcing him to lean heavily against the wall. “He is,” he spat out, frustration rising up into his throat as Sam just wasn’t getting it. He fell to the floor in an uncoordinated slide, the panels of the wall cool against his back. “He is.”

Steve didn’t have a perfect memory for nothing. He might have been blinded before, but he wasn’t now. Earlier that day—hours ago and a lifetime ago—he’d had his hands on Bucky’s body, for the first time and the millionth, and he’d been washing him and not seeing him, but he was seeing him now. “It’s him.”

“Steve, it might not be,” Sam countered, crossing his arms over his chest. “You gotta prepare yourself for that poss—”

A part of Steve understood that Sam was genuinely concerned, that he even made sense. But that didn’t matter. Instead his skepticism had the same effect as a rush of oxygen to the contained fire of Steve’s rage. The backdraft burned hot and unfair in his gut, forcing him to his feet, pushing him forward into Sam’s personal space. “Don’t tell me he’s not Bucky,” Steve snarled, ignoring the shame that again Sam was the closest target for his fury, that he didn’t deserve this, “I know his body.” Steve gestured violently across the hall, “better than I know this one.” He pounded his fist into his own chest.

The radiating pain of it was not nearly sharp enough to dull the jagged edges of his insides.

Sam stared at him, and Steve realized what he’d said. What he’d said out loud.

The fire fled and left behind only lingering heat and shocky horror. He’d never—Sam would know, what that meant, what Steve was saying—how could he have—

Paralyzed, Steve was powerless to stop the dawning comprehension in Sam’s eyes.

He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t think.
“So it’s like that,” Sam said, from very far away.

“I didn’t mean,” Steve gasped out. Somehow, he was still standing. Lamely, he tried again. “It’s not—”

Sam had his palms up and out, like Steve was a spooked animal, his face full of kindness so sincere it was intolerable, and his hands, both of them this time, came down heavy and warm on Steve’s shoulders. “It’s okay,” he said, and Steve thought he might choke on the very air in his lungs, and Sam said again, “Steve. We’ve got a job to do, okay?”

“Captain Rogers, take some deep breaths for me—”

Steve breathed. Sam had led him down the hall, away from Bucky, you need to get checked on, okay, and he breathed again—

“Raise your fingers on your right hand when you hear a tone in your right ear, and your left when you hear a tone in your left ear—”


“Can you describe for me what you did earlier today? What did you do when you first woke up?”

He hadn’t slept well. He and Sam had eaten eggs. Then gone up to the—the cell, where they had locked up Bucky, to take him to the shower, where he’d—where he’d—

“I’m going to shine a line in your eyes, I’d like you to just remain still—”
Flare of bright light.

“How are you feeling, emotionally?”

The question dislodged the cold, compressed stupor in Steve’s chest and lungs and throat, clearing the fog in his brain. He suddenly focused on the doctor, at her expression of businesslike concern, at her hands covered in blue latex gloves and the white coat. The words didn’t come. He wasn’t sure there were any words. Bucky had always been the words guy. Bucky had been the one who could sweet-talk, and explain Hey-Mrs. Baker-what-really-happened-was, and c’mon pal didn’t you read this one, it’s got a time machine—what had Steve done, how could he have—

Steve inhaled deeply, and closed his eyes. This wasn’t helping. This wasn’t helping Bucky.

“Doc, you got enough on the physical side?” Sam asked. “Okay? Come back in an hour, does that work?”

The doctor left. Steve realized he was staring at the floor, staring at his own folded hands hanging between his legs, the windows and walls still juddering in his peripheral vision, vertigo still clinging stubbornly to his senses, making his stomach swirl in a way that was absolutely nothing compared to everything else.

He knew it was okay now, being a fairy. There was even a word for what Steve was, not that it had mattered much with Bucky gone. Of course, he wasn’t. He was alive, and Steve had just—

“They’re gone,” Sam told him. “You okay?”

Steve shook his head. He couldn’t look up.

“You did good. That’s what we needed. Set a baseline with you, that way they have some idea of how he’s feeling, even if he can’t tell us.”

Even if he can’t tell us. Because of the mask. Because somebody had taken Bucky’s face and nailed a mask to it. Because somebody had hurt him, and strapped him into that chair, even as he’d been struggling, cold and wet from months or years in cryo—
“You’re spiraling again. That helping?”

“No,” Steve managed, looking up towards Sam, whose steadfast and unsympathetic expression didn’t belong on a friend, or on one of the doctors SHIELD had made him talk to, or on somebody disgusted with what Steve had unwittingly admitted, or on anyone else but a fellow soldier. His jaw — slightly swollen, because of Steve — was set. His mouth was a firm line. His eyes were tired, but resolute. Sam had a job to do, and he was doing it. Steve had a job to do, and he wasn’t.

Steve inhaled deeply, deliberately expanding his lungs and diaphragm until it hurt. He settled his shoulders. He had to focus. He couldn’t think about anything else. He just couldn’t. He had to box it up, force it down, sink it deep into his muscles and bones, pack it down like gauze in an open wound, yards and yards of it, so it didn’t stop the bleeding but at least blocked it.

“Okay,” Steve said. “What’s next?”

“So here’s the plan,” Sam said, sipping his hot coffee and making a face at it. After the check-up, he’d marched Steve down four floors to the cafe there, forced him to choose the drink that now sat on the table before them, steaming and untouched.

Mechanically, Steve reached forward and took a sip. It was cloyingly sweet, “jacked up with calories,” Sam had explained, to normalize his blood sugar.

“The anesthesiologist wants to let him wake up a little. He’s worried about damage to his liver, frankly, and even though he’s on IV nutrition now—” Steve flinched, why the fuck hadn’t they done that? “—he doesn’t wanna fuck up his system more with drugs, until we have a better understanding of his physical state.”

“That what he said,” Steve asked, doing his best to approximate a joking tone. “He doesn’t want to fuck up his system more?”
“It’s the technical term, yeah,” Sam replied dryly. “So, I’m gonna go in there. He knows me the best, after you, he knows I’m not a doctor. I’m gonna ask him some questions, you’ll be able to see him. But—”

“We don’t want to upset him,” Steve recited. The words came out strangled. “So I’m staying here.” They had set up shop in a new, unused conference room down the hall from Bucky, Sam correctly judging that having Bucky in Steve’s line of sight wasn’t going to help his concentration.

“What happened in there was pretty traumatic, Steve,” Sam said, and for the first time in hours he actually sounded a little shaken. “I’m just—I’m the one who pressed the *button*, man. And it didn’t kill you, but…”

“It hurt,” Steve finished. He took another sip.

“Yeah. Think about it from his perspective,” Sam jerked a shoulder in the direction of Bucky’s room. “He was asphyxiating. He was afraid, and then we hurt him, and you were right there while it was happening. We don’t know what the seizures might have done to his memory. He might remember it, he might not. He might just remember that you were there when he got hurt.”

*But I wasn’t*, Steve wanted to scream. He inhaled carefully. “So I’m staying here. And the mask?”

“The brain brigade is on it. Uh, JARVIS?”

“*Sir and Dr. Banner have engaged the assistance of Dr. Thomas DeWitt, a noted neurosurgeon, and Ms. Rhonda Hayes, a biomedical—*”

“I get it,” Steve interrupted. “They’re working on it.” The anger and fear he was trying to suppress fluttered weakly in his chest, hummingbird-like, testing his resolve. Some of it escaped him. “We gotta get it off. We gotta get that *fucking thing* off him, Sam.”

“I know,” Sam replied simply.

Steve didn’t let himself try to parse out the sympathy in Sam’s expression into its component parts. He didn’t want to see pity there, or *curiosity*—
“He remembered me.” The words tumbled out, as sharp as tacks. “He remembered me. He asked—in the video from the bank, he asked—”

“Spiraling.”

Steve released a shuddering breath, and counted to ten. He had to focus. He swallowed, and viciously grabbed hold of the sick fear coiling in his stomach and tightening his spine. “So you’re not even gonna ask?” he bit out caustically. “If I’m—if Captain America’s a—”

“’Cause it’s my business?” Sam returned evenly.

The pressure intensified in his sinuses, in his throat. Steve dug his thumb and forefinger into the hollows of his eyes, pressing so hard he saw spots. It didn’t help.

“Major Wilson, the patient is regaining consciousness.”

“All right, Steve,” said Sam, low and serious. “It’s go time.”

“—all those curved or toothed beaks opened in their hoods to a brazen unison, and this is what they chanted: life is blood, shed and offered. The eagle’s eye can face this dree—”

It hurts. He hurts—it is—loud, and cold, and—
“—Strength to the strong and the lordly and the lonely, timor—um, tee-more, maybe? Mortis exult—uh, exultat me. Shame to the slothful, and woe to the weak one. Death to the dreadful who turn to flee—”

He is flat on his back. Mouth dry. Tongue big and flat and bitter. Head hurts. Throat sharp. Beeping and bright and—oh no, no, no, no, no—

“No, I got it, I got you, it’s okay,” says the voice.

Timor mortis exultat me.

His hand moves. Index and middle, pinch down to the thumb, no. No. Please not this again. Please don’t. Please—

“Hey man,” says the voice. “I know you must be scared. It’s okay. You’re okay. You got really—sick, all right? And we put you under for a little while. You’re still in the same place. You’re still with me and Steve.”

Steve. Steve.


“What kind of fucking question is that. Yes.

He laughs. “Yeah, okay. Just checking. Do you remember what happened?”

What happened. What happened, can’t breathe, the thing, it was bad, in his throat, sick—and then—

And then—
“It’s okay if you don’t,” says the voice. Look over. Gotta look over. *Gabe always did like to read aloud didn’t he* and—

Sam. It’s Sam. Flap the hand, like a wing, like a bird. *Sam.*

“Yeah,” says Sam, quiet. “Yeah, it’s me. Scared us pretty bad there, big guy.”

What.

“We’re sorry about the feeding tube,” Sam says. “We didn’t know you’d react that way to the nutrition solution. It won’t happen again, okay?”

The tube. The tube in the throat, Steve saying *you can do it, it’s okay, just a little bit more* and the awful—the awful—*it happened before,* and—

“You still with me? I know you must be tired.”

Hand: *okay.* The tube in the throat, he can’t *breathe,* it won’t stop coming *up,* come on Steve *help*—

The head got heavy, hurt, hand on Steve’s shoulder, Steve scared, he’s scared too, *come on, Barnes, get it together*—

“I’ve got some questions for you,” Sam says.

*Some questions. Just one or two questions. If you cooperate, soldier—*

“Back in the cell,” Sam says, too gentle, too quiet, “You were holding on to Steve’s shoulder, and using your thumb and index finger to tap out some Morse—”

The pattern. The *pattern.*
Don’t move, don’t—the mouth is so dry, he can’t let him—nobody’s supposed to see, they aren’t supposed to know, if they see it he’s in trouble, he can’t—he can’t—

“You don’t need to be scared,” says Sam. “It’s okay if you don’t remember. Steve said—”

Steve. Say it, only the left arm works, the other is—tied down, it hurts, needles in the arm, tubes, can’t make Steve with one arm—

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, come on, it’s okay—”

No, please, please, he’s gotta get—is Steve okay—

Arm up, tear it free, beeping goes wild, Steve, circle the shield for Steve, please, please—come on Steve, where is he—sit up, get up—

Hand on his chest, holding him down, oh no, please don’t—please Sam—Sam’s face, Sam’s eyes wide and brown and—mouth, “I’ll get him, oh, shit—”

Crash, steps, rush of air—

“Bucky,” Steve whispers, he’s there, big face, swimming over his, his head hurts—Steve is so afraid—

Bucky—c’mon Buck, Bucky—Bucky Barnes—

“It’s okay,” Steve says, face white as hell, oh God he’s so scared, and his own hand is suddenly warm and covered up, heavy, Steve’s big hands, long fingers—they always were so long—pulled up to Steve’s face—he’s crying, shit, c’mon Rogers, it’s okay, Bucky—

Dry lips, on his own knuckles, over the tube and the tape, hold on—
Hey Steve, he thinks, so clearly, his lips form the words behind the—behind the mask, oh, please, please take it off—

“Buck, I’m—” and Steve can’t talk, can’t say the words, clenches his jaw tight, get so tired of taking cheap shots you decided to try and break your own jaw? Jesus, Rogers, relax a little, and lead in, kiss him, and—

Lips on his hand, chapped lips, hot, Steve’s big warm hand holding his—

Steve it’s me, he’s Bucky, and he’s Bucky, and it’s Steve, and his ribs hurt, his eyes hurt, and please, and a thumb on his cheek, above the mask, swiping away the—aw, Christ, he’s fucking crying too, it hurts, and Steve leans forward, holds Bucky’s hand to his heart, his face on Bucky’s chest, and—

Yeah, Bucky thinks. Yeah, okay, and he squeezes back.

Chapter End Notes

Wow -- I am FLOORED by the response to Ch. 15. Thank you! Sorry if I have not yet gotten to respond to your comments -- there were a LOT of them! <3 Thank you to everyone who commented, left kudos, reblogged, and otherwise showed their support -- I am beyond delighted and grateful.

Thanks to Quietnight, JHSCdood, and many others for their help and encouragement on this chapter. <3

Also a huge thank you (and giant SQUEE) to sallysparrow017 and AvidReaderLady, who are making amazing and creative podfic interpretations of this story. I strongly encourage you to check out both of them -- one podfic for a story is unreal, two is positively an embarrassment of riches. Please check out what these talented podficcers are doing, both projects are so unique and well done! <3
Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Summary

Steve stays with Bucky.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

**despite the threatening sky and shuddering earth (they remained)**

Part 17


The voice sounded very far away. Steve blinked.

“You with me?”

Steve slowly unfolded himself from his cramped position, lifting his head from its uncomfortable perch on his shoulder and staring down at his hand, still entwined with Bucky’s — Bucky’s — fingers. Together, their hands were sweaty and hot, almost glued together, and his eyes stung, half from gritty exhaustion half from just the thought — god, Bucky’s hand — and his headache still there but duller, and his body sore, and Bucky’s hand.

Bucky was asleep, his body still canted slightly towards the chair in which Steve found himself -- he
had a vague memory of Sam’s voice, here man, here you go — and the machines still loud around them, a cacophony of flickering lights and whirring and beeping. But Bucky was asleep. He didn’t know if it was natural, or if at some point they’d sedated him again.

The lines Bucky had scored into his own face were scabbing over. So some time must have passed.

“Steve,” said the voice again, and it was — of course, it was Tony. Steve looked over at him, and lifted his free hand to rub at his eyes. He could feel where the salt had dried onto his face, where it had clumped his eyelashes together. His face felt heavy and weirdly tight.

Tony stood in the doorway to the room, his hair damp and his face clean. The evidence of a shower and a fresh set of clothes did nothing to suggest he was any less exhausted than he had been — Steve checked the clock above the doorway — seven hours earlier. His hooded eyes, framed in dark smudges, made it clear he was still burning the candle, with no end in sight.

“Hey,” Steve managed. It came out hoarse and rough. Compulsively, he looked back at Bucky, at his fingers, at his masked face. “Did you…?”

“Working on it,” said Tony, speaking more quietly than Steve had ever heard. “Some progress. Found a video of them doing a — doing —” Tony cleared his throat, and didn’t pick up the thread of his sentence again.

“Doing what?” Steve’s stomach twisted. But he had to know. He had to.

“Looks like taking the mask off, doing routine — maintenance, on him, was.” Tony flapped his hand. “Pretty regular. Right out of cryo, pop it off, check the tech, shave ‘n a haircut, two bits, and boom. Back on.”

“The tracker,” Steve realized, zealously ignoring the rage that flared bright in his chest at the thought of them touching Bucky’s body, hurting him, and dragging him, confused and in pain, out of cryo, at —

“Oh, yeah, good point,” said Tony. “The trackers in his teeth. He’s got two of ‘em. Can’t get to those, if—”

“Before the mask,” Steve cut him off. “When he escaped, he would have…”
“Pulled them out,” Tony finished the thought. “Christ. Yeah, he would have, if he’d remembered which…”

Steve shut his eyes so tightly he could feel the grit that he hadn’t quite rubbed away pinch at the delicate skin of his eyelids. *If he’d remembered.*

How many times had he been made to forget, and *remembered anyway,* remembered again and again until—

“He knows me,” Steve said. “Earlier, with…”

“I know, Steve. Wilson filled me in.”

Steve stared down at where their hands, curled together, offered unmistakable proof of what Bucky meant to him. At least, it would have back in their time. It would *now,* even. Men didn’t touch anymore, not that Steve had seen since waking up. Just quick, concussive slaps to the back. *Good shit, Cap,* as Rumlow had been fond of saying.

Even the ways that Steve and Bucky had once been *allowed* to behave, arms over each other’s shoulders, *a hug before he’d shipped out,* today they’d be nailed as fairies straightaway.

Steve swept his thumb against Bucky’s hand. “Did he tell you… “ he swallowed. “Did he say we were…”

“No, but…” Tony shrugged a little, in Steve’s peripheral vision. “It’s not exactly a shock, Steve. Not really.”

Steve swallowed around the flush of questions — *what had given him away,* *did everyone think that,* *did Howard* — and thought of Sam’s voice instead, firm and unsympathetic: *You’re spiraling, Steve. That helping?*

“How long until we can take it off?” Steve asked next. “We gotta get it off, Tony. We’ve got to.”
“I know,” said Tony. “Couple of days, max. Sooner, even. Working round the clock. The doctors come in to talk to you at all?”


“They’ll explain everything going on with him,” Tony said seriously. “They need to do anything, change anything, put him under--they’ll tell you. Check with you. Got it? Not exactly, uh, next-of-kin, officially, but here?” Tony held up both his hands, palm up. “As good as.”

Steve thought back to his curious internet searches, the questions he’d asked upon being told it’s called ‘gay’ now, and it’s okay, please don’t use this word or that word, only to find out, well, mostly okay. And then he grasped what Tony was trying to reassure him about. The pieces clicked together.

Next of kin. Like a brother, sure, but also--like a spouse. A partner, is what they called it now.

His throat went tight and hot, a blend of some emotion that he couldn’t quite make out: not gratitude, and not embarrassment, exactly, not fear, but some terrible swirling unequal mix of all three.

“Thanks,” he managed finally. “I’m gonna stay here. As long as it takes.”


Bucky woke up a few hours later, briefly. Steve had been looking away, focused on the tablet that one of the tired-looking nurses had brought to him after he’d asked, researching the words he remembered from Hill’s initial briefing on the Soldier. On Bucky.

Benzodiazepines, for keeping him calm. Methamphetamine, to keep him awake, and awake, and awake. Haloperidol, an antipsychotic, for… Steve couldn’t figure it out. Making him think more clearly? He clenched his jaw so tightly he wouldn’t be surprised to feel a tooth crack. If Bucky needed help thinking clearly, then it was fucking HYDRA who was to blame.
He was so quick at everything, from grasping the details of a battle plan to picking up a new skill to busting balls with the best of them. He was bright, and funny, and he’d cracked jokes, and he’d loved to tease Steve, whether it was over his outfit or—

Cyproterone acetate. To castrate him. It was reversible — everything on the fucking tablet said so — but the thought of Bucky’s body belonging so wholly to his captors, so out of his own control in every way that they had even medicated that—

Bucky’s hand squeezed Steve’s in a faint, almost reflexive twitch of muscles and tendons that made him nearly drop the tablet in surprise. Eagerness and no small amount of trepidation blocked up his throat as he watched Bucky’s eyes slowly blink their way open. It took a long time for them to settle and focus on Steve.

“Hey,” Steve managed finally, the single word coming out more gruff and pained than he was aiming for. At some point in the past few seconds, he’d realized that this moment — Bucky slowly easing into wakefulness, and Steve at his side — marked the first time that they were both awake and actually alone in a room together.

And all Steve could manage was hey.

“It’s only been a couple of hours,” he found himself saying. “You were—asleep, it’s good, you need—the rest is good.” His throat felt impossibly tight. “Are you in pain? Are you hurting?”

Bucky’s fingers clutched his more tightly. Steve lifted his hand up to his mouth, pressing a careful kiss to the soft skin between Bucky’s thumb and index finger. His skin was hot.

Withdrawal, a small corner of Steve’s mind recalled. Fever, sweating, aches and pains. Nausea. Seizures, if it was bad enough. And he was getting fluids, he was getting nutrition, but—

The metal hand whirred. Unlike his natural one, the prosthetic didn’t hesitate: its fingers closed into a fist, drew itself closer itself to Bucky’s chest, which was covered in tubes and tape — oh God, please don’t say sorry, or please, anything but that — and it shook, a bit. A wiggle.

Cold. He was cold, and now, oh no, the fist, fingers reaching out to splay across his chest, please—
Steve reached forward, closing his own hand over the metal one — shockingly cool compared to Bucky’s overheated skin — and stopped him. “You don’t need to say please,” he choked out. “You don’t need to say please, or sorry, or anything. Anything you need, okay? Anything you want, Buck, you got it.”

It didn’t take long to find the cabinet with the heated blankets. Steve dragged two of them over Bucky’s entire body, and before he could even get out the question, *that better?* Bucky’s eyes were drooping.

It didn’t go as well the next time Buck woke up.

Steve was dozing too, the strain of the past few days — and really, *weeks* — having long ago depleted his energy reserves, when the still and shrouded figure beside him burst violently into motion.

Later, he would wonder how long Bucky had lain there after coming awake, only able to see the faint outline of Steve’s body, illuminated as it would have been by the fucking medical equipment, and no doubt feeling trapped and restrained by the blankets Steve had tucked him into. Steve would imagine him feeling sick and confused and hurt, not knowing — or perhaps not remembering — that Steve was there, that he was safe. But in the moment —

Bucky flailed upwards, tearing at the tubes and cables, at *the tube attached to his throat*, and the machines went haywire. For a second Steve could see nothing but the whites of Bucky’s eyes and the blank unreflecting black of the mask as he threw his body out of the bed and stumbled a little on the wires and the blankets. He careened towards the door but staggered so wildly off course that he slammed into the wall instead, coming to a stop once his left shoulder punched a hole into the drywall.

Steve wanted nothing more than to leap forward. But some small scrap of good sense — the same good sense Bucky had always, and with great amusement, accused him of lacking — led him to rise slowly from his chair instead.

His muscles were tight with coiling energy. His heart pounded in his throat. Panic had narrowed his
focus, taken him from half-asleep to sharp with adrenaline almost instantly. But he had to stay calm. He had to.

Across the small room, Bucky’s breathing — through the hole in his throat, Jesus Christ — was harsh and loud.

The lights in the room grew suddenly brighter, in tune with the commotion building in the hallway. Steve had his hand raised and facing the door, hoping to stop anyone from entering the room, in the split second it took for him to realize what Bucky might do — and how much more afraid he would be — if a pack of medical personnel were to stampede into the room.

Steve’s heart was in his chest. Bucky was still leaning heavily against the wall. With the room lit up, Steve could see how pale and sweaty he was, how disoriented, how his legs, exposed in the hospital gown, were shaking. His hand was bleeding where he’d torn out his IV.

His eyes darted from the bed, to Steve, to the crowd of worried people Steve could hear, but not see. He refused to look away from Bucky.

He had to feel trapped, and ill, and in pain—

“JARVIS, block ‘em,” Steve commanded, instantly regretting his barking tone when Bucky’s muscles locked up, when his posture struggled upwards, when his wide eyes settled back on Steve and something in them went flat with resignation.

The clear glass separating them from the hallway went abruptly opaque.

“Bucky, it’s me,” Steve said, attempting to keep his voice gentle and reassuring, trying to suppress the unfathomable agony that tore at him every single moment that Bucky looked at him with fear in his eyes. “It’s Steve. You’re okay. You’re okay, Buck, it’s—” Steve’s voice hitched despite himself “—it’s me.”

Bucky blinked at him. The rack of machines next to them beeped loudly and discordantly, in a dozen different whistling tones. His feet — he was wearing socks, different ones, someone had put socks on him — slid a little against the floor, and he reached out his metal arm to steady himself, the fingers digging deeply into the drywall, carving out a handhold.
“I know you must be feeling pretty sick, Buck,” Steve tried again. “It’s the drugs. You just need time — your body just needs time, to get used to not having the drugs anymore. I promise, you’ll — it’ll get better, okay, it’ll—”

Bucky cut him off. He dislodged his metal hand from its impromptu grip, his other hand drifted towards it, still quivering, the fist, the circle: Steve. Again, Steve. Again.

“Right here,” Steve managed to say, sounding strangled even to his own ears. “Not going anywhere, Buck. Not for a second.”

Then: Me. Please. Bucky stared intensely at him, his chest still rising and falling too rapidly as he breathed his shallow breaths. You — me — please.

“You want me to come over there?”

A faint nod.

Steve’s crossed the room in the span of a heartbeat. “Not going anywhere,” he repeated, quietly, just for Bucky, as he stood an arm’s length away from him. Behind them, the machines went quiet. Never again was he leaving this man. Not in a hospital bed, not at the bottom of a ravine, not ever again.

Bucky’s natural hand hesitated, and lifted up to fit at the juncture of Steve’s neck and shoulder, where he’d told him hours and hours before — 32557038, Steve, it’s me — and where no doubt the bruises were still there, but fading quickly.

“But, can I—” Steve began, the words tumbling out before he could stop them. Banked tears stung at the corners of his eyes. “Can I—?”

But he didn’t get the chance to ask, because instead Bucky stepped towards him, socked feet soundless on the floor, and tipped his head forward against the crook of Steve’s chest, and let his arm slide down from Steve’s trapezius to his spine, and clutched at the cloth of his shirt, and still his metal arm hung still and straight next to his body, and Steve exhaled deeply, finally releasing the breath he had been holding, somehow, since 1945, and hugged back.

Bucky’s body was too hot and too shaky, his pulse thrumming rabbit-like where their chests were
pressed together, and he stank of sweat and something else, something sour, and it was the best thing Steve had ever felt in his life.

Slowly, Steve eased them to the floor.

Bucky pressed himself more closely to Steve’s body even as their long limbs tangled awkwardly together, even as they twisted themselves in a position that wouldn’t possibly stay comfortable for long. The cold of the floor and wall easily bled through Steve’s tee shirt and pants and Bucky’s hospital gown, and the metal arm was cold too, and Steve didn’t care. He wrapped it around his own waist and felt it come alive, squeezing back, and he buried his face in Bucky’s hair, and he breathed, and he felt that rapid flutter and twitch of Bucky’s muscles under his hands, against his skin, and the spasmodic clench of his fingers against Steve’s back, and the shaky rhythm of his breathing.

Steve exhaled slowly into Bucky’s hair. He could feel the angular, unnaturally hard press of the mask against his chest, and he couldn’t let himself think about that.

It didn’t seem possible for Bucky to get close enough. And Steve couldn’t let himself think about that, either, or what it meant, or how long it had been since he’d—

No, he told himself. No spiraling. And so he sat there, and breathed, and held Bucky, and breathed, and let Bucky hold him, and breathed.

It might have been minutes or hours or days later when JARVIS interrupted. “Captain,” the AI said quietly, almost apologetically, “I have a call for you.”

Bucky went tense, and his arms — the natural one and the metal one — clenched a little harder. Steve swallowed. His throat was too dry and his tongue was sticking to the inside of his mouth. “‘Kay.”

One of the mounted screens across from them came to life: Tony, looking haggard and tired and manic. “Oh good,” he said quickly, not waiting for Steve to acknowledge him. “You’re both there. Great. So who’s ready for some mask-on, mask-off action?” He leaned forward, his eyes intense and determined. “Emphasis on off?”
art by quietnight

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone for your kudos and comments, and a big thanks to quietnight and spitandvinegar for their help on this chapter! <3
Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Summary

The mask comes off.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

despite the threatening sky and shuddering earth (they remained)

Part 18

In the end, things moved quickly. Steve was there, not allowed in the room so much as nobody had managed to kick him out. He’d pulled his surgical mask down under his throat, barely able to concentrate on anything but Bucky’s face tilted towards his, and pulled off his nitrile gloves the second Bucky had cringed when he’d touched the strip of visible skin between mask and eye.

Earlier, Steve had helped him gather his hair up under a close-fitting cap. The sudden emptiness framing his face had thrown the mask into stark relief against his pale skin. Without his hair to obscure it, the device seemed like more like a muzzle than ever, all unnatural angles biting into the sides of his face and curling under his ears to extend the line of his jaw.

He stared up at Steve, his blue eyes open and bloodshot and scared, as he lay flat on his back on the surgical table, angling his face just slightly towards the pressure of Steve’s thumb tracing his cheek. Steve thought it had to be the most astonishing display of bravery he had ever witnessed.
I’ve developed a formulation that will work locally, that is, just in the areas involved in the removal, so you won’t feel anything but you’ll be awake. We can also put you to sleep—"

_Please_, Bucky had interrupted, his eyes shockingly wide. _Please_, and then pressed his mismatched palms together, and held them to his tilted face, a childlike mime anyone would recognize. _Sleep._

_Please — sleep_, he had said again, _please — sleep_, and Steve had thought back to the solid metal table in that vault, in the converted bathroom which had been his prison, and the thick bands of metal attached to its sides, precisely where someone’s — Bucky’s — wrists and ankles would be, and Tony’s appalled _did ORs come with manacles in your day, Cap_, and Steve had _realized—_

“You got it,” Tony had interrupted him, the knuckles of his hand going white where he gripped the mocked-up mask he’d built from the files and scans. “Out like a light. We promise. Bruce?”

It had been clear from the carefully blank expression on Bruce’s face that he, too, had grasped exactly what Bucky was asking and why. “We promise,” he had managed finally, in a voice so strained and hoarse that even Tony had glanced over at him with some mild alarm.

_Please_, Bucky had said again, and Steve hadn’t been able to stand it anymore, reaching out to rest his palm on top of Bucky’s hand where it was circling his chest. Bucky had leaned towards the contact, the heat of his body spreading to Steve.)

“You’re gonna be fine,” Steve whispered to Bucky, whose answering blink was slow and deliberate. The sedation was starting to work.

Steve ignored the orchestrated bustle of the room and the low murmur of Tony speaking with the neurosurgeon and Bruce asking the maxillofacial specialist a question and one of the technicians saying, _I finished my third count, what about you_ to his partner. He didn’t care about them, not any more. He couldn’t find it in himself to care about anything, not when Bucky was right here, not when he _needed_ him.
He leaned down and pressed dry lips to Bucky’s sweaty forehead. “I’ll be right here when you wake up.”

(“The sedation won’t exacerbate the withdrawal,” the anesthesiologist had explained. He was taller than Steve and twice as skinny, with a flop of graying hair gamely hanging on in defiance of his receding hairline. He’d introduced himself as Bill. “It’ll be like any other surgery. He should come out of it in about two hours, according to my calculations. More than enough time.”)

Steve had turned a hard expression in the direction of the neurosurgeon. “That’s enough?”

Dr. DeWitt had barely looked up from the tablet he was working from. Steve had never met a doctor less interested in him. “Assuming Stark does his part correctly, it’ll take less than one hour.”)

Bucky’s eyes were closed, his heart rate dropping now that his adrenaline was no longer in combat with the world.

“Sir,” said somebody at his elbow.

Steve’s shaky breath caught inside his lungs, a riptide trying to sweep him under.
“Sir,” they said again

“Just gimme a minute,” Steve burst out. He leaned forward and planted his hands on the sides of the padded headrest cradling Bucky’s head, blinking hard as he stared at his upside-down face.

Bucky’s eyes were closed. And when they next opened—

“He’ll stay asleep, right?” he asked desperately, to no one. The commotion of the busy room had calmed, now that Bucky was asleep and Steve was irrelevant. “This is gonna work?”

One of the green-shrouded figures was Tony. He stepped forward and hooked a latex-covered finger inside his own surgical mask so that Steve could see his face. He’d slept last night; he must have. Any rest he’d gotten had done nothing to soften the manic glint in his eyes, but at least the dark smudges orbiting them had faded a little. “We got this. Now get the hell out, so we can get that—” He jerked his other thumb in the direction of Bucky, “—the hell off him.”

(“Got the cavalry flying in tonight on the Tony Express,” Tony had informed them. “Medical team’ll be ready to rock tomorrow. Gonna come by and go through it all, step-by-step, with the—with Barnes, and you, in the morning. This time tomorrow?” Tony flattened his hand against his face and made an exaggerated suction sound. “We’ll pop that sucker off.”

“Gotta let ‘em help us, Bucky,” Steve had whispered in Bucky’s ear after the screen had gone dark, still holding him so tightly it felt like no light or air or sound could escape the space they occupied. Tony had told him earlier on the video call that the medical staff was about two seconds away from breaking the door down. “I don’t know how, but they do. They’re gonna help us.”

Bucky’s breath, filtered through the mask, was hot and damp against Steve’s shoulder. Steve had wondered if he was trying to speak beneath it, and just couldn’t. He’d wondered at how many words Bucky might have said that no one had ever heard—
The metal arm had withdrawn from its implacable curl around Steve’s side, where the unyielding edges of it had pressed so tightly into Steve that he thought the pattern of its plates and ridges might be imprinted on his skin. The fingers had pulled at Steve’s own arm until he’d unfolded it from their embrace, and manipulated Steve's hand until it lay flat, palm up, on Bucky’s knee.

The metal hand had formed a fist, and come to a rest in the center of Steve’s palm. Help.

“Yeah,” Steve had said, twisting to bury his face into Bucky’s hair. “Yeah, they’re gonna help.”

Sam was waiting when Steve finally stumbled out of the operating theater. He hardly noticed as Sam helped him strip off the functional green cotton gown, the booties, the thin paper mask he’d pushed off his face at the first opportunity. Steve balled them all up, compacting them as tightly he could, and threw the bundle into the bin, breathing hard.

“Good morning to you too,” Sam said evenly.

Steve looked up at him, tracking the fresh clothes, the clean lines of his fade, his easy stance. “You, uh — your day off…?”

Sam rolled his eyes at him. “You ain’t my job, Steve. Neither is he. I don’t need time off. But a man’s gotta take a day every so often. You included. Now come on.”

Steve twisted around to look through the door, where Bucky was already out of sight, surrounded by the mass of green figures, their movements brisk and economized. “No, Sam, I—”

“We’re not goin’ anywhere. Gonna sit and observe, just like the plan says,” Sam interrupted him. “Now come on.”
When they’d finally gotten up off the ground, chest to chest, Bucky had taken his index finger and dug it into Steve’s chest, you, and then done the same to himself, me, and gone back and forth between them until Steve had leaned forward and just nestled his forehead in the curve of flesh between Bucky’s neck and shoulder. “You and me, pal, you and me,” he’d repeated back.

Bucky’s hand had slid to Steve’s side, spanning a fraction of the skin he’d almost been able to encircle, once upon a time. His fingertips trailed over Steve’s ribs, in the way he’d once counted them, and the familiarity of the touch had made Steve’s breath hitch in his chest.

Later, after a warning knock on the door had prompted them to find their way back to the hospital bed, Bucky trailing tubes and wires, Steve had watched as his socked toes scrunched up against the floor, and then flattened out. A moment later, they’d scrunched up again, and flattened, again and again, in the deliberate pattern that had put a pit in Steve’s stomach.

The doctor’s first order of business had been to get him hooked back in to the fluids and all the equipment. Bucky had stared straight ahead, his toes scrunching, his metal arm held stiffly by his side, the palm hidden in the bedclothes where its fingers intertwined with Steve’s. Somehow, he’d tolerated the doctor’s touch as she replaced the IV he’d torn out.

By the time she’d released his hand and twisted toward the suture kit she’d laid out, the number on his heart monitor had ticked up again, crossing some arbitrary threshold that made the machine start beeping shrilly. Bucky’s metal fingers had borne down on Steve’s, his shoulders had stiffened, and Steve hadn’t been able to stand it.

“Hang on,” he’d told her. “Hang on, just give us a minute. You’re gonna be okay, Buck. You and me, right?”

Bucky had looked at him then, blue eyes glinting, focused, his pupils dilated. In a past life, they’d been able to have whole conversations just with a clever combination of eyebrows and winks. But now—

Beneath the blankets, Bucky’s hand had moved again. It formulated itself into a fist, and settled into Steve’s palm, help, and he’d lifted his brow, a question, and the fingers formed good, and Steve had exhaled heavily. “Okay. Let’s do it.”
“Shortly, the team will roll the patient to his stomach,” said JARVIS from one of his omnipresent speakers. Tense and unsettled, Steve stared at the gaggle of experts through the observation window, jiggling his leg. “Then Sir and Dr. DeWitt will coordinate—”

“That helping?” Sam inquired. “The color commentary, I mean?”

“I don’t know,” Steve bit out. “They went over it with us. With me,” he corrected, since Bucky had been pale and sweaty with exhaustion and illness, not quite grasping that he was meant to answer one way or the other whenever the team of doctors had asked him a question. “I know the — mechanism in the back, Tony’s doing that first. And then from there they’re gonna do some tests, and then—”

He couldn’t finish the sentence. Hearing it described, looking at the films that Bill had walked him through later (“I’m not a surgeon, but I know a thing or two”), pointing out the differences between the pins — the nails, Steve’s mind supplied — and the anchor points that had been bored into the bones. Into Bucky’s face. It’s the density, from the serum, the maxillofacial surgeon had explained within Steve’s hearing. Otherwise it would have ripped off at some point. There’s evidence to suggest it might have, actually—

“They will now initiate the roll—”

“That’s good, Hal, we got it,” Sam interrupted. “You know, we don’t have to watch.”

Steve just shot him a look.

“Yeah, yeah, I know. But this…” Sam shook his head, his jaw going tight. “It’s hard enough for me, man. This whole thing is. I can’t — I can’t imagine. It’s fucked up.”
The thing was, Steve had been so consumed, in the past day — days? he didn’t even know for sure — with the mindless need to help Bucky, to get that fucking thing off him, that he hadn’t even thought of what it would mean when it was off. That Bucky had somehow been returned to him, in circumstances more awful and impossible than Steve could — or would — ever have imagined. And how easily, how swiftly, it all could have been destroyed. How Bucky could have been—

A flash flood of horror, raw and corrosive, swept through Steve’s gut. If he hadn’t stayed his hand, if he had landed one of those blows with his shield, he’d been aiming for his head, if he hadn’t caught hold of Bucky’s jacket, somehow, in the water, and dragged him to shore, if he hadn’t—

“Steve?”

“I could have,” Steve gasped out, falling forward to catch his head in his hands, his heels pressing hard into his eyes, “Sam, I could have—I almost—”

“Don’t do this, man, just do not,” Sam warned, in his ear, cutting through the wild rush in Steve’s brain of I could have killed him and never even known it.

(“You might have torn some of the stitches in your throat,” she’d explained gently, to a Bucky whose gaze had remained unerringly locked onto his own knees, his hidden hand still holding Steve’s. “I’m going to need to check on them. We don’t need to trach you again right away, since you’re breathing so well, but I don’t want to ignore any injury to the tissue, even if you’ll heal it pretty quickly. I have a local anesthetic that should work for about 30-45 second intervals; I’m very fast with these.”

She’d waggled her fingers at him.

Bucky hadn’t reacted. He hadn’t even breathed.
“Pal?” Steve had asked him, gently. “Is it okay for her to…?”

Bucky had looked up and blinked at him, after a moment, and Steve had watched his throat — his throat with the stoma and the bits of plastic and tape, the splatter of dried blood — contract as he swallowed.

“I have a wipe here,” Dr. Moran had said, holding up the small white square of wet, gauzy material. “I’m just going to clean off the blood. It might sting a little, especially if there are any tears or abrasions, but it’s just saline, it won’t hurt you, okay, Mr. Barnes?”

Bucky had pulled his hand away from Steve’s and drawn his palms together, the metal fingers intertwining with his natural ones in an anxious twist, I don’t know. A faint sheen of sweat lay on his forehead.

“You’ll have to tilt your head back,” Dr. Moran had said. “It won’t hurt.”

Bucky didn’t move.

“Is it something—” Steve had blurted out, cutting himself off. Dr. Moran had looked at him, an eyebrow lifted in inquiry. He cleared his throat. “Is it something I can do?”

Bucky’s fingers had stirred. Steve. Please.

“It means me,” Steve had lamely explained, gesturing feebly at Bucky. “That’s his word for—”

“I know,” she’d interrupted him. “We were all briefed. This is what you need to do.”
“The patient has been successfully moved. Sir is now beginning the most delicate element of the procedure—”

“Steve, there’s about a hundred better things for you to panic about than what you didn’t do,” Sam said firmly. His voice was nearer than it had been before. Steve hadn’t even noticed him scooting his chair closer. “Just focus on what’s happening right now, okay? You’re getting your boy back. Right?”

The muscles of Steve’s entire body went rigid: his back and shoulders, his biceps, his forearms, his neck, even his heart felt like it stopped. He dragged his face away from his hands and looked back at Sam, searching his face for—

He wasn’t sure what. Sam would never mock, he would never—

“We, uh,” he found himself saying, his voice unrecognizably hoarse. “Nobody knew. We weren’t—”

Steve couldn’t bear to look at the kindness in Sam’s gaze. He jerked his head over to look through the glass, where Tony — easy to distinguish thanks to the Iron Man-patterned cap — was bent low over Bucky’s head, holding some sort of tool, with wires—

“You wanna talk about it?” Sam asked easily, and Steve abruptly found that he did.

(The doctor had left them with a gentle try and get some rest, okay? as if Bucky were a normal patient, as if he were listening at all, instead of sitting motionless and compact on the bed, what little expression he could manage reduced to vacancy. Anxiety gripped his shoulders, and the stiff line of his spine, and snagged his natural hand in the brutal vice of his left. The room had gone silent, Steve having long tired of the incessant noise and barked at JARVIS to silence the equipment.

Steve had angled himself towards Bucky, settling on top of the covers so he could face him directly,
and had placed his hand on his natural shoulder. Buck had flinched slightly at the contact, an abortive little thing that had made Steve’s heart clench up painfully. He’d dropped his hand. “You with me?”

Bucky had exhaled then, shuddery and slow, and his hands: *chitchat — again — Steve.*

Steve had swallowed. “You want me to talk to you? About tomorrow?”

He’d shaken his head, once, twice, and looked up at Steve then, his weariness obvious, and maybe frustration too, in the corners of his eyes. His hands: *Remember — chitchat — before.*

Steve had realized then that for the first time, he had no questions to ask him. They no longer had a need to piece together what had been done to him, or to attempt to pry information out of him using a vocabulary limited to the dozens of words, instead of thousands.

*I got us a stupendous date planned, pal,* Bucky had told him once, grinning. *Stu—pend—ous,* he’d repeated, poking his finger in the dead center of Steve’s narrow chest. *That’s a ten-dollar-word, all for you, sweetheart.* And he’d leaned in, and trailed his finger up Steve’s chest to his jaw, and Steve had made a joke and ducked away from Bucky’s mouth instead of kissing him. *More like stu—pid—est,* he’d tossed back. *Who’s got money for that?*

Bucky hadn’t even been able to read Steve’s simple question, a few days before. When his captors had pulled him out of that chair, in the awful footage Steve had made himself watch again and again, Bucky had barely been able to walk.

And still: *Remember — chitchat — before.*

“So you want me to…” Steve had begun, trailing off. “I could read, maybe, or…?”

Bucky had breathed out again, a definite sigh, and Steve had tried to imagine his face without the mask — whether his nostrils would flare out, or if he would rub angrily at his jaw with a rough scritch sound because of his five o’clock shadow, or if his face would simply cool into something tense and smooth, because Bucky had always been controlled in his anger, where Steve was savage.

Bucky hadn’t tried explaining himself again. Instead, he’d rested a hand onto Steve’s chest, like *please,* and instead of circling it to form the word, he *pushed.* Steve had let him, swinging his legs up
on the bed and letting Buck settle lengthwise beside him, his weight pressing hotly against Steve’s body, and Steve had wrapped his free arm around Bucky’s shoulders, in the way he had loved even when Steve had been small, and Buck had pressed his face and the mask into Steve’s chest, and curled his fingers into the cloth of Steve’s shirt, and his body had trembled a little, and so Steve had pulled him that much closer, until somehow they had both fallen asleep.)

“He — there was an explosion,” Steve started, halting when it occurred to him that he really ought to have started at the beginning of their story, and not the end. He should have started with the two dumb kids who’d kissed each other on a joke, only it hadn’t been, not for either of them, and they’d kept on even when—

“There’s not a lot of information on what happened,” Sam said carefully. “In the history books, I mean. Just that he…”

“There was an explosion,” Steve began again, doggedly. “And he fell out the side — of the train. We were on a train. And I reached for him, and he was hanging on, I almost —”

“Jesus Christ, Steve—”

“But I didn’t get him,” Steve said, staring dully ahead at the observation window, at the fragments of Bucky he could see through the crush of doctors that surrounded him. “They did. The one time in my life where he needed me, and I didn’t—”

“Shut the fuck up.” Sam’s voice was sharp.

Steve jerked his head to stare at him. Sam’s expression was uncompromising and severe, not a hint of pity, or of disgust.

“I mean it,” Sam cut him off before Steve could say a single word. “Ah, ah, ah. No. He needs you right now, man. Back then, yeah. In the last…” Sam flapped his hand in the air. “Seventy years?
Yeah. But you can’t do anything about that. You can do something about this.”

“Sir has successfully removed the casing to the tamperproofing mechanism without triggering it,” JARVIS said. “The next step is to disable it.”

Steve inhaled deeply, locking on to the window. “Can you get us closer?”

“Oh course,” JARVIS replied, and a video overlaid one of the observation windows, zoomed in to two sets of hands working around the black matte mask and the stocking cap binding Bucky’s hair out of the way. Tony’s hands, Steve realized absently, and DeWitt’s, the neurosurgeon.

Together, they were operating some sort of—

“It’s like microsurgery on a robot,” Sam commented, leaning in closer to get a better look at the small, precise tools being wielded at tiny elements of the tamper-proof device, which mostly looked like the insides of one of the cell phones Steve had inadvertently smashed, early on.

Bucky would have mocked him for that. “He’d have been excited, you know. Waking up in the future.” Steve snorted. “I was just — angry.”

“No offense,” said Sam, “But you still are.”

“Yeah.” Steve rubbed at his eyes. “Yeah, I am.”

(Bucky had already been awake when Steve had opened his eyes. He’d lost all sense of time, really, and had no idea specifically when Bucky had maneuvered them onto the narrow mattress, or if how long they’d slept, or if Bucky had slept at all.)
His hand had slid from Steve’s hip to the small stage of space between them. A quick, deliberate fold of his fingers down to his palm, three times. 

Hi.

No handshake, not this time.

“Hi,” Steve had said, his voice thick but finally sounding how it was supposed to. “Did you — how are you feeling?”

The lines in the corners of Bucky’s eyes had crinkled a little, in confusion maybe or even amusement. Steve had imagined him saying, been better, hot stuff, with a faint lilt of his mouth, the corners curled up, and instead his hand had moved from hi to I don’t know and then, no — cold — good.

“That’s better,” Steve had said dumbly, finding himself suddenly bowled over by the reality that he was Bucky, and he knew Steve, he was in there, they were together—)

“Sir has successfully connected me to the device,” said JARVIS. “I now have full control of it.”

Adrenaline flooded Steve’s muscles, making him suddenly aware of the breath in his lungs and the dryness of his mouth, of his scratchy eyes and pounding heart. “Is it — do you—”

“All is going according to plan,” JARVIS responded promptly. “The next phase will engage—”

“Dr. Clark,” Steve finished. The maxillofacial specialist, the one who would actually—

“So they’re gonna flip him again,” Sam said. “We’re halfway there.”
Steve just stared at the screen, at the careful coordination of the team as they moved in concert, one figure stepping forward as another sidled away.

“Steve?”

He turned to glance back at his friend. Sam tossed his chin towards the operating room. “You said nobody knew?”

Steve’s stomach clenched. “About us, you mean?” He thought again of the two kids they’d been, and then the two young men, and then the two soldiers, and then just the one. “No. I mean, I don’t think so. We had to — you couldn’t—” He struggled to complete the thought, to try to put into the words how afraid they’d been, almost all the time, how fucking unfair it had felt—

“Yeah,” Sam said. “That’s some bullshit.”

A shocked huff of laughter escaped Steve’s throat. “Yeah, it is.”

(“I’ll be right there the whole time,” Steve had sworn to him, as the doctors entered the room, as they got ready to move in a procession down the hall, and Steve had been able to see Bucky’s pulse fluttering rapidly in his throat, and the lines at the corners of his eyes had smoothed out, no longer confused, no longer amused, just afraid.

Bucky had placed his hand flat on Steve’s chest. Heedless of their audience — because what did they fucking matter? — Steve reached down and covered it with his own. The other had settled on Bucky’s shoulder, a mirror to the spot where on Steve’s own body the bruises had since faded. He’d squeezed, first with his thumb, three times, and then his index, twice—

Bucky’s eyes had gone impossibly wider, and his own hand had picked up the pattern against Steve’s chest, the thumb and the index, and his breathing had slowed, and Steve had pulled him
“Don’t pay attention to that part,” Sam told him, as Steve’s eyes tracked the bloody little nails, or — screws, he couldn’t tell, as Dr. Clark’s surgical forceps dropped them into a tin with a plink. “You don’t need to see that part, Steve.”

“Yeah,” Steve said, “I do.”

“Hey Steve,” came Tony’s voice over the speaker, crystal clear, a little breathless. “You got your front row ticket?”

Steve walked in. No surgical mask, no gown, no gloves, no nothing. There wasn’t time. Somebody moved out of the way for him. Hey there, said somebody else, and Steve glanced up. Bill, who gave him a thumbs up. Thumbs up for good.

Bucky’s eyes were closed. There was a smear of blood on the mask. Bucky’s blood. Somebody
wiped it off with a bit of gauze.

The doctor was exchanging one tool for another, and said, “Do not touch,” and Steve didn’t reply — he didn’t think he could — and instead he simply watched as gloved hands reached forward with grasping silver instruments, Bucky’s eyes still closed, and the tools clamped on to the sides of the awful fucking thing, and Steve could hardly breathe, and just like that, the mask was off.

Chapter End Notes

Massive thank you to spitandvinegar, quietnight, jhscdood, magdaliny and everybody else, you know who you are. ;)
Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Summary

Bucky wakes up.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

despite the threatening sky and shuddering earth (they remained)

Part 19

It’s dark when his eyes open.

A little light from the hallway, but other than that, darkness. Like before, like with Steve, the whole length of him squeezed up against him, against Bucky, warm through the clothes, warmer than the blankets, Steve’s big hands.

It’s dark. He’s on his back.

Head hurts. Face too, sharp not soft, face, because—I’ll be right here when you wake up.

Hand is free, and heavy, pull it up, it’s got a tube in it that pulls, but—

Bucky’s fingers, touching his own lips, soft and dry and he squishes them down, then, curls the fingers, drags them across his cheek, prickly—against the fingertips, and he pushes down, and his cheek gives, stretches at the skin, pushes against his closed teeth, so he opens them and pushes his cheek in until he feels it with his tongue on the inside.

He opens his mouth more. The jaw hurts, pulls, but it opens, opens, opens, cool air, straight into his mouth, and his tongue, runs it over teeth and lips, it escapes, slips above the lip to the bristly hair, his
“Hey, man,” says a voice.

Don’t move. It’s not Steve. Look over, Sam. Sam, with the wings, and words, Sam who reads. Sitting. In the dark, with a—

“How’re you feeling?”

Head hurts. Face hurts, not bad, because the mask, it’s off, it’s gone, and his mouth, he can open his mouth, but when he does, no sound, nothing, make the shapes, with the mouth, mask—

Sam leans in closer. “Okay if I call you Bucky, too?”

Bucky. Bucky. It’s him. Not just to Steve but to Sam, too. Don’t nod, use—the hands, and mouth, make the word come, yeah, but it doesn’t, and the hand, little fist like a head that nods, Yes.

“It’s good to meet you, Bucky. Officially.” Sam hunches forward. Elbows on knees. “You’ve woken up a couple times. You were pretty confused. But it’s been about a day and a half since the surgery. Everything went fine, they got the mask off no problems, no—” Sam’s hand moves in a swoop, “—zapping. Everything’s okay. And—”

Steve. Where’s Steve. He’s gotta — I’ll be here when you wake up — Move the hands, in the right order, because all that’s coming out is the s, a hiss, for Steve, and the head hurts, and the air is — cold — the body cold too, not like before, not like with Steve—

“Steve’s right over there, man, you’re good,” says Sam, and look over, where he nods his head to, Steve, sleeping, head sideways, what a dope. “I can wake him up for you?”

Yes. Wake him up, wake him up so — so he’s — I’ll be here when you wake up — kiss on the forehead — because the mask was coming off, people standing around, glasses, masks, staring down, will the paralytic work this time —

“Bucky, you with me, man?”
Bucky. Hand on chest. The mask gone. Mask off. Hurts where it — pulled, at the face, at the bones and skin, but —

Move fingers to the mouth, the mouth, with the breath through the teeth, the tongue on the lips, pull the hand away, Thank you.

Thanks, Sam.

“I didn’t do anything, Bucky,” says Sam, Bucky, not soldier, not—

Thank you, say it again, and it all — it’s all in the chest, the throat, eyes, like before, with Steve, and, it’s done, it is all tight like — a whole body pulled taut — and the head hurts but—

“Buck?”

Steve. Tired, scratchy. Never did like mornings. Or any other time, Buck said once, ornery as a—

As a—

Look over. Steve smiling, at Bucky. Steve. Steve, the mask’s off, it’s off, I’ll be here when you wake up, come on, Steve—

Steve’s closer, his hand on Bucky’s, big warm hand, leans down, you need a shave Steve, and kisses, right at the corner of Bucky’s eye and cheekbone, right where it’s wet, and he smells — sleepy, sweaty, like he’s been— need a shower too kid—

Arm up, left one, it’s free, pull him down, down, down, Steve come here, and it comes out just the s, a long s, broken up because—the chest is breathing so hard—

Face, skin and beard, all inside the corner of Steve, his neck, he’s sweaty, stubble scratches at the cheek, breath bounces off Steve’s skin back to Bucky’s lips, nothing there to stop it, no mask—no nothing— that tickles Buck, or not where somebody could see, and—
“God, Bucky,” Steve says, shaky, and Bucky can feel his pulse with his mouth, it is going so fast, oh, Steve, just stay here for a while — just stay—

Steve tries to pull back, don’t let him, keep the face right there, right inside him, against his skin so it gets hotter, sticky, don’t look anywhere else, just breathe, pull him closer, face covered up, face hidden, this time by Steve, don’t let go, stay, just stay right there, Steve—

He gets tired, eventually. Bucky has been tired for — a long time, he thinks.

It all hurts, his guts, his head — pounding, pulsing, like — like—

“Drink some water, Buck?”

He’s cold. Feet are cold, so cold they feel almost wet. But he’s in — a bed.

Bucky looks up.
Steve, tired, hand held out, a cup. Water. Where has — When is —

What the fuck, has he — how much time has he lost — not this again, it makes, in the chest, it goes — fast and tight, like he can’t breathe —

Steve. Right next to him, sitting so close he can feel him, the body heat, Christ you feel fuckin’ good and yeah sure I’m a regular—

A regular —

A regular —

Always did feel fuckin’ good honey, is what Buck said once, and he turns into Steve’s body, right there, every time, there’s been more times he woke up, Steve’s hand is holding the water, his other arm around Bucky, the whole body is shaking.

—trembling, Buck, you’re freezing, “Just let me,” says Steve—or he said it?

“Gotta stay hydrated, Bucky,” Steve says, and the water is right there.

He drinks the water. Chokes a little, like before, with the mask, and Steve’s hand — is on Bucky’s back, rubbing him, rubbing his skin, in a circle, like a —

“Easy, pal,” Steve says, so quiet, just for them, the same way he always did, hey pal.

Steve. Steve, say it, say the fucking word, “Sssssss—”

“I know,” Steve whispers, and the water is gone, and it’s all Steve instead, Bucky doesn’t want—he doesn’t want to lose more time, he wants — the head hurts, like a fucking — train, chugging along, boom-boom-boom—

He’s back on the bed. He’s so tired. Bucky is tired, and Steve’s hand, sliding over his face, big warm hand, rubbing across — the cheekbones, and jaw, gentle, the hurt’s gone, and up and down, and—
“—how long the withdrawal will last,” says a voice, quiet, loud enough it comes through —

His head, *Bucky’s head*, it hurts, and the shoulder, and throat — eyes — keep them shut, *Christ*— there’s a squeak, a squeak-squeak-squeak, and something sliding around, *rolling* around, and *movement*, and it’s —

It’s a voice he knows, soft, it’s *I won’t lie to you it won’t be comfortable*.

“—a few days since it started, we know that, and with him getting IV fluids and nutrition — and sleep — that’ll speed up the process.”

So loud. *For f**ksakes knock it off*. The light comes through the eyelids, through the face, red and bright, hurts. Turn the head. Face down, because if he’s awake, then *Steve*—

“And the withdrawal,” says Steve, *hey pal*, but his voice — *dark*, somehow, angry maybe, oh come on Steve, *they don’t deserve to live* he said once and then — “It’s making him wake up like that?”

Like what. Like *what*, Bucky is — he’s awake *now*, just — still, don’t move, don’t let it — it aches all in the body, all over it, and in the eyes, and *head*, just —

“—difficult to say. There’s a lot — Steve, he’s going to need help. And time.”

Bucky’s *he*. Bucky’s the one — he needs *help*, is what — it’s *Bruce*, the *I’m not a doctor, good*, who Bucky — Bucky almost —

“You think I don’t know that?”
The blankets aren’t — none of it is heavy enough, it’s just — he can’t —

“You think I don’t,” says Steve again, you pissed him off now Bruce, and—

“I think you don’t know very much about brain damage.”

“But I know him,” Steve says, and it sinks in, through the eyelids like light, through the mouth like air, through the body like heat when Steve’s right there, I know him, which is Bucky, Bucky knows him back, he has — this whole time, he has.

He wakes up, and knows where he is.

The bed. The room.

The mask is off. They took the mask off Bucky. And Steve is — Steve is right there, always, and Bucky looks, moves his head, it doesn’t hurt, and sees Steve, asleep, big old arms and legs folded all up together, like somebody — like—

A skinny balloon, all twisted up, then blown up with air, so it’s—puffy. A little balloon man, with Steve’s big muscles, blown up with air.

Steve’s asleep. Bucky’s in the bed. Cold. Good, Bucky thinks, he thinks it, About time you took a fuckin’ nap, and then—

Steve, asleep, small, in a chair, face all — smudged, with dirt, no, with pencil—
Asleep, passed out, chest up against Bucky’s chest, in the—in a — tent, and, he’s big—

Bucky’s nails are long. Bucky lifts his hand up, the other hand doesn’t—have any nails. Save on gloves. Half off. Scratches at his face, trails the jaw, left ear to right, hi mouth, sticks his tongue out, feels around.

Christ, he needs a shave.

He’s still in the room. With the bed. The shakes are gone, they’re not — his hand doesn’t shake, as much, body doesn’t shake. As much.

It was fucking HYDRA. It was — hail fucking HYDRA, it was — wipe him start over, it was — that shield, that face, yellow hair, nose, big old — why’s he so fucking big anyway, it was — just ask the fucking question damn it who the fuck is this guy, and — wipe him start over, oh no come on just — just did this, just did it before the mission, and then it’s — soldier are you going to cause any trouble and just — shake head for no, and it’s wipe him start over, wipe him start over—
“Hi,” says the man. Bruce. Steve’s coworker. Handshake, then—pictures, then—then, the arm, around the throat—

Jesus fucking H, kid. Relax. Just—in the room, on the bed, cold except for Steve, nobody anywhere, just—Bucky, and Steve, and Bruce.

Bucky looks at Bruce. The hand, around his throat. Man up, come on, pay attention, this is—Sorry. Say it too, not just hands, say, “Sssss,” make the right—make the right folds, with the lips, and use the tongue, the fucking—

“No need to apologize,” says Bruce, and next to Bucky is Steve, so fucking warm, hand on Bucky’s leg, head hurts again, it’s just—hard to—

“—scary time,” Bruce, fuck, he did it again, he can’t—

“Hey, Buck,” says Steve, fingers in Bucky’s fingers, thumb and index, doing the pattern, “Doing great, all right?”

Bucky thinks, good one, jackass, but it’s right there, in his hand, the pattern, okay. Okay, Steve. Okay. “Sssss,” he says, and it’s fucking—this is fucking—

Humiliating, is the word, he can’t even—he can’t—the mask is fucking off and he can’t—it’s Steve, and he’s Buck, and he was—it was—wipe him start over—why can’t he—why can’t he fucking talk—

The hand, on his. Steve’s hand. His other one, on Bucky’s chest, through the—tee shirt—and Bucky just breathes, breathes. Just breathe for a second, Bucky. Come on.

Christ.

“Your laryngeal nerve is damaged,” says Bruce, what, “and while we don’t know for sure—this would require more scans—our working theory is that you’re experiencing a form of aphasia,” what does that fucking mean—
“—you can comprehend language, and construct words or sentences in your head—”

Yes, that’s fucking it. Bucky’s right here. He’s right here, he just can’t — there’s no fucking sounds, there’s no—


Bruce stops. Bruce stopped talking, because — because —

Bruce smiles. “We’ll take as long as you need. I know this must be frustrating.”

To the left, a screen. Something — lines, swoops, circle, blurry, then hands — a guy’s hand, fingers out, smacking the flat of his hand to his own face once, twice — what —

“Frustrated,” says Steve, and he does it too, the hand out, smacks himself, what a dope. Watch yourself, Rogers. Got — he’s got — he’s strong, now, did it hurt?

Frustrated. Do it, flat of the hand, the metal one, Steve’s got — his real one, Bucky’s real hand — slap it to the face, no mask, frustrated. Do it again, use the face to make the sign, and then bad, and then flip the bird, which is — which is fuck you.

Yeah.

Steve laughs, big sound, bubbling up out of him, warm in the chest, look at that kid. Steve laughs, and it’s — how many times — yeah honey I’ll make you laugh all right, and Steve’s looking at him, mouth moves too, and there’s something in — something in those eyes, and there’s my smile, thought you forgot how, and he’d roll his eyes—

Can’t look at me like that, Buck, he said once, he said it — he said it — I can’t help but look back, that’s what he said, Steve said, hearts in my fuckin’ eyes. Oh, Steve.

“The good news,” Bruce is talking, “Is that your brain is showing signs of healing. And we haven’t
done any more scans of your throat, but the nerve damage will improve. That’s the serum at work.” His mouth goes — not a smile. Something else. It’s a — it’s a — goddamn, what’s the fucking word —

“Buck,” says Steve, Bucky’s whole right side lit up with Steve, alive with Steve, he just wants — if he could just —

“As the nerve damage repairs itself, you’ll be able to make noises,” Bruce is saying, look at him, pay attention, that’s what Steve was saying. Buck, to make him look. “And things like eating and drinking will be easier. It’s just going to take a little time.”

How much. How much time. Buck wants to — Bucky wants to fucking talk, there’s so much — in the head, there’s so much here, and them, and all of it, and there’s — a kid, a girl, with a smile, and the fucking — a woman’s voice, and — and Steve—

Use the hands. Use the fucking hands. Cup the hands, two arches. How. Tap the wrist, time. How long. Come on, how long —

“I’m not sure how long,” says Bruce, fuck that, this is — bullshit, this is all —

“Hey,” says Steve, and his head fucking hurts, and it’s — he can’t — so Steve pulls him forward, not just his side but all of him, all of Bucky, to where it’s real, yes, this is Steve, this is all — here, it’s all — and Steve talks, and Bruce leaves, and Bucky just — breathes for a while.

It is like coming up from — like coming awake, from stillness, from nothing, it’s hot, and, low voices, in the room, which is where Bucky is, doesn’t hurt to hear or think or breathe, it’s just — heavy — face pressed into pillow, and it’s—

“So where’d we leave off?” Sam. Sam who reads, who was — he was reading, before.
“I put the—” Steve, who yawns, “—bookmark in. You don’t have to…”

“Well I can’t make you take a shower, or a walk, but…”

“I showered.” Another yawn, Steve, take a nap.

“Yeah, okay. Uh-huh. All right: Wart lay on his back with his bearskin half off him… oh shit, is this guy gonna sleep, what a novel fuckin’ idea—”

Steve laughs, a shift of cloth—

“Oh-ho, Steve Rogers flippin’ the bird, good lord—”

“I ain’t getting any younger here—”

Sam laughs, a big ha that he cuts off, that he stops, and then, very quietly, “Shit, did I wake him?”

Him, Bucky. Bucky is awake already, but it’s — so hard to move, and this is — Steve is right there, all the sounds coming through the air like — like honey off a dripper, slow, see-through golden—

A warm weight, on his back, his side, Bucky is — on his side, arm supported on — pillows. Eyes closed. The space grows small, shrinks from a room to just — him and Steve — it could be the fuckin’ dog days and you’d still find a way to say hey Buck I’m cold and an old press of skin to his, sticky—

“Hey Buck.” Steve whispers, close to his face, Bucky can feel Steve’s breath, but he doesn’t want to move — he is weighted down, a stone in a river, a stream, but he looks, he’s gotta look, when Steve sounds — so sweet, Rogers, look at that mouth, and there he is, smiling a little, blurry around the edges, bright. “You okay?”

One hand is under Bucky, inside the blanket, the other is free. Flip it around, make the come here sign, for Steve to give his hand, and he does, the nails are ragged, no hangnails anymore. Bucky
presses it flat, then swoops his index and middle fingers above Steve’s palm. Read.

JARVIS taught it, but—

“Read, sir,” says JARVIS, and Steve leans down, kisses him on the cheek, and Bucky’s eyes are already closed, he’s already — underwater — and he hears Sam say, “I heard the man,” and then Steve’s weight behind Bucky, he is on the bed too, bigger than before, a wedge, a wall, an— Atlantic wall, between Bucky and everything —

“Wart lay on his back with his bearskin half off him and his hands clasped behind his head,” Sam starts. Steve is warm. “It was too beautiful to sleep, too temperate for the rug. He watched out in the stars in a kind of trance. Soon, it would be summer...”

It’s just Bucky and Steve. Steve in front of him, wearing the—sweatshirt, that was — that Sam said, if you want you can put those on. Bucky says, “Sssss,” and he asks, how long, because it’s — it’s been days and days, and before that, it was —

“The mask came off a week ago,” says Steve, a week, but how long, ask again, because Bucky is — Bucky was —

“—you were pretty out of it, with the drugs, and just — everything,” and Bucky thinks, yeah you don’t fuckin’ say, and then—

How long, he asks again, because it’s not just weeks, it’s not, he knows it’s more, he knows it like he only knows Steve—
“It’s 2014,” says Steve, “HYDRA had you for — a long time. Do you —”

Right, it’s — it was the train, it was — Steve’s face, body, hanging out, and the rush of wind, and then — nothing, and then — the face, with the glasses, and faces.

“Bucky? Do you — remember?” Steve asks, soft, the way he does, when he asks something again, or again, focus, for Christ’s sake, soft like Bucky’s a child, like a —

He remembers — running, and nice one sarge, and Steve, so dead tired because they marched for days, took watch, got back, dead to the world, liberty, and a bag of candy spilling, and honey don’t forget to, and — the train, and wipe him start over —

“You’re Bucky Barnes,” says Steve, his hands still on Bucky’s face, kneeling in front of him, so tall they’re face to face, “It’s 2014,” he says again, “You’re here with me.”

It’s a glass door, and tiles, “Don’t slip, Buck,” says Steve, in blue shorts, a thousand miles of Steve, and the tube in the hand is gone — it is all gone, all of him naked for — the first time in a long time. A loud shhh of water, steaming the air, like — before, feels good huh man?

Look up at Steve. He’s so clear, and Bucky’s head is steady, his body — tacky, with sweat dried over, and grime, and the hair, hanging over his face. Then —

“You don’t have to, if you think it might…” Steve says, lines between his eyes popping up, little ridges, it’ll get stuck like that sweetheart, and a frown pulls at his mouth, and for a second, Bucky sees him in double, sees — just get in the tub, Buck and lemme help and — Bucky’s knees up around his chest, shivering, even though it’s warm, and Steve’s hands on his back, fingers combing through his hair — his short hair, not like, not like—

“I don’t want you to be scared,” says Steve, I ain’t scared, kid, “Last time…”
Okay, Bucky says, with the hands, and makes the mouth do it, just a tongue click, for $k$, and he tries but the sound doesn’t come, it just won’t — your laryngeal nerve — and Bucky reaches out for Steve, and places his real hand on Steve’s smooth chest, and a muscle jumps there. It’s double again, it’s Steve beneath him, Steve is beneath his hands, on Steve’s stomach, his shoulders, these are new, and Bucky closes his eyes, and steps into the shower.

Steve waits. Bucky’s body goes hot, it burns but good, and he blinks at the water, the water clumps up his eyes, and his hair sticks to his face, and no more cold water flats for us, Rogers, who laughed then, because one day you and me’ll hit it big.

Come here, Bucky says, with his hand, not for Steve’s hand but for all of him, lemme help, Bucky, lemme just, and Steve is there, and his hands on Bucky’s back, with the soap, feels good, he says it now too, no sound, just with the mouth, feels good. Thumbs up, good.

“No.”

It’s the sharpness of it, that makes Bucky tune in. Sharp. Hard. Pissed off. Must be Steve, Bucky thinks, and feels his mouth stretch, curl up, the muscles remembering what to do, alert the fuckin’ presses.

“No, what? You’ve seen his scans, Steve, and all of the forty thousand accumulated medical degrees I’ve dragged in on this, they all agree—”

“He’s getting better,” Steve says, and Bucky can’t see him but he can see him, in his head, his spine climbing straight up, his heels digging straight down. “He’s not in immediate danger, the withdrawal is gone, mostly, and he’s getting better with food—”

“He’s getting better with yogurt and gatorade, Steve, and meanwhile he’s had how many seizures? And he still has — the thing, in his brain, and the subdermal—”
Don’t want it, thinks Bucky— don’t want it, don’t want it — don’t let them, Steve—

“No,” Steve says. “Nobody’s doing anything, not until he’s — all the way well, not unless something goes wrong. He’ll decide for himself.”

He loses time, when it’s time to leave the room, because no more medical procedures, and Steve’s face, I want you to be comfortable.

Bucky tries not to lose time, he knows it’s — your brain is healing, Mr. Barnes, and you’re traumatized, it’s called withdrawal, Mr. Barnes and he hears — he heard them — he dissociates, and that’s when — it’s the same as losing time.

He is Bucky Barnes. It’s 2014. He’s with Steve.

He’s in the room, Steve is saying, “Ready to bust out?” — God, he looks tired — and then it’s, heart pounding — cold air — sharp and sour, in the nose, the smell is so loud, and it’s empty in the hall, but it’s — it might not be —

And then he’s sitting. Steve’s hands on his face, it feels — fucking good, and Steve looks at him, and Buck wants to say, shit, Rogers, I did it again, but he can’t, not really, even if he can breathe and work his face he can’t — he still loses time —

“This is where I’ve been staying,” says Steve, cutting through all of it, like it’s all right. He looks tired. “Me and Sam. Still need to — get you checked out, with everything, but.” He shakes his head. “No need to put you in a hospital bed. You can sleep your eighteen hour days right here.”

Funny guy. Roll the eyes, that ain’t changed. Steve laughs, oh, there it is. That’s the good stuff.
Just — he’s tired, even if he lost time, even if it’s okay, and Bucky says, *you and me,* and he doesn’t see Steve’s face because he leans forward, into his chest, breathes him in, he’s so *tired,* and it’s “Sssss,” into Steve’s chest, and Steve’s arms all around him, on the — *couch,* is the word, and Steve says his name — Bucky — and this, at least, he knows *this.*

*How long,* Bucky asks when he wakes up. Steve is there, kisses his forehead, says, *it’s been one day,* or *it’s been two days,* or—

And Steve is there, always, because, *JARVIS tells me when you’re waking up,* because Bucky had asked, *how again here* and behind him, a screen, with a hand, a little pinky stuck up, making a *swoop,* and Steve had looked too — *JARVIS,* he’d said.

Bucky’s eyes stay closed. The hands: *bad,* and it all — it’s all so *fuzzy,* in the head, so much — so much there, if Sam could just —

“Want me to read?”

*Yeah,* Bucky thinks, *yeah, Sam,* because that will be — that will be a story, with the words, in his ears, saying, think this, Buck, follow these words, follow — *Wart,* and *Merlyn,* don’t follow — the other stuff.
Flip the pages, a *scrip-scrip-scrip* as Sam’s fingers find the place, and he breathes out, he must be close, sitting on the floor next to the couch, Bucky is — sunken inside it —

“‘Sing?’ asked the Wart, quite taken aback,” Sam begins, because — Wart is meeting the hedge-pig, it is his *last lesson*, and—

“—cried the hedgehog. And it began hurriedly to sing in a very placating way, but rather muffled because it dared not uncurl—”

A little girl, high-pitched giggling, curled into a ball, skinned knees, shrieking, *I am a hedgepig!—*

“—it sang most mournfully into its stomach, ‘Sweet Genevieve — ther, uh, I assume that’s the? Okay, so, the days may come, the days may go, but still the light of memory weaves those gentle dreams of long ago. Aw, shit.”

Sam breathes for a second, he breathes instead of reading the book, and Bucky can hear the book close, but he doesn’t open his eyes, he hears — *Steve*, *Steve* read it, *but still the light of mem’ry weaves*, *Steve* and — *Becca* —

“*Well done,*” says JARVIS, as Bucky signs *G—O*, for *go, like a fuckin’ five year old*, and then — one letter at a time, they still — they still *blur*, but this one’s easy, it’s *T—O, to*, tip of the tongue, behind his front teeth, for *T*, and now for the next one, *come on, Barnes.*
Wakes up and doesn’t know where this is, or — what is this place, and this — guy, this big face, yellow hair, this is — what is —

Head hurts, real bad, make the sign, Bucky says head hurts, eyes closed, and Steve’s voice — “Can I do anything” and yeah you can be quiet for chrissakes, and then a hand on his shoulder — too much, get away, just — in the dark —

“What, you don’t trust me now? Not after I got you — how many of my old hoodies you got in your closet, again?” Sam is smiling with his eyes, as he pushes the mug forward, steaming, hot, smells like — smells good.

“It is good, Buck,” Steve says, next to him. “I tried some.”

The screen is in the corner. Picture: mug, with hands, and then — sweatshirt with a hood, hoodie, with hands, and Bucky watches. Mug. Hoodie.

Thanks, JARVIS. Pinky finger, a little swoop.
Sam is waiting. “You gonna try it? C’mon.”

Use the hands: what mug.

“It’s bone broth, man, it’s good for you. Protein. No solids. Your perfect meal. My momma’s recipe.”

And he tries it, it’s hot, and he doesn’t — it works, he doesn’t fucking choke, trying to get it down, and it’s a little — salty, something like — chicken broth, and rolling out little balls — with the hands, gentle now, sweetheart, and — he closes his eyes, and hears Sam, “I’m sorry, man, do you not like it?” and Bucky has to — he has to — M, a fist with his thumb tucked between his pinky and ring finger, then A, a regular fist, and leaning down, so she can tiptoe up and kiss him on the cheek, thank you, my darling and — his mother, and he does it again, my, and spells it out, Ma.

His face is — itchy, when he wakes up, in his bed, one foot out in the cool air. Rest of him in blankets. Hot. Bucky scratches at his face, around the mouth, rough, prickly, and Steve catches his hand, and squeezes his fingers.

His head hurts a little, in the back, a pulse of it. Thud—thud—thud.

“That was twelve hours,” Steve tells Bucky, without him asking how long, “Asleep the whole time. How’re you feeling?”

Itchy, is the answer, Bucky’s face is — but he’s okay, don’t worry about me, pal because Steve’s right there, his hand on his face, curling his fingertips through the beard, and smiling at him.

“You never had this much scruff in your entire life put together,” Steve says, eyes crinkling, and it
rushes up Bucky’s chest, just want to — just look at that face, look at him, Steve, and Bucky wants the whiskers off, he knows how, uses Steve’s hand as the base, his own to flip up, for off.

“I don’t know that one,” Steve says, and so Bucky says JARVIS, little pinky with the swoop.

“Off, sir,” JARVIS says.

Bucky makes his mouth do it too, no sound, but “Fffff,” and Steve grins, leans forward, whole weight forward, wrapping him up, his face against Bucky’s, scratching at it with his own cheek, gonna get marks Rogers, and one time Steve said can’t help it my fella’s got a noon o’clock shadow, and Bucky can’t hardly get his arms around him, hell.

“You wanna shave?” Steve asks, voice muffled like — muffled like, fuck. Face all pressed in Bucky’s hair, pulling at it, and he’s heavy and hot and little pulls against the scalp, so there, he’s just so here, when Bucky breathes he moves Steve’s whole body, turns his head into Steve’s neck, tries shave, and it comes out, “Shhhh.”

“Don’t shush me,” Steve says, what a goddamn asshole, and Bucky pushes at him, pokes at his guts, and Steve laughs and laughs.

Bucky’s hand shakes, sometimes, when he wakes up. The whole body. Not like — before, not like — weeks before, days, when it was all bad, but —

In the mirror he is — long hair, skinny face. Beard, eyes — little bits of grit, from the sleep, and a red line, a fold on his skin, from the pillow, and where it used to pull, to hurt, his fingers find it — below his eye, the cheekbone, a little — divot, the word is divot, on the bone, in the bone, where — where it was — where —

Steve touches too, finds each one. The skin’s healed but not — underneath, Bucky can still feel it.
He looks at Steve, in the mirror, Steve’s not laughing now, his face dark, mouth a straight line. Not you too, Bucky thinks, and his hand keeps shaking.

The mask, it was on him, they put it on him, they didn’t — they made it stay there, so he couldn’t — he had no face — and wipe him start over — and the tube, and he can’t breathe, and Steve, and he can’t —

“Let’s get you taken care of,” says Steve, reaches down, tap on, just lets it run, and rests his hands on Bucky’s hips, for a second, squeezes a little, right here Buck. “You wanna hop up?” Jerks his chin towards the counter.

Okay, Rogers.

Bucky watches Steve get ready, the — rhythm to it, the razor — “It’s a new one, old one’s in the Library of Congress or something” — and the leather — the leather — fuck, the strop, and then Steve’s hands, with some sort of —

“This part’s new,” Steve says, showing Bucky his hands, the glisten of something, “Just gonna rub it in. Smells good, Buck,” and Bucky closes his eyes, Steve’s hands on his face, rubbing through the whiskers on his face, and —

Come on, Rogers, how are you so bad at this? Bucky said once, smile stretching wide, a laugh, it was a morning, thick and hot in the air—leaning over Steve—what happened to those steady hands?

Steve holds the brush under the water, then smears on the — soap, then says, “You ready?” and Bucky keeps his eyes open, watches Steve’s face as the bristles go round and round in circles on his face, the smell of it inside his nose, and Steve says, “You know, you taught me this,” and Steve’s hand holding his chin steady, and then the soap is done, and Steve says, “Look to the right a little,” and holds his skin tight, and pulls the razor down, smooth glide, warmed up from the water, he can feel Steve’s breath, his big hands, thumbs, fingers, hot against the skin, and the soap is something — spicy, and Bucky’s eyes close, and far away Steve says, “Upper lip, now, be careful,” and his mouth does it, and the little rasp of it is louder even than their breath, and they are breathing — the same air, like —

Under a blanket, skin all pressed up together, be careful, does it — is it good — and then it’s the water running, and the soap again, and the razor, and Steve’s there, and his hands, and, okay.
Bucky’s face is smooth. It’s smooth, and Steve’s hands put water on it, right on his skin, then he pats him dry, and Bucky opens his eyes to watch, and sees the flick of a cap, hears the pop, breathes in a flutter of scent, and Steve says, “Just some, um, lotion.”

Steve’s index finger puts the lotion on him in cool wet dabs, and Bucky leans in, get in here Steve, he reaches for Steve’s waist, and then Steve’s thumbs are right there, on his skin, in small soft circles.

_Don’t it feel good when I do it like that_ Steve, Bucky asked once, when it had been his own hands on Steve’s back, tracing his spine, making circles. Bucky curves his fingers around Steve’s side until the tips of them dip into the cleft of his back, different now but the same, and Steve is so _close_, barely any space between them, like two clasped hands, like—

Steve’s fingers slip and press around his jaw, down his throat, above his lip, under his eyes, and he is so—_gentle_, is the word, like Bucky is— a precious thing, and _if it could just be us forever_, and a rush of something terrible and big and sharp swells up in Bucky’s chest, his throat, _sweeetheart don’t you know_, and Steve’s thumbs slide over his eyebrows, his eyelids, and Bucky says, “Steve,” and it comes out slurried and hoarse but it _comes out_, Steve’s name, and Steve freezes, and his eyes go so bright, big, shocked—

“_Bucky_,” Steve says back, his grip on Bucky’s face is firm, his fingers pressing strong warm lines into Bucky’s skin, but deeper, straight into the bones of him, the heart of him, Steve’s hold on him immovable, and _forever_, and — _fella gets ideas with a mouth like that_, and _leemme help, Buck, lemme just — can I kiss you_?

“_Steve_,” Bucky says again, gasps it, everything of Steve all caught up in his throat, and he pushes forward, closer, until the space between them is gone and he breathes Steve’s air, and touches his mouth, his lips on Steve’s, and — _it’s been way too long, sweeetheart_, he said once, and _is this okay_, with — fear, bubbling in his gut, and Steve breathes in, like he’s — _breaking the surface_, and kisses back.
Chapter End Notes

Massive thank you to all who have commented and left kudos on the last few chapters -- I am slowly but surely making my way through comment replies, but if I haven't gotten to you yet: THANK YOU! It is an incredible joy to hear from each of you. :)

This chapter was an real effort -- thank you very much to JHSC, Quietnight, spitandvinegar, and magdaliny for your collective handholding/willingness to withstand my whining. <3
“It’s like how when you first start working out, you make a lot of progress real fast, you know?” Sam tried to explain to Steve, one afternoon when Bucky was — unsurprisingly — taking a long nap that Steve would bet pretty good money would turn into another 16-hour trawl through the land of nod.

“Yeah,” Steve said after a moment of craning his neck backward to check on Bucky, who was sprawled on the couch, in an open space, with windows. “When I first started out, I made progress real fast,” he added.

“Asshole,” Sam replied, through a mouthful of too-hot soup. “Anyway, for regular joes, for normal fellas,” he continued, and this time the joke was on Steve, since Sam and everybody else was enjoying the hell out of hearing Steve finally — “finally!” — talk like the Brooklyn mick from 1935 they all wanted him to be. He can’t help it, not with Buck around. He’ll take the teasing.

“So when you first start,” Sam continued. “You make progress real fast, adding ten, even twenty pounds a week to your big lifts. Squats, deadlifts, bench.” Sam blew on his spoon. “Then, after a month or two, maybe even three, you start plateauing. It gets harder. Suddenly, a good week is adding five pounds. Or even less, maybe a good week is just doing good reps. Good form, you know?”
Steve sighed and rubbed at his hair. It’d been another day of Buck not saying a fucking word. Not signing, not trying to talk, not paying attention to Steve, even, which is the thing that made him the most nervous.

It sounded foolish even to himself. But not once, not since the first time Steve had walked into that cell, had Bucky ignored him.

And today, that was exactly what he’d done. He’d stayed in bed, then disappeared to walk the halls of the tower, then showed up again a few hours later to sit in his room. Not working on reading, not working with JARVIS, just — sitting, and ignoring him as Steve offered soup, and juice, a goddamn smoothie, to read aloud, to sit with him, to do fucking anything—

“It ain’t a setback,” Sam said firmly. “A setback’s him running. A setback’s a seizure, like last week with me. A setback’s him getting scared, lashing out, forgetting words, going blank. That?” Sam pointed to the huddled sleeping lump on the couch. “That’s growing gray matter, Steve. That’s a good rep. Got it?”

Steve woke up to the whisper and rasp of his own sheets getting pulled back, and the pull of the mattress towards a new weight, and the slide of a warm hand up his arm. He’d always been a light sleeper, but the war and the future had honed the edge of that blade to something invisible and razor-sharp. Sometimes it felt like he didn’t sleep at all.

He waited for Bucky to settle, and then asked quietly, “Buck? You okay?”

He could feel the rhythmic movement of Bucky’s head and the strands of his long hair slipping across his shoulder blades, feather-light, only he can’t tell if it’s a nod or a shake. Steve twisted around.

Bucky looked tired, fuzzy almost, his face in need of a good shave and his hair tangled from neglect.
He was chewing at his lip. He was buried in the sweatshirt Sam had given him months earlier.

“Buck?”

Bucky’s shoulders shivered a little, almost unnoticeably, and he folded his body up against Steve’s, nestling his head on his chest and letting his right hand emerge from the sleeve of the sweatshirt to rest on Steve’s stomach. “Before,” he said. It sounded like Pefore. He had a habit of mixing up similar consonants, sometimes, especially when he was anxious or uncertain.

The nerves in Steve’s gut sluggishly unwound themselves, creeping throughout the rest of him, slow to come to life because of how tired he was, but there nonetheless. Given the two days of Bucky existing in his own small, silent world, of sleeping when he could and wandering the building when he couldn’t, Steve wasn’t surprised at himself. There’d been nothing for him to do but wait. He’d never been good at that.


Steve’s stomach sank. Bucky’s voice was barely more than a whisper. He pulled his hand away before Steve could reach out to hold it, and used it to speak instead: Hurt — people.

“Yeah, I know,” Steve said, keeping his voice low. He stayed on his back, right where he was, even though all he wanted to do was curl into Bucky, grab hold of him, sink everything of him inside Bucky’s bones so he could sleep his sleeps and walk his walks right alongside him, so he wouldn’t have to work it out alone. “It’s all over now,” he whispered at him. “You’re safe now.”

“They,” Bucky said, just as quietly. “Aren’t. I don’t — I don’t —”

Steve didn’t interrupt him. He just waited.

“I didn’t — want it,” Bucky said, straight into Steve’s chest, his breath hot, his hands clutching at him. “I remember, fighting — I didn’t. Steve—”

“It’s over,” Steve said again, fiercely, and he couldn’t hold it back, not any longer. He ran his fingers through Bucky’s hair, and pressed his head to his chest, and slid one of his legs in between Bucky’s. He would weave them together, if he could. He would grab hold of their threads and unspin them back into the fibers, into the raw, tangled mess of them that should never have been combed out in
“You’re done,” Steve whispered, and the words unspooled out of him then. “You don’t have to anymore, Buck, never again, I swear,” he said, over and over — you’re done, you’re done — and he wound him up in his arms so tightly it had to hurt him, and Bucky coiled himself around him so tightly it hurt Steve, their bodies so taut they could barely breathe.

Bucky had nightmares.

And nightmares, and nightmares, and nightmares.

“How long,” Buck asked, one day. They were wrapped up on the couch.

Sam had been by to read for a while. They were three or four books beyond A Once and Future King, now, with Sam more than halfway through their second Discworld — “Welcome to the world premiere of Guards! Guards! where Captain Vimes is a brother from Harlem, you got me?” — and both of them had spent most of the past hour laughing at Sam’s performance, inching closer and closer, holding hands under a blanket like they still had to hide something.

It’d been a good day.
How long, Buck asked again, with his hands instead. He wasn’t looking at Steve, even though he was laying crosswise on him, his head in his lap, Steve’s fingers in his hair.

“You didn’t sleep,” Steve told him quietly. “Not just now, I mean.” He didn’t let the dismay show. He still got confused, sometimes, what Bruce called ongoing lapses in short-term memory, but he hadn’t in a while, he’d been doing so well—

“I mean,” Bucky said, screwing his eyes shut and pushing into Steve’s fingers, which had gone still. “I mean — how long. Was it. Was I—”

“Oh, Buck,” Steve said, leaning down, and kissing him on the forehead, and holding his hand, and then kissing that too, and closing his own eyes. “It’s been — It was a long time.”

There was a bad day.

There were a lot of bad days.
“Got a lead,” came the call from Hill and Fury. “Suspected HYDRA base, showing unexpected signs of life since D.C., energy spikes, irregular foot traffic. You in?”

It’d been a bad week. Another failed therapist, a couple days where Bucky only managed to talk with his hands, where he had headaches and seizures, where he couldn’t sleep — or didn’t want to — and there was nothing Steve could fucking do.

“Yeah,” Steve said. “When’s wheels up?”

“Am I gonna,” Bucky asked him, from outside the bathroom where Steve had just climbed out of the shower. His voice carried, at least it did to Steve; he would hear him anywhere, louder than anything else.

Moving a little gingerly, Steve carefully toweled himself off. “What, Buck?”

Bucky didn’t respond, not where Steve could hear or see him. When Steve finished rubbing his head so his hair wasn’t dripping and tossed the damp towel into the hamper — in a move his exhausted and damaged muscles immediately regretted — he spotted Bucky seated in the doorway. His spine was pressed up against the jamb, his legs tailor-style. He was looking at Steve, wearing one of those inscrutable expressions that didn’t come from his time with HYDRA, but from before. Just who he was.

He’d always been hard to read, when he was thinking.

Steve gestured at his own battered torso. “Looks worse than it is.”
Bucky’s jaw went a little tight. He opened his mouth, and then closed it when the words didn’t come. His hands: *I don’t like it.*

“Me getting hurt?” Steve reached over to the toilet seat, where he’d loaded briefs and an undershirt before limping into the shower stall. He carefully slid one leg into the briefs, and then Bucky reached out and flicked him on his other leg, hard, with his metal hand.

“*Ow, Buck, what the—*” Steve bit out, dancing away from Bucky’s hand, and paying for it with a fresh bloom of pain in his side. “S’that for?”

Bucky gave him a baleful look, his jaw tense. His hands: *You fight — fight — fight — fight —*

The breath whoosed out of Steve’s lungs. “Buck,” he said, the word coming out so soft it might have been a whisper. “You know—”

“When I’m,” Bucky interrupted him, staring straight ahead at the opposing jamb, his eyes blinking rapidly as he struggled for the word, “*better— am I—*”

Steve slid down to the floor in a single movement, his hands coming to rest on Bucky’s knees. He waited for Bucky to finish his question.

That was important, he’d learned early on. *Let him finish, don’t try to complete his sentences, don’t speak for him.*

Bucky started again. “You said — I was done.” He looked at Steve then, his gaze as intense and focused as it had been since the beginning days, when he had still been trapped behind the mask. “Said I was done.”

A vice tightened around Steve’s chest. He couldn’t speak.

“Said I was done,” Bucky said a third time, slurring now the way he sometimes did. He reached forward, poked his metal index finger in the center of Steve’s chest, heedless of his aches and pains.

“Bucky, I can’t just…” Steve began, in a weak protest. Bucky jabbed him again.
“You.

Steve swallowed. “You don’t want me out there, huh?”

“Not,” Bucky managed. His throat worked hard. He squeezed his eyes shut in frustration, and Steve reached forward to slide a hand over his shoulder, easy, from the curve of the muscle down to his biceps, an easy massage of his triceps, and then back up to his shoulder.


And the decision settled easily over Steve’s shoulders, all at once, whole body going suddenly warm when he hadn’t even realized he was cold, like there’d been a blanket draped on him by somebody who’d been waiting a long time to put it down. Like somebody whose arms were real tired.

_I didn’t want to fight_, Buck had said, in his broken way, using up all the energy he had to get out a couple of words at a time, and those were the words he’d picked. _I didn’t want to._

Steve swallowed. “Okay,” he said finally, everything narrowed down to just them under a blanket, like when they were kids, whispering to each other on couch cushions, hiding away from the world, no war, no nothing, just them.

He leaned forward to rest his forehead against Bucky’s chest. Bucky’s hand came around, dragged him closer, careful of the sore spots, and Steve said again, “Okay.”

“We’re — done,” Bucky got out. “Steve — we’re done.”
“There are several foreign objects that the medical team recommends be removed,” said Bruce quietly. He sat on one of the armchairs, ankles crossed, hands fidgeting loosely in his lap. “We’ve observed enough now to see that—”

_No_, said Buck, with his hands. He was standing, a couch and a kitchen island in between him and Bruce, like he was still afraid he might charge him and hold him up by the neck, how he sometimes dreamt, where he still had the mask on, where Steve never figured it out, where he didn’t remember himself, where _nobody ever knew_, all these whispered fragments that he’d only confessed once, in a mix of sign and words, exhausted and afraid.

“Buck?” Steve asked him, still sitting. “What’re you saying _no_ to, pal?”

Buck wasn’t looking at him. “_No_,” he said, out loud this time. “I don’t — _I don’t_.”

Steve spine straightened. He stared at Bruce. “Will it hurt him? Will any of it…?”

Bruce scratched at his chin, looking pained. “It hasn’t _yet_, with everything deactivated—”

“I don’t — _want it_,” Buck interrupted him, low and angry and uncompromising, each word perfectly enunciated. That happened sometimes, and Steve had quickly learned not to draw attention to it.

“Okay,” said Bruce. He smiled. “Then I declare you no longer my illegal patient.” He stood up and telegraphed his way over to Bucky, and held out his hand to shake. “It’s been an honor.”

It was an unseasonably warm day in late September when they decided to go to Prospect Park. In the backseat of the chauffered car, Bucky texted Steve.

_I like the car_
And Steve said, “I like walking,” and Bucky just shot him a withering look. Steve grinned.

It was a weekday, but that didn’t stop New Yorkers from eeking out the last bit of summer they could, seeping thickly through the trees and grass and on the edges of the ponds, heads upturned like sunflowers.

“Statue of you around— _here_, somewhere,” Bucky said once they’d been walking for a while, his left hand buried in Steve’s sweatshirt and pulling Steve along beside him in unnecessarily abrupt little jerks.

“How’d you know that?”

“Phoned it,” Bucky replied, smug, as he plucked his phone from his own back pocket and twirled it in Steve’s direction. “Face only the—” he paused, to think of the word, and his throat worked a little — “the _sculptor_ could love. A better likeness I— _never_ did see.”

“Uh huh,” Steve said back, unconvinced, and took an extra long step forward to hip-check Bucky, who shot him a delighted look, and without further ado, dropped down to the ground and yanked Steve down with him.

Steve hit the ground heavily, the little explosion of breath from his lungs made of equal parts surprise and laughter. “My hero,” he said. “Such a gentleman, such—”

Bucky reached out and snagged Steve’s hand with his own, lacing their fingers together so swiftly and surely that it shut Steve up. They were in _public_, and they could _do this now_.

They lay back on the grass, and Steve watched as Bucky closed his eyes, his pale skin even paler in the sunlight.

He needed to get outdoors more.

Steve closed his eyes too. The ground beneath him was a little chilly and soft, not the hard baked heat of August anymore, but with the sun overhead that hardly mattered. Bucky’s fingers twitched rhymically in his, the thumb and index alternating in the reflexive pattern that meant he was relaxed.
and didn’t know he was doing it, or he was trying to cope.

Steve swallowed the little flare of anger and sorrow. He’d gotten over this already, for Christ’s sake.

He tilted his head towards Bucky. “Buck?”

Bucky’s fingers stilled. Lazily, his other hand — gloved, of course — slid up to his chest, formed a fist. Sorry.

“You don’t gotta apologize,” Steve told him, pained. “I just…”

“Can we,” Buck began once Steve trailed off. “Somewhere it’s like this.”

When Bucky was tired, it was harder for him to focus on the words. “What d’you mean?”

Bucky looked over at him, squinting in the light. Strands of hair clung to his cheek. “Somewhere it’s like this, but,” his shoulder hitched a little, as he sought the right phrase, “We can go.”

“We can go anywhere you want,” Steve said honestly. “You mean like this? Like the park?”

The gloved fist on Bucky’s chest twitched twice, a shorthand. Yeah.

Steve rolled towards him, trapping their hands beneath them, and rested his forehead on Buck’s shoulder. “You got it.”
It was supposed to be a vacation. It started off that way. It started off as Steve going to Tony, asking for advice — *me and Buck, we were thinking — he likes the park, I think all the green, and —* and next he knew, Tony was nodding his head, and calling up pictures of an old house, small, nestled away in the Adirondacks, acres and acres of land. A lake, a couple fields, and woods, the property crawling up the side of a mountain Steve was pretty sure Tony owned most of, and Bucky spent the first couple days just walking all of it, learning it with the single-minded focus that called to mind a pair of eyes behind a mask and nothing else.

“How’s the perimeter,” Steve asked him cheerfully, when he wandered back inside, damp and sweaty, smelling of outdoor things Steve couldn’t put names to, cheeks flushed, hair pushed back off his face, swept behind his ears. “Still there?”

And Buck said *yeah*, and the next day said *yeah*, and the day after, *yeah*.

“*How’s the perimeter,”* Steve asked, ambling across the kitchen to rest his hands on Bucky’s hips, and kiss him a little, a gentle hello-kiss, the kind that made Bucky’s cheeks flush. It’d been a week since they’d arrived. Maybe two. Maybe longer. Steve was surprised to find he liked the idea of losing track.

It took a moment for Bucky to figure out the words. “*I was. Just — walking,*” he managed after a while, and kissed him back.
“Maybe we could,” Bucky said one afternoon, not looking up from his drawing, his hair hanging over his face.

He’d taken to collecting perfect *ferns* or leaves or odd bits of *animal skeletons* that he found during his rambles, and bringing them back to the house to render them in pencil in perfect, excruciating detail. He spent hours with a pencil or pen in one hand and another in his mouth, chewing on it as he figured out how to attack the *fiddlehead* or the *showy aster* or whatever else he’d come across that day. Steve was fairly sure it’d been his therapist’s idea, but of all the hobbies he’d grimly attempted in the past months it was the only one that was sticking.

He’d never been interested in art before, other than in pretending to be irritated when Steve asked him to model for him. And Kilroy too, Steve supposed. He was using it as his mark, when he went out trail blazing. One day, when Steve came with him, he’d started adding the little hat.

“Maybe,” Buck said again. His pencil had stopped moving, though he kept it pressed to his sketchpad.

“*Maybe* what, Buck?”

Buck set down the pencil. His arm whirred. “Grow stuff, maybe. *Here.*”

Steve blinked. “Like a garden?”

Buck didn’t say anything right away. Steve waited, and then: “And stay. Maybe.” His hands added, *for time.*

“I’m not *selling* it to you, Rogers,” Tony said, incredulous. “Number one, you couldn’t *afford* it, not with your bank account or his, that is, *the one he’d have* if he’d let me sic my *hundreds of well-paid lawyers* on the federal government — he could at least *get his identity back,* for Christ’s sake—”
“Tony,” Steve interrupted, swallowing down the acid that rose in his gut, unpleasant and sharp, at his flat-out denial. “Maybe — rent-to-own, or—”

“Like layaway? You want to treat your house like a coat you found at Sears? C’mon, Cap, gimme some credit.” Tony said, now actually appearing on the screen, his face smeared with engine oil and sweat. “Number two—”

Steve blinked. “Hang on, what do you mean, my house? You just said—”

“—I meant more the royal your, though I guess it’s only in your name, so yeah, your house—”

“Tony, what the hell are you talking about—”

“Steve,” Tony leaned in close to the screen, and tore off the welding goggles strapped to his forehead, leaving red circular welts behind. He raked a hand through his hair. “You and him, you’ve been waiting a long time to come home from the war.” He gestures expansively at the screen, as if he were there in the living room where Buck was sleeping on the couch, as lazy and lax as a cat in the sun. “Presto. You’re home now. Happy V-J Day, go sweep your sailor off his feet.” He smiled at the screen, small and sincere and rare. “I mean it. We’ll take it from here.”

And then he hung up.

“I don’t know — why,” Bucky said, absently flipping the pages of their book. “It ain’t — fun to listen. To.” He was glaring at Steve, or trying to, but it was hard for him to maintain any real irritation while Steve’s head was in his lap, his long legs stretched out onto the couch.

“I don’t see Sam around,” Steve told him airily. “I got used to a bit of pampering, Barnes, I dunno what to tell you—”
“I sound — stupid,” Bucky snapped. His hand stopped stroking through Steve’s hair. “Don’t joke.” His brows were pulled together, two dark flat slashes above his eyes. His lips pulled downward. “What if — it. Fuck.”

Steve waited for a while, giving Bucky a chance for the frustration to bleed off or to finish his thought, whichever came first. “You don’t have to read,” he told him quietly. He left the but unsaid, but Bucky gave him a baleful look anyway.

Reading aloud was one of his ongoing homework assignments from the speech therapist he teleconferenced twice a week, and he was downright dogged about attacking the tasks that made up his treatment plan. Mission-oriented, is how Sam had described it once, which had hurt to hear at the time. Seeing him make progress, though — seeing him almost happy — meant Steve had gotten over himself pretty quick.

“Sam said,” Bucky got out. His fingers were tapping at Steve’s skull. It was strange, how that pattern had gone from sinking rocks into Steve’s gut to making his eyes close, his lungs breathe easier, his heart slow. Hey, it’s me, Bucky was saying, even when he hadn’t known it.

“Said I — owed him. He’s gonna—” Bucky stalled out. Steve blinked up at him, watching as the muscles fluttered in his jaw.

Bucky pinched him when he saw him looking. Then, with his hands: collect.

Steve grinned. “Gonna invite him up for a poetry reading? We could probably find something really awful to make him listen to.”

Bucky rolled his eyes, then: sleep. over. “To our. House.” Then his cheeks went just the slightest bit pink, the same way they had when they’d been young men, and Bucky would ask Steve on dates, and hold his hand in fairy bars, and on occasion, late at night, sometimes drunk, sometimes under the covers, sticky and sweaty, whisper what if, Steve, what if into his good ear.
One night, it was Steve who woke up yelling, only he wasn’t yelling so much as whimpering, deep in his throat, his jaw clenching so tight it ached, and he was covered in sweat, freezing, and his muscles shaking and twitching like he’d been running, crawling, jumping, and climbing all at once, in four different directions.

A warm hand on his chest. He clutched at it, pulling the body it belonged to closer to him, and he was so fucking cold, and it took a second for him to realize Bucky was talking to him.

“Easy,” Bucky was saying, right into Steve’s ear, a little thickly, like he’d been jolted out of sleep too. His hand rubbed smooth patterns on Steve’s front. “Okay — now.” The words were coming with more effort than usual — more evidence he’d really been asleep. Christ.

Steve reached up his own body to his hair, clawing his fingers through it and grimacing at the sweat. Already the dream was fading, it had been something — awful, a sucking horror deep inside his gut, the context gone but the adrenaline still skittering through his body. “Bucky,” he whispered, his voice hoarse, and Bucky pressed up closer to him, his skin warm where Steve’s was cool and damp.

“Scared,” Bucky murmured in his ear, and Steve focused on the feel of his hand. “You’re okay.”

“M’okay,” Steve managed, turning into Bucky and pressing his face in the hollow of his throat. They didn’t share a bed, they hadn’t in the city and they hadn’t yet here. They hadn’t even really talked about it — Bucky was still healing, and Steve would wait for him to one day hold out his hand — but it felt good to cling to him, to stick up against him, even through the quavering comedown after waking from a nightmare.

“Shower,” Bucky said, slurring the sh so it came out sower. “Up.” His hand slid to Steve’s side, to his ribs, and pulled, and Steve let him drag him off the side of the low bed frame, and lever him to his shaky legs, and lead him to the bathroom. He sat Steve down on the closed toilet seat.

Steve let his eyes fall mostly closed, even though Bucky left the bathroom mostly dark, illuminated only by the ambient light of one of the low lamps in the hallway. Through his eyelashes, Steve could see the light bouncing off the entire exposed length of Bucky’s arm, naked as he was from the waist up.

“M’okay,” Steve said again, even as Bucky reached inside the shower and fiddled with the tap, soon
filling the room with the sound of the spray. “You heard me?” He opened one eye more fully to look at Bucky. He’d had bad dreams as a kid, sometimes, and even as a young man — yawning dark things that evaporated once he woke — and Bucky had always been a light sleeper.

_Not asleep_, Bucky replied with his hands, in an elegant swoop of pale skin and the glimmer of metal. It was the same old lie he’d always told when Steve woke him up. He cleared his throat. “Get in, Steven,” he commanded, in a tone of mock long-suffering. His habitual exchange of the _t_ sound for a _d_ seemed on purpose this time. “Ain’t got — all day.”

The corner of Steve’s mouth quirked up, and the memory lit something warm in his stomach, tempering the chill of the dream. He hauled himself to his feet, and stripped off the singlet he’d worn to bed. His hands hesitated, just for a second, at the waistband of his briefs.

“Already — _seen,_” Bucky began, stilted, as Steve stripped down, “What you got.”

Steve kicked his briefs away and stood up, stepping forward into the cloud of steam and towards Bucky. “You remember that?”

“You aren’t,” Bucky said, quietly, and struggled for a second. “_Subtle._” He pulled back the curtain, an obvious command, and Steve moved forward obediently and stepped inside.

The water was scorching hot, burning away the edges of his dream. He exhaled, long and shuddery, into the humid air and leaned to the side, resting his weight against the chilled tiles that hadn’t yet had a chance to warm up.

A second later, he heard Buck follow him inside, and a moment after that, settle his mismatched hands on his hips, the quality of the air different, now that Bucky was in there with him, smaller, closer, and then Steve felt the press of a forehead in the valley between his shoulder blades.

“I remember you — _small,_” Bucky confessed. “But this is — okay?”

He didn’t sound nervous, not really. His face was so close to the skin of his back that Steve could feel the light brush of his mouth as he formed the words. Steve swallowed, his focus narrowing to the feel of Buck’s hands on him, the span of them, the press of his thumbs to the dimples of his lower back. “Course it’s okay,” he said back, keeping his voice low. “You don’t gotta ask.”
Bucky lightly poked his right side, a corrective warning. “Bodily. Autonomy—” it came out slurred, but intelligible, —is, important. Steve.”

Steve snorted, fondness swelling in his chest. He reached down and pinched him back, or tried to — his fingernails scraped over the metal of Bucky’s arm instead.

Buck huffed out a small laugh, and then the grip of his hands on Steve’s hips went tighter. “Took care of me,” he said. Steve could feel his breath in little heated puffs against his back. “In the — shower.” This time, he got the sh sound right.

Steve closed his eyes, fixing his attention on the water beating against his chest, and the warm, live heat of Bucky behind him. He didn’t want to think of that day, of Bucky’s slack, quivering body, his blank stare. “What do you remember about that?”

It was a fair question. Those early days were pretty fuzzy for him. At best, Bucky’s memories acted like snapshots, usually indistinct and muddled thanks to the drug withdrawal and brain injury. They didn’t talk about it often anymore. Bucky still found it almost impossible to articulate what it had felt like, except like everything was all at once.

Steve still wasn’t sure he understood.

“Smell,” Bucky replied after a moment, and rubbed his nose into Steve’s back. “Bummed I — missed out. On a—” he cut himself off, and peeled his left hand from Steve’s hip to point at the loofah hanging from a hook.

“Sponge bath,” Steve finished for him, grinning despite himself. The nightmare felt very far away. “I was very professional.”

“Got all wet.”

“Yeah.”

“I was,” Bucky started, and then released Steve’s hips to shiver his hands over Steve’s chest and neck in staggered claws, using Steve’s body to say: scared.
Steve caught his hands and pressed them to his chest. He’d **known**, of course, that Bucky’d been afraid, anxious, uncertain — existing in a state of perpetual fear and unable to express it aside from **please** and **sorry**. Steve said that now, using one of Bucky’s hands to circle his own chest. **Sorry.** It’d never be enough, but it also wasn’t about Steve. He understood that now.

Behind him, Bucky shivered. “Not,” he said, “**Now.**” He kissed the back of Steve’s neck, a delicate thing that traveled down to Steve’s toes, and then said, “It’s all—” he paused, and his hands finished: **different.**

It was true. They were in uncharted territory, and not just because of what Bucky’d been through, and the hill he had to climb every day, the holes he was gradually filling in. They’d never been able to imagine a life like this, where they didn’t worry for money, where they didn’t have a war to fight, where they didn’t owe anybody anything — not their bodies, or labor, or **hiding.**

Steve wasn’t used to it yet. He signed back: **good different?**

Bucky pinched his belly, then laughed when Steve’s body reacted a little differently than he probably meant it to. “Dope,” he said. “You got — a lot of bad. **Sleeps.**” Dreams, he meant. Sometimes it took him time to excavate the words he was looking for, and if he was feeling impatient he’d just go for the next best option. It irritated **him,** but not Steve. He’d spent most of the 1930s discovering new ways Bucky Barnes could charm him, and the 21st century, as it turned out, was no different.

“**You or me?**” Steve asked him after a moment.

Bucky dug his chin into the meat of Steve’s back so suddenly and viciously that Steve actually yelped. “Hey!”

Bucky huffed a small laugh. “**You.**”

“I’m okay,” Steve replied, and watched as Bucky’s hand snaked forward to grab the scrubber. He heard the pop of a cap, and let himself be nudged forward into the water. “You don’t have to…”

Bucky didn’t reply, and goosebumps flared across Steve’s whole body he felt him start working at his back with the bodywash. He let his eyes fall closed. Just the two of them, in the dark shower, Bucky’s hands purposefully moving to the small of his back, to his sides, his shoulders, his arms, his ass. The aroma of the body wash — something fresh and spicy — thickened in the humid air.
A hand on his shoulder spun him so they faced each other. He opened his eyes, then, just in time to see Buck biting at his lip in concentration, pinning him in place with one hand on Steve’s shoulder and the other rubbing circles into his chest. Steve’s dick was feeling heavy and thick. He couldn’t help it, not with Buck’s hands on him and the heat of the shower bleeding away the awfulness of the dream.

Bucky was soft, though, when Steve glanced down. The drugs in his system were long gone, of course, but they hadn’t done more than kiss — though they’d been doing that a lot. Lately Buck had taken to catching him by the arm when he didn’t expect it and spinning him back against his body, settling his mouth on him like Steve was still a buck-oh-five on a good day, like he was his same old fella, like nothing had changed. A couple of weeks before, Bucky hadn’t been kissing him like that, spun-up and wanting even if it didn’t go anywhere else. Steve figured he could wait to see what the next couple of weeks would bring. They hadn’t talked about it, not really, but then again, they never had.

After a while, Bucky leaned in and reached past him to put the scrubber back, his chest pressing wetly against Steve’s just for a second, his thigh sliding alongside Steve’s dick. When he pulled back, suds had transferred from Steve’s chest to his own. Steve watched them trail down the ridges and swells of lean muscle. Bucky was still too lean, having dropped underweight for months when they’d been trying to figure out his food issues, but he was making progress. He was healthy.

Bucky caught him looking, of course. Even before he’d become a sharpshooter he’d never missed a thing. He hooked a thumb on Steve’s chin, and lifted him up to look him in the eye, and then dropped his own gaze to where Steve was hard. Then he looked back up again, blinking through eyelashes that had caught condensation from the air, and there was a lilt to his mouth that was new and old at the same time — the same particular curve of his smile that always been his shorthand for hey, how about it, Rogers?

Steve breathed in deeply, his body flushing. He’d always been a tinderbox for Bucky’s lit match. The nightmare was forgotten, and Bucky settled his hand back on Steve’s side, pressing hard enough with his fingertips that they caught on skin as he dragged them down. His thumb came to rest right in the hollow of Steve’s hip, and he grinned when Steve’s body strained forward. Bucky was still soft, but maybe—

“Can I,” Steve asked, his voice low and hungry, reaching forward to touch Bucky’s jaw lightly with his fingers, and Bucky shuddered, like the naked skin there was somehow still new and tender, like the intimacy was unbearable.

Steve took his face in both hands. He held him for a moment, just looking. Then, slowly, he traced the strong line of his jaw, and tested the give of his cheek, the grab and rasp of his stubble, this face he loved. He swept his thumb along his nose, then let it rest right at the corner of his lips.
Bucky’s eyes went wide and his bottom lip dropped open, soft where all the planes of his face were sharp, and he exhaled slowly. His breath landed harder, shocked Steve more, than the water from the shower head.

Steve’s own body felt strangely distant, compared to this. He swallowed and stepped closer. Buck’s familiar unsteady breathing guided him as he tilted his hips, searching until they slid together and he found him growing hard up against Steve’s belly.

Buck’s nostrils went wide. He angled his mouth and scraped his teeth over the meat of Steve’s thumb, surging forward to crowd Steve’s body with his. He wrapped one hand around the small of Steve’s back and trapped Steve’s fingers against his own face with the other, drawing them together until there was no room even for the water to get between them.

The steam and heat didn’t stop Steve’s whole body from shivering. Bucky opened his mouth and dragged his mouth along the length of Steve’s fingers, pulling two inside, licking and sucking at them, giving him the playful look that had always lit Steve up, dizzy and warm.

It was different in the water — different with his long wet hair plastered to his forehead and neck, different with him working Steve’s fingers in his mouth, but he was the same. He was as hard as Steve was, now, that hot familiar press against his hip.

“Buck,” Steve got out, shaky, his eyes roving all over him, taking in the bunched up muscles of his chest and the plink-plink of the water hitting his left shoulder and the long lean lines of him. “Lemme — I wanna — can I?”

“I’m — gonna,” Bucky interrupted, pulling Steve’s fingers from his mouth and leaning forward to kiss him, hard and wet, while he reached around and turned off the water. He grinned at Steve, then. “Been waiting,” he said, with a put-upon shake of his head, and then pulled Steve out of the shower stall.

He dried himself off with a towel, just barely, and then took his time with Steve. It was graceful, how he moved, and efficient, even when he flicked his head back to get his hair out of his face, or reached down with the metal hand to balance himself as he ran the towel over Steve’s legs. Crouched down and compacted, he looked powerful.

He glanced up then. There was something playful in his eyes when he rested his hands on Steve’s knees and pressed his face up against Steve’s thigh, dragging his mouth along the soft skin there.
“You know,” he started, and Steve could tell he was attempting to sound conversational, only of course his words were so hard-won they could never seem casual. “I got — a condition,” he finished.

“I already know about your brain damage,” Steve replied automatically. It came out breathless. He smiled at Bucky. It was hard to concentrate.

Bucky snorted. “Sass,” he said, and bit at the inside of Steve’s thigh, his face coming in real close to the part Steve wanted him to pay attention to. “I,” he started, and stalled out. His hands picked up the thread: missed you. “Even when,” he got out, and then his expression went a little wicked. “Brain damage.”

Laughter bubbled out of Steve’s chest, rising up from the warm flood in his chest that had nothing to do with the heat of the bathroom. “C’mere, you asshole,” he said, holding out his hand and pulling Bucky back to his feet even though he didn’t need the help. They kissed, anticipation curling in Steve’s belly, both of them hard, and then Bucky’s hand closed around his wrist. In a second, he spun him around and pulled him from the bathroom, leading them not to Steve’s room but to his.

He set Steve down on his own bed and stayed standing, leaning over him to kiss him again. His hands: stay. Then he pushed him hard in the chest, and kept pushing until Steve’s back hit the uneven folds of his rumpled bedclothes.

Bucky knelt at the end of the bed between Steve’s spread legs. He wrapped both hands around Steve’s calves and kneaded at them. “I was — saying. I got — an oral fixation,” he got out, his voice hoarse and uneven, and then he grinned at Steve, his eyes crinkled in the corners. He bit down on his own lip, rolling at it the same way he liked to with Steve’s.

The joke came out slurred, but even if Steve hadn’t been pretty practiced at parsing him at his most tired or emotional, he’d have figured it out when Bucky bent over Steve, lowered his mouth, kissed up his thighs, and licked at him, like a test. Then he sucked him down.

Steve made an embarrassing shocked sound and tried hard not to immediately press forward into Bucky’s mouth, restraining himself to panting and biting back the noises his body was trying to get out. He flexed his legs and shivered when Bucky hummed, telling him in the same way he always had how much he liked doing Steve with his mouth. Steve wanted to look but it was almost too much.

It was too much, he was gonna—
“Buck,” he said urgently, sounding strangled, one hand clutching uselessly at the air, the other smoothing along his scalp. Bucky was working at him differently than he used to, more meandering and wet, tasting at him instead of drawing it out determined and hard, like he was playing with his mouth and Steve at the same time.

When Bucky looked up next, eyes bright at the corners from the work of it, he winked. Steve had to drop down to the bed, his chest heaving.

Bucky finally quit exploring and started the relentless rhythm that used to make Steve cover his own face and bite at pillows, to keep from getting too loud. Steve tried to focus, tried to take it all in, but then Buck’s metal fingers slipped up Steve’s stomach, poking at the jumping muscles and trailing through his sweat, and Steve couldn’t help but groan as the world narrowed down just to him.

Buck had always fidgeted with him when he did this. Steve used to snipe at him, what, I ain’t got enough for you?, and then grab back.

Steve had forgotten that. His muscles where Bucky was grabbing at him quivered, and he reached forward to catch Bucky’s jaw again, run his fingers over the muscles and tendons of his throat, the stretch of his mouth, and himself moving wet between his lips, in time with the flaring pulse of bright hot pleasure in his belly.

Steve couldn’t help driving forward, then. He’d never been disciplined about this, he couldn’t help it, not when Bucky was looking at him—

He sucked hard, then, and sped up, and Steve cried out, pushing back the clinging wet hair and holding his gaze and it was so good, and those metal fingers on his belly, making a fist, yes — yes — yes, and grunts getting trapped in Bucky’s throat as he worked — Steve could feel the vibrations of them with the fingers on his cheek, his throat —

Bucky was grinding his own body against the bed. He signed Steve one-handed, uncoordinated and rushed, and Steve was skimming the edge, dimly hearing himself pant out ah, ah, ah in rhythmic gasps, and Bucky’s hand, another half-sign that took Steve a second to decode, a $Y$ he smacked gently against Steve’s belly, again and again, now — now — now —

Pleasure hit. Steve whole body flexed, his fingers clutching at Bucky’s face — as he shook and pulsed into Buck’s mouth, he wasn’t easing off, Christ—oh—oh—
Bucky crawled up him as he shook, sweating and urgent and warm, lips and teeth catching on Steve’s neck — his own hand working hard and fast at himself in the hot crawlspace between their bodies. Steve’s muscles felt weak and overcharged at the same time as he got both hands around his ass and hauled him closer, “Yeah, Buck, c’mon” — and then Buck was gasping out half-finished sounds into his ear and arching, and spilling warm and wet between them with a choked off cry.

Bucky came down heavy on top of him. They stayed close like that, hearts thudding hard, sticky and sweaty and probably needing another shower, as they caught their breath. It got chilly quick, and it took Steve a couple of tries to grab one of Bucky’s blankets and drag it up over their heads.

Everything felt muted and soft. Bucky turned into Steve, mouthing at his neck in the same way he did his pens and plastic spoons and knuckles. Steve sighed at the feel of it, and drew a hand down Bucky’s back.

“You good?” It came out quiet and stifled, under the blanket.

Bucky huffed. “You’re the — one. With the bad — dream.” He rubbed his face into Steve’s chest. “Good — nightmare cure?”

Steve snorted. “Yeah, that was — hell, Buck. And you — it was…?”

Buck took a breath like he was going to try answering, but stopped. Then the hand kneading at Steve’s shoulder skipped off his skin to hover in the air between them.

Steve blinked at it. A flat hand for neutral, a see-saw back and forth, and he could feel Bucky’s face curving into a smile where it was pressed against his neck. His back started shaking, unmistakable, and Steve peeled him off and rolled them to their sides, blanket falling loose, and caught him in a silent laugh. Bucky’s face was flushed and damp, his mouth messy and pink, and he was grinning up at him.

“So-so, he was saying with his hand, so-so, and Steve laughed too and leaned forward to bite meanly at his nipple a little. Buck busted up for real, then, loud and hoarse in the still quiet of his bedroom, and the bite turned into a kiss, soft and sweet against his chest — and Bucky pinched his in return.

After a moment Bucky rolled them again until he lay curved up against Steve’s back. He drew him up close, got his mouth in his ear, and whispered — slurring because he was tired, maybe, and not
because of the other stuff: “Here from — now on, ‘kay?”

Steve shuddered. He smoothed his hand over Steve’s chest, the long length of Bucky’s body naked and present, right there, his voice in Steve’s ear, hoarse, “Right here,” he said, and then his hands: for time — for time — for time, and Steve said back, yes, and kissed him, for time, and they exhaled together, and I love you, and then: “Okay,” Buck added, and Steve could hear the smile, “I get it. Now — go. To sleep, Rogers, Christ.” And then, his hands: I love you too, and they went to sleep.

//end

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone for reading, following, commenting, and leaving kudos on this fic. <3

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