White Wolf

by fancyh

Summary

Der weiße Wolf, they call him. The White Wolf. It's said he runs at Captain America's heels, and his fur is as white as the snow that blankets the earth, his mouth red with the blood of German soldiers, and his eyes blue as the deepest lake.

But it's a ghost story, nothing more.

Зимний солдат, they call him. The Winter Soldier. It's said he comes in the night, and his metal arm gleams with the red star of Russia, his face is masked with a muzzle of darkness, and his eyes are black holes filled with death.

But it's a ghost story, nothing more.

They do not say he has a name. They do not say he is even human. But here is the truth: He has a name. It is whispered, shouted, written in blood and tears and graphite by slender hands. It is forgotten and yet never so. Here is another truth: He is human. He bleeds and cries and loves and oh god, is he human. Even when he is not, he is. That is the tragedy, in the end. And here is the only truth that matters, the one written on two halves of the same soul with blood and grief and tragedy: He is Steve's, and Steve is his, and they will burn the world down to keep each other safe.
Chapter 1

I awoke as a tinder wolf
growling
a cut shawl man
dreaming of scarf’s
that left the world
drifting on infinite
dependency

I know I have
to wash
my human on
there are cigarettes
to be sung

could I be
a long shank man
a conqueror
or magician

No I am tinder wolf
howling,
hunting more
tobacco

Walking silent
forever
an assassin

Wolf by Bruce Ruston

His blood burns with fire, arms straining against the restraints and teeth clenched over a scream. The doctor - Zola, beady eyes in a round face, glasses, a twisted smile - watches him dispassionately, jotting down notes on a clipboard. Bucky feels like he's being ripped apart, every cell in his body screaming in exquisite agony from whatever the doctor had injected him with, and he thinks this is it, this is how I die. His last conscious thought is Steve, I'm so sorry before blackness swallows him up at last.

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He opens his eyes to find he is still strapped down in the godforsaken lab, body aching and mind hazy. Some distant part of him wonders what had happened and why he isn't dead. How long has it been? He has lost count of the time he's spent strapped down to the table, being poked and prodded
and tortured. It could have been days or weeks for all he knows. Strangely, he doesn't care. This is the end, he knows. He isn't getting off this table.

A noise sounds, loud and abrasive, and he flinches, wishing he had his hands free so he could cover them. A familiar form leans over him, a look of pride and twisted excitement on his face.

"Sergeant Barnes," he says in a thick accent, voice ringing in Bucky's ears. "You are awake. How do you feel?"

Bucky ignores him, turning his gaze to the ceiling. "James Barnes, Sergeant, 32557038," he intones. He studies the specks on the ceiling, seemingly clearer than before.

Zola sighs. "Very well. We shall do this - how do they say - the hard way, yes?"

Bucky swallows, steeling himself. Zola's questions meld into a stream of nonsensical words, his voice making Bucky's head pound and his hands drawing groans of pain from Bucky's lips as time blurs around them. He repeats his mantra, over and over and over until the world seems to become distant and sounds and sensations fade away into blissful nothingness.

"James Barnes, Sergeant, 32557038, James Barnes, Sergeant, 32557038, James Barnes, Sergeant, 32557038, James Barnes, Sergeant, 32557038.."

"Bucky," a new voice breathes. He opens his eyes. "Oh my god."

Hands rip away the straps. Someone leans over him as he slowly comes back to awareness. The face is familiar. "Is tha-"

"It's me. It's Steve," the figure says, face the same but different; and everything wrong but it's Steve, he can smell him-

"Steve," Bucky slurs, his lips curving up.

"Come on." Strong hands pull him up - and that is wrong Steve isn't strong - and a warm palm claps the side of his face and Steve's face, Steve's expression is the same; his scent is the same but different and he says, "I thought you were dead," and his voice is Steve and it is Steve but not.

Bucky looks him up and down, convinced he is dreaming and numb with muted horror. "I thought you were smaller."

An explosion sounds, somewhere far away. "Come on," big-Steve says, and he slings Bucky's arm around him and grips his waist as he helps Bucky stumble away from the lab. More explosions rock the air, the scent of gunpowder and metal and fire stinging Bucky's nose.

"What happened to you?" Bucky asks, reality sharpening as his head clears.

"I joined the Army," Steve replies with a humorous lilt, and it is so Steve it hurts.

Strength is starting to come back to Bucky's limbs and he pushes Steve away to stumble on his own. A distant part of him whispers that he shouldn't be able to walk right now, shouldn't feel better than he has in weeks. "Did it hurt?" he asks, trying not to think of the red liquid that Zola had injected him with that made his blood boil and bones shift-

"Is it permanent?"

"So far," Steve quips. The goddamned punk.

They reach a railing above the factory. It explodes just as they reach it, and they both fall back to hurry along the walkway towards where it stretches over the facility and to freedom. They've reached the bridge spanning the divide when a voice calls out.

"Captain America! How exciting!" Bucky thinks Captain America? Steve? What the hell? but then his gaze lands on Zola behind the man and he feels rage and fear pulse beneath his breastbone. Zola stares back, expression transfixed. "I am a great fan of your films," the other man continues - an officer judging by his uniform. He starts walking across the bridge and Steve strides to meet him, drawing away from Bucky. "So, Dr. Erskine managed it after all. Not exactly an improvement but still, impressive."

Steve throws a punch, hitting the man square in the face just as Bucky thinks Steve, you dumb punk. "You've got no idea," Steve says fiercely. The man staggers back, putting a hand to his face. Red rims his eye unnaturally.

"Haven't I?" he snarls, before throwing a punch at Steve's shield and denting the metal. Steve goes to draw a gun but he knocks it out of his hands, sending Steve sprawling as Bucky's heart jumps into his throat. Bucky wants to help him but he can't get his limbs to move. He clings to the railing weakly, head buzzing. Steve kicks out and strikes the man in the chest, throwing him back; Zola grabs a lever and suddenly the walkway is splitting in two, dragging Steve and the officer away as explosions blossom below them.

"No matter what lies Erskine told you, you see I was his greatest success," the officer says. He lifts a hand to his jaw and grips, pulling away his skin to reveal a red skull-like face underneath that strikes horror into Bucky's core.

"You don't have one of those, do you?" he asks Steve lowly, brain too stunned to comprehend what is happening. He wonders again if he is dreaming.

"You are deluded, Captain," the red-skulled man says. "You pretend to be a simple soldier-" he tosses his skin mask into the flames "-but in reality you are just afraid to admit that we have left humanity behind!" He turns, walking towards the elevator. "Unlike you, I embrace it proudly, without fear!" Zola goes ahead of him into the elevator, his beady gaze retreating just out of sight and leaving Bucky's skin crawling.

"Then how come you're running?" Steve questions.

The man doesn't reply, and the elevator doors close smoothly, leaving Steve and Bucky alone. More explosions rock them from below, sending them staggering back, and Steve glances around before patting Bucky's arm and hurrying towards the stairs.

"Come on! Let's go. Up!"

Bucky lurches after him blindly, climbing up the stairs until they reach another railing where a narrow beam stretches across the space. Fire spits below, a yawning hellmouth that licks at their heels and fills their noses with the smell of ash and smoke.

"Let's go, one at a time," Steve says, voice full of tightly controlled panic. He helps Bucky over the railing and onto the beam, and Bucky begins the terrifying journey across. The tiny voice in his mind whispers again as he balances perfectly on the narrow surface, the beam shifting and
breaking under his feet. He has almost reached the end when it gives out completely. Running along the beam he throws himself forwards, clinging to the railing on the other side. He pulls himself over, looking down in horror as he realizes Steve's escape route is gone. He looks up helplessly.

"There's gotta be a rope or something!" he yells across the gap.

"Just go! Get outta here!" Steve waves a hand.

Bucky clutches the railing, fire burning in his chest. "NO! Not without you!"

Steve looks around helplessly before turning to the bent railing and gripping it, bending it wider. He steps backwards as far as he can go as Bucky watches in horror. Steve pauses before taking running steps forwards, and launches himself across the gap.

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There is fire, and explosions, and blue beams of light that vaporize enemy soldiers. The sights and sounds and smells overwhelm Bucky and he staggers blindly after Steve, head fuzzy and skin crawling oddly. Finally, they are out of the facility and running towards the woods, where men from Bucky's unit are grouped around a tank and truck. He sees Monty, Morita, Dum Dum, Gabe, and Dernier directing the men and feels a stab of relief that they are okay. He hurries towards them after Steve. At their arrival, the men spin around and point their guns at them before relaxing.

"Barnes!" Dum Dum shouts. "Damn is it good to see you." The rest of them look him up and down, faces splitting into wide smiles.

Bucky manages a grin. "Likewise."

"Alright, we need to get moving," Steve says seriously. "Get the most seriously injured into the truck and the rest will have to manage. We'll take the lead, the facility should be destroyed but these woods will be crawling with Hydra."

Dum Dum snaps him a salute. "Copy that, Cap." He turns and the others turn with him, beginning to spread out and relay the orders. Steve turns to Bucky, taking a moment to assess him.

"You okay?" he asks.

Bucky nods vaguely. "Fine."

Steve gives him a worried look before springing back into action, darting forward to help carry the wounded over to the truck. Bucky follows, lending a hand where he can but feeling distant and drained. In a matter of minutes they are loaded up and ready to move, Bucky taking his place at the front with Steve. They march forwards down the road, Bucky holding a gun someone had given him, the group of guys from his unit right behind him. Exhaustion dogs at his heels but he ignores it, making his mind blank of anything except putting one foot in front of the other. He doesn't know how long they march, but eventually word trickles up that men are lagging and Steve calls a halt, soldiers spreading out to secure the area.

Once they're secure, a few of the better-off ones, including Steve, take watch as the rest sprawl ungracefully against trees, too tired to care about appearances. Bucky slumps to the ground next to his small group of guys from the cells, all of them eying him with badly disguised concern.

"You alright, Barnes?" Gabe asks. "We thought for sure you were gone. No one comes back from the isolation ward." Bucky appreciates his bluntness, that soldiers don't tiptoe their way around
things.

He shrugs. "Lucky Steve got me when he did."

"You sound like you know him," Gabe says.

Bucky nods. "Grew up together. He was tiny then, though. No idea what the hell happened to make him into Captain America." He doesn't have the energy to consider those implications just yet.

Dum Dum snorts. "Didn't seem to have any idea what he was doing. Just said he punched Hitler over 200 times and then ran off to look for you."

Bucky rolls his eyes. "Sounds like Steve," he mutters.

As if summoned, Steve comes over, sinking down next to Bucky and pressing their shoulders together. His jacket is singed and torn, dirt smudging his face. Bucky doubts he looks better, his face scraped and eyes sunken, hair stringy with sweat.

"So, I don't think we've been properly introduced," Dum Dum says to Steve wryly. "Sergeant Timothy Dugan, but everyone calls me 'Dum Dum."

"Steve Rogers. Pleasure to meet you." He turns his gaze to the others.

"Private Gabe Jones."

"Private Jim Morita."

"Lietenant James Montgomery Falsworth, at your service. My friends call me 'Monty."

"Jacques Dernier. Résistance française."

"French resistance," Gabe clarifies.

"Pleasure to meet all of you," Steve says diplomatically, and Bucky is thrown by his easy self-assurance. "That was some good work back there."

Dum Dum scoffs. "You ain't seen nothing yet. So, Barnes says you guys grew up together?"

Steve smiles. "Yeah. He pulled me outta a lot of scrapes as a kid. Known each other since we were six years old."

Morita whistles. "That's a long time."

"Tell me about it," Bucky grumbles, and they laugh.

"So how do you guys know Bucky?" Steve questions. "Were you all in the same unit?"

Dum Dum shakes his head. "Nah. Me, Gabe, and him were all in the same unit, but Morita and Monty and Frenchie were just in the same cell as us. Morita's Niesi Squadron, Monty is British Armed Forces, and Frenchie is French Resistance. Got to know each other real well over the past few weeks stuck in that hellhole."

Steve nods, and Bucky watches the conversation absently. His head feels like it's stuffed with cotton wool, skin still crawling uncomfortably. It feels too tight, like it's stretched over his bones, and it makes Bucky think of the skull-faced man. There's pressure behind his eyes and his teeth ache with a dull pulsing throb, a feeling like something is stuck in his throat making him swallow
convulsively. He leans the back of his head against the tree, closing his eyes.

"You sure you're alright?" Gabe's voice cuts through his thoughts. "Last time we saw you you were sicker than hell."

Bucky opens his eyes to see Steve turn to him worriedly. "Sick?"

"Pneumonia," Dum Dum says. "Tried to keep it under wraps but eventually they found out and took him away. You know, I'm gettin' the feeling that the isolation ward wasn't what they said it was. Word was they did experiments on people there." He looks at Bucky significantly, a silent question on his face.

Bucky shrugs. "Yeah."

Bucky sees all the men turn towards him, identical expressions of wariness and alarm on their faces.

"How long?" Steve asks.

Bucky fiddles with a tear in his pants. "I don't know. A few days, I think." He glances up at the men questioningly.

"It's uh, it's been a week," Morita says.

"Oh," Bucky says. An uncomfortable silence falls.

"But you're not-you're not sick anymore?" Steve questions hesitantly.

Bucky shrugs. "Guess not."

He sees the men exchange glances with each other, and Steve watches him worriedly.

Finally Steve clears his throat after the silence has dragged on for a few minutes. "We should get moving," he says.

The men clamber to their feet, others nearby seeing them and copying their motions. Soon the whole group is ready to go, all of them tired and hungry and thirsty but determined to keep going. They start the long procession again, Bucky's mind going numb again as he marches forward endlessly.

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They are greeted by cheers and applause as they march into camp days later, ragged and exhausted but still standing. Steve turns his head to look at Bucky and Bucky glances back; a moment passes between them and then Steve gives his arm a pat, a small smile quirking his lips. They finally come to a stop in front of a stern man in uniform and Steve snaps a salute.

"Some of these men need medical attention." He pauses. "I'd like to surrender myself for disciplinary action, sir."

The man's face stays impassive, but a small glint of pride shines in his eyes. "That won't be necessary."

Steve nods slightly. "Thank you sir."

The man turns away and a beautiful brunette woman steps forward, edging into Steve's space as
her eyes flick over him.

"You're late," she remarks in a crisp British accent, red lipstick forming the words.

Steve pulls out a crushed transponder from his belt. "Couldn't call my ride," he quips, and jealousy curls in Bucky's gut.

"Hey!" he yells. "Let's hear it for Captain America!

Cheers go up, everyone turning to Steve as they applaud. Steve glances at him and Bucky raises his eyebrows with a small shrug. But the woman is still staring at Steve, and Bucky feels suddenly, decidedly out of place in this world where Steve doesn't need him anymore; hasn't for a while apparently.

Eventually the men filter off to tents and medical and showers, and Steve turns to him with that same worried expression. Bucky hates it, hates being on the other side of that expression. He was the one who always worried about Steve, he was the one who took care of him. He knows it's unfair, but he feels one thread away from snapping. His anger is the only thing keeping him going.

"You should go to medical," Steve says.

"I'm fine," Bucky replies. A voice whispers that this is a lie. Another wonders what they will find if they look at him too closely.

Steve looks pained. "Buck, you were just experimented on-"

"I said I'm fine," Bucky bites out harshly. "I just want a goddamned shower and some food."

Steve looks like he wants to protest, but he doesn't say anything, just sighs. "Alright Buck."

Relief floods Bucky at his acquiescence, and he realizes just how terrified he had been of going to medical. "Come on," he says, squeezing Steve's shoulder, "food, then shower. I swear to god I'd eat one a' old man Simmon's meat pies right now, that's how hungry I am."

Steve chuckles. "Those things were terrible." Just like that, the tension is broken.

They get their rations from mess and find a spot to eat them, the smells of food making Bucky's mouth water and stomach clench. He wolfs down the food, uncaring of manners, and when he finishes he's not even close to full.

Steve watches him as he chews his own rations at a more moderate pace. "When was the last time you ate?" he questions.

Bucky shrugs. "Dunno."

Steve's face twists, and he hesitates. "You know, you really should go-"

"No." Bucky cuts him off. He is not going to medical.

Steve looks frustrated. "Come on, Bucky-"

"No."

"You're always tellin' me to take care of myself, why can't you?"

"Leave it, Rogers," Bucky says flatly, but Steve is like a dog with a bone, and Bucky knows that
this will not end well.

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Showered and fed, and with his uniform pressed neatly, Bucky feels more human than he has in weeks. He sits at the bar, nursing his fourth drink. His head is still clear, not even a hint of intoxication, and the whispering voice grows louder. Steve is off recruiting the guys from his cell for the elite team he's putting together to go after Hydra. Bucky will join them, he knows that. Steve had told him everything that had happened while he'd been gone, from volunteering to let scientists experiment on him to becoming a dancing monkey for the war effort. It puts a sour taste in Bucky's mouth, and he promises himself never to leave Steve alone again. God knows what new stupidity he would throw himself into.

They had even tried to give Steve a medal of honor for his rescue of the men at Azzano, but Steve had blown off the ceremony in typical Steve fashion and embarrassed a United States Senator in front of a room full of reporters. Bucky agrees with Colonel Phillips - they should give him a medal just for that. If it weren't for Steve he'd be out of here so fast their heads would spin. He would take his honorable discharge and go home to his family the way he'd promised Becca, would forget all about war and mad scientists and the crawling feeling that hasn't left since Steve pulled him off that table in Zola's lab. He'd forget about the fact that four glasses of whisky don't touch him at all, and that he feels stronger than he ever has even half-starved and tortured.

But Steve is here, and he is Bucky's home. So he will follow him, even though a voice says that if he does, he may never come back from this war. That's alright, he thinks. As long as Steve is safe.

He smells him coming, even over the alcohol and cigarettes in the air and the crowded bar. There's a unique, healthy smell about him that Bucky can't pinpoint, but deep down there's still a faint undertone of Steve that reminds him of Brooklyn - sweat and soap and a hint of graphite. He hears his footsteps over the sounds of piano and singing, sure and steady now, and for a moment thinks he can even hear his heartbeat.

"See? I told you, they're all idiots," he drawls, as Steve slides onto the stool next to him. He takes another sip of whisky.

"How about you?" Steve asks. "Ready to follow 'Captain America' into the jaws of death?" he says it wryly, but there's a real question there. Bucky heard the way he said Captain America, like it's a curse.

"Hell no," Bucky replies. "That little guy from Brooklyn who was too dumb not to run away from a fight." He turns to look at Steve. "I'm following him." He takes another drink as Steve signals the bartender, and leans in, Steve's scent heady and intoxicating the way his whisky isn't. "But you're keeping the outfit, right?" he teases lowly.

Steve sighs, eyes flicking to him in response before looking back at the poster still stuck to the wall, 'tour canceled' pasted across the front. "You know what, it's kinda growin' on me."

Suddenly the singing falters as heeled footsteps echo across the floor, and Steve and Bucky turn to look in unison as Agent Carter walks towards them. They get up as she approaches, standing in the doorway.

"Captain."

"Agent Carter."
She walks forward, stopping in front of Steve and throwing a brief glance in Bucky's direction. "Ma'am," he says with a nod and a tight smile.

She ignores him, turning back to Steve. "Howard has some equipment for you to try. Want in?"

"Sounds good," Steve replies.

Agent Carter turns to look over the bar, where the guys are singing loudly and drinking. "I see your top squad is prepping for duty," she says wryly, and Bucky grins slightly, though it's forced.

"You don't like music?" he asks.

Agent Carter's gaze is sultry as she looks at Steve. "I do, actually. I might, even, when this is all over, go dancing."

Bucky chuckles. "Then what are we waiting for?"

Agent Carter looks softly at Steve. "The right partner." They stare at each other for a moment, tension between them. "0800," Agent Carter says, and then she is turning to leave.

"Yes ma'am, I'll be there," Steve calls after her.

Bucky shakes his head. "So, Agent Carter?" he says, and it comes out bitter.

Steve looks stricken. "No, it's not like that, Bucky-"

Bucky waves a hand. "It's alright. I understand. She's beautiful, and obviously smart as hell. I'd be shocked if you didn't like her, pal." He sighs, trying to put on a brave face. "Besides, we gotta settle down eventually, right?" He can't say it out loud, here in this crowded bar, but Steve knows what he means. There's no room in the world for two men to be together. Eventually, they'll have to keep up appearances, and each find wives. It's just, a selfish part of Bucky wants Steve for himself.

Steve looks pained. "Bucky-"

"Not here," Bucky says quietly.

Steve nods, and they head out of the bar into the crisp fall air, slowly turning to winter. They're silent as they make their way to Steve's room in the inn, the only one that's truly private. They've barely gotten in the room and closed the door before Steve grabs Bucky and pushes him against the wall, kissing him greedily.

"I'll always love you, Buck," Steve says breathlessly. "You're it for me. I don't care what anyone says."

Bucky ignores the platitudes, knowing they can't ever be true. He focuses on drinking in as much of Steve as he can, in case this is the last time they ever do this.

It's strange, Steve being so big. Bucky doesn't know what to do, how they fit together anymore. He can feel Steve feels the same way, as he seems to hold back as if scared he might hurt Bucky with his newfound strength. But Bucky needs it, needs Steve to take control the way he always had. Was this what Steve always felt like, everyone treating him like he was made of glass?

"I'm not made of glass, Rogers," he growls, knowing Steve will understand. He grips his wrist, swallowing. "Please," he murmurs.

Steve pulls back just enough to look at Bucky, eyes unreadable before he grabs Bucky's wrists,
pining them to the wall. Bucky sighs in relief.

"I thought you were dead." Steve growls.

Bucky pushes back against Steve, wrists straining against his hold. "You went and let goddamned scientists experiment on you," Bucky bites back. "Goddamned punk."

"Jerk," Steve says breathily, and kisses Bucky. It's a battle, the way it's always been, Steve and Bucky pushing and grabbing and ripping clothes off with biting words. Steve's new body doesn't seem so bad now, both of them settling into familiar patterns. Bucky is able to appreciate the health and vitality that has been granted Steve. He no longer has to worry about Steve having an asthma attack, or a weak heart, or any of his long list of health ailments. Steve is finally safe from his own health, even though now he's more unsafe than he's ever been. He has simply exchanged one war for another, and isn't that just Steve? The man would pick a fight with a brick wall if it was the only thing in reach, Bucky thinks.

Bucky lets all his fears wash away as his world narrows to nothing but Steve. He ignores how both of them seem almost evenly matched in strength, Steve not noticing because he is used to Bucky being stronger. He ignores the way Steve's scent intoxicates him, and the way he can hear Steve's heart beat in his chest, steady and sure. He ignores everything about this goddamned war and how they've both changed, and how they may die tomorrow. Tonight, the world doesn't matter, and it is only Bucky and Steve. Whatever tomorrow brings, at least they have this one moment in time, just two Brooklyn boys at the edge of the world.
Bright eyed,
And bushy tailed.
Happy yips,
And loved by all.
Oh, when did it go wrong?
Foot soldiers,
And flying boulders.
Screams and howls,
Along with angry hooting owls.
You run so far,
Following the East star,
Not knowing what to do.
Mother dead,
And Father crazy,
Who else is there?
To watch over you.

Little Wolf by Hunter K.

Steve wakes slowly, a warm weight on his chest and soft breath tickling his neck. He cranes his head slightly to see Bucky wrapped around him like an octopus, face pressed into his neck and limbs pinning him down. Steve shifts and Bucky lets out a small whine, snuffling closer. Steve sighs, resigned to staying for a while. He takes a moment to just lay there, Bucky solid and safe against him. Thinking that Bucky was dead had been like an ice pick to his chest. He hadn't even thought before doing everything he could to get to him. Everyone had praised him for saving almost 400 men, but truthfully he had only been there for one. He can finally protect Bucky the way Bucky has always protected him, and he intends to do just that.

Bucky had said he was fine, but Steve isn't so sure. When he had found him, Bucky had been glassy eyed and detached from reality, mumbling his name, rank, and service number over and over the way they were supposed to under torture. He had been experimented on but won't say anything about what happened, the only clue that he had mysteriously recovered from a bout of pneumonia. He won't go to medical or let anyone examine him, he acts too fine for someone who had been sick and starving not even a week before, and sometimes, when he thinks Steve isn't looking, his eyes are haunted and scared. Steve wants so badly to know what had happened, what Bucky is thinking now. He has never felt so unsure around Bucky. They shared almost everything before, but now it is like a wall has been put up around Bucky and for all his newfound strength, Steve can't tear it down.

To top it all off, Steve doesn't know if Bucky looks and feels different because he had changed or because Steve had changed. Steve is as tall as Bucky now, and no longer colorblind or half deaf. All of his senses are enhanced, and his strength is unparalleled. Maybe that is why Bucky just
feels off. Maybe that is why he smells different to Steve's keen nose, something pricking at his memory that he can't place. Maybe it is training that has given Bucky the lean muscles he has now, his body thicker and heavier than Steve remembered; it almost, almost seems like Bucky can match Steve for strength. Maybe Steve had just subconsciously tried not to use all his strength last night in case he hurt Bucky, but there had been a few times when Bucky had pushed against Steve's hold or grabbed him and actually been able to, and it had felt so familiar because of course Bucky had always been stronger than Steve, but now it makes alarm bells ring in his mind. And, once or twice, he could have sworn that Bucky growled, a sound low in his throat that Steve had never heard him make, but he put it down to his previous deafness because maybe he had just never noticed before. That had to be the only explanation. So what if Bucky's teeth seemed sharper than usual as he mouthed at Steve's neck, or his eyes darker and expression almost feral. He is still Bucky, and he is still Steve's. Nothing else matters.

He feels Bucky start to wake, breaths changing and limbs twitching. Steve raises a hand to run it through Bucky's hair and Bucky presses into it, eyes blinking open as he looks up at Steve.

"Hey," Steve says.

"Hey," Bucky rasps. He pushes himself up so he's sitting against the headboard, and Steve's side feels cold without the contact. "Don't you have somewhere to be?"

Steve blinks before remembering. "Right. Stark." He gets up, peeking around the curtain to check the sun. It hasn't come up yet, so he figures it's probably before six. He moves to put on his uniform, various pieces scattered around the floor from their frantic movements last night. Bucky does the same, both of them accidentally mixing up their uniforms a few times in the dim light. Steve's is darker, but they aren't too far off in size now. Bucky does up Steve's tie with careful fingers, the tension between them palpable. Steve wants to ask a million questions but can't find the words and so only stands, unmoving, as Bucky finishes the knot and tucks it into his uniform jacket, smoothing a hand down his chest. Steve reaches up and catches it lightly, holding it in place as Bucky looks somewhere to the right of Steve.

"Buck," he says quietly.

Bucky finally drags his gaze up to Steve's reluctantly, eyes vulnerable and yet guarded.

"Yeah?" he says, and his voice is tired. Resigned.

There's so much he wants to say, but he can't. "Just-" he finally hedges, "What's goin' on, Buck? What's wrong?"

Bucky sighs, and gently removes his hand from under Steve's. "I wish I knew, pal," he says. "I wish I knew."

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Steve pokes his head out the door, checking that the coast is clear before gesturing to Bucky. Bucky slips out silently, going to find the rest of the guys while Steve meets with Stark. When he gets to base he is told to wait by a blonde woman in uniform who smiles at him with hungry eyes. He manages to fend off her advances before Peggy rounds the corner, assessing him with sharp eyes. She leads him to Stark's lab, uncharacteristically silent. He has just picked out his new vibranium shield when she reappears.

"You quite finished, Mr. Stark?" she strolls closer. "I'm sure the Captain has some unfinished business."
Steve holds up the shield, grinning. "What do you think?"

Peggy looks considering before grabbing a gun and aiming straight for him. He ducks on instinct, bringing the shield up to protect himself. The bullets ping off the shield, no vibrations reaching Steve's arm. When she stops Steve cautiously looks from over the shield, stunned. Stark is cowering across the table, and the whole lab has stopped to watch them.

"Yes, I think it works," Peggy says with a vicious smile before setting down the gun and striding towards him, shooting him a haughty look as she passes. Steve is left completely bewildered as Stark comes up to stand next to him, still gaping. Steve pulls out a piece of paper and hands it to Stark.

"I had some ideas about the uniform." He and Bucky had come up with a concept that morning, one that kept with Steve's original uniform but would actually be functional. *I gotta say, that Captain America outfit was hot as hell,* Bucky had said. *I mean, goddamn. Those tights...* and Steve had choked on a laugh and shoved Bucky playfully, which only led to another round of kissing.

"Whatever you want, pal," Stark says distractedly, and they both stare after Peggy as she vanishes from sight, completely dumbfounded.

***

Steve doesn't see Bucky again until dinner, when he meets the guys for mess. He slides in next to Bucky, giving his shoulder a slight nudge. Bucky looks over and gives him a tight smile that doesn't reach his eyes.

"So, Captain Rogers, when are we heading out?" Falsworth asks, accent crisp and polished.

"Few days," Steve says. "Soon as they get our uniforms sorted."

"Long as I get to keep my hat, I'm happy," Dugan says.

Bucky snorts. "You an' your hat."

"Hey! It's a great hat."

"Don't worry, everyone gets to decide on their uniforms," Steve interjects. "Feel free to submit ideas."

"We should use that little wing thing on the Cap outfit for our emblem," Jones muses.

"Tu veux dire cette tenue américaine laide avec les collants? Et les danseuses?" Dernier questions.

Gabe laughs. "Oui ça. Il y a ces petites ailes sur sa tête."

Dernier pauses before nodding decisively. "Oui. The wings."

Steve feels like they just made fun of him somehow, but it also feels good natured.

"Left shoulder," Bucky says. "Just a small little patch. Show we're a team."

The rest nod in acquiescence and Steve feels a small swell of pride. Though he doesn't know them that well, he knows that these men are some of the best, and if Bucky likes them then they must be alright. The fact that they're willing to follow him is amazing considering all of them have way more experience than him. If he's being honest with himself, they're probably only following him
because they know Bucky, but it's still empowering.

***

That night, Bucky sneaks into Steve's room again and they're finally alone.

"I think Agent Carter knows," is the first thing Bucky says.

Steve blinks, thinking back to Peggy's inexplicable frostiness that day. "How?"

Bucky shrugs. "I dunno. But she ran into me right after I left this morning and I could swear she knew. She said, "he mimics her British accent, "'how is Captain Rogers this morning?' real knowingly, and I said I'd run into you briefly but she just gave me this look like she didn't believe me. Then she just said, 'take care, Sergeant Barnes,' and left." He shrugs again. "I have no idea how she would've found out, but if she tells anyone we're done for. No more Captain America, pal. They'll be sending us back on the next boat."

"Peggy wouldn't do that," Steve says, but he's not sure. He doesn't really know her that well, and if she's feeling betrayed...

A knock sounds on the door and they both freeze, looking at each other in alarm. Steve motions frantically with his arm and Bucky moves out of sight of the door, pressing himself flat against the wall. Steve opens the door a crack, peering around it cautiously. Peggy's face greets him, eyebrow raised and expression unreadable.

"Agent Carter," he stammers, blocking the door with his body.

"Boys," she says, and his heart sinks.

"Um, it's just me, ma'm," he tries to stutter.

Peggy just raises an eyebrow. "Really? I could swear I heard voices." She stares at him for a moment before sighing, expression softening. "Can I come in?"

Against his better judgement Steve backs up, opening the door wider. Peggy steps into the room as Bucky detaches from the wall, trying to maintain a nonchalant expression.

"We're, uh, discussing the uniforms," Bucky says.

"I'm sure," Peggy replies wryly, lip quirking up. Bucky shoots Steve a helpless glance.

"Can we help you, Agent Carter?" Steve tries.

Peggy whirls to face him. "Yes, I believe you can. I don't enjoy being made a fool of, Captain Rogers."

Steve gulps, blood draining from his face. "What-do you mean?"

Peggy holds up a hand. "I don't enjoy being made a fool of, but I understand." Her expression softens. "I'm not going to tell anyone."

Steve lets out a breath. There's no point in pretending now. "Thank you, ma'm."

Peggy nods. "I just want to know one thing."

Steve nods. "Anything."
Her head cocks to the side. "Was it real? Or were you pretending to be attracted to me?"

Steve's glance flicks to Bucky, who gives him an understanding nod. Finally he sighs. "It was real. I'm sorry."

Peggy smiles. "Don't be sorry. That actually makes me feel better." She looks between Bucky and Steve, considering. "You know, this could actually work."

"What could?" Bucky asks.

"Us." She looks at Steve. "You need to maintain your image, right?"

He nods.

"And you're actually attracted to me. So, in public..."

"We could be together," Steve finishes. "And Bucky and I could be together in private. Are you sure you're okay with that?"

Peggy shrugs, turning to Bucky. "Are you sure you're okay with sharing Steve?"

Bucky gives her a small smile, slightly bitter. "He's not mine to keep. I couldn't think of anyone who deserves Steve more."

Peggy walks over to Bucky slowly, stopping when she's right in front of him. She reaches out a manicured hand, tugging on Bucky's tie. Steve sees Bucky's eye flick down to Peggy's lips and Peggy smiles.

"Well, Sergeant Barnes, I don't think it's just Steve we'll be sharing," she says softly, before leaning in to press a gentle kiss against Bucky's lips. Then she pulls away, moving towards the door. She looks back, hand on the doorframe. "See you tomorrow, boys," she says, and then she is gone.

***

In two more days they are heading out on their first mission, new uniforms tailored to each and the small winged emblem stitched to their left shoulders. Steve's new uniform is perfect, painted with the American flag but muted and functional for everyday use. His new shield, resplendent in red, white, and blue, hangs from a special attachment on his back. The rest of the guys wear brown, but Bucky's coat is a blue that matches Steve and Monty's red cap stands out, the British emblem clear on it. They are the most diverse unit, breaking every rule and convention set down. Gabe Jones was only ever supposed to be with other black soldiers, James Morita was shunned and vilified by most American soldiers for being Japanese-American, and the fact that there is a British soldier and a member of the French resistance just rounds out the whole rag-tag group. Steve couldn't be prouder.

"We need a name," Morita notes, as they trudge through the forest. "Something that really describes us."

"What, 'buncha gum-flappin' idiots doesn't have a nice ring to it?" Dum Dum snarks.

"I thought that was just you," Monty says.

"Oh shut up."

Steve raises a hand, signaling a halt. They grow silent, ready and waiting. The building lies in front
of them, deceptively quiet. They creep forward until they're close and Steve counts down before dropping his hand.

They charge, Steve breaking through the door with his shield as they enter, guns blazing. There's chaos as the Hydra soldiers are caught unawares, eyes widening and hands scrabbling for guns. They clear the building quickly before planting explosives, and Steve rides away on his motorcycle as the building collapses into burning wreckage. He smirks as he pulls up into the clearing in the forest, waiting for the others to regroup. A whistle signals their arrival and they come jogging into the clearing, Steve's heart skipping a beat as he takes in tight expressions and doesn't see Bucky. Finally he appears, stumbling after Jones, and Steve immediately moves forwards.

"Bucky?" he says, scanning him up and down for injuries. Bucky's forehead is beaded with sweat, and he's hunched over as if in pain, but there are no visible injuries. "What happened?" Steve asks.

Jones shrugs. "One minute he's fine, then he almost gets hit and this happens." He gestures with a hand.

Bucky starts unbuttoning his coat, fingers shaking and breaths coming in pants.

"Buck, what's wrong?" Steve asks frantically. Bucky finally struggles out of his coat and leans a hand on a tree, not responding.

"Cap, look out!" Dum Dum yells, and suddenly Bucky looks up and launches himself forward, shape blurring in midair and clothes shredding as a...wolf crashes into a Hydra agent that had snuck up, jaws closing around his throat. With a wrench of its head, the wolf tears out the man's throat, screams stopping instantaneously and a shocked silence pervading the clearing. The wolf suddenly backs up, tripping over its feet, and whirls around, eyes wide as they dart around wildly. Familiar blue eyes.

"Bucky?" Steve breathes.

The wolf's eyes snap to him, and Steve becomes sure. The Bucky-wolf is huge and pure white except for the blood staining his muzzle, and Bucky's dog tags swing from his neck. Blue-grey eyes stare at Steve in fear and horror before turning to look at himself. He ends up almost chasing his own tail as his head cranes to try and see himself, and Steve hears a choked-off laugh from one of the men.

"Well," Dum Dum says faintly. "This is new."

Bucky stops to stare at Steve again, eyes wide and panicked.

"Can you, uh, can you change back?" Steve questions. He fervently hopes Bucky won't be stuck like this forever.

The wolf-Bucky's eyes furrow in concentration, and there's a few moments of tense silence before he shakes his head, whining. Steve feels his heart sink.

"Okay, uh..." he looks around at the others, unsure what to do. They all wear identical expressions of stunned bewilderment.

"We should probably get out of here," Dum Dum says, and Steve has never been more grateful. He nods, trying to collect himself.

"Okay, let's head towards somewhere we can make camp. Keep on the lookout for any more Hydra." They pick up their packs, Steve taking his and Bucky's and stuffing Bucky's coat and
somehow undamaged boots into it as Bucky hovers close by. Once they're all set, Steve starts forward and Bucky moves to trot at his heels as the rest fall into formation. Bucky presses against his leg and Steve reaches down to stroke a hand through his fur, marveling at the softness. He hasn't even really given himself time to process this beyond *Bucky is a wolf now,* but he turns it over in his mind as they walk, seeing the last week in a new light. Zola must have done something to Bucky to turn him into this, though whether Bucky knew is another question. But Steve had been right that something was different. The growls, the sharp teeth, the different smell, and increased strength all make sense now.

They encounter only a few Hydra patrols along the way. When they reach a safe place to make camp they stop, Frenchie and Gabe starting a small fire as everyone sets down their packs and lays out their bedrolls. Steve places Bucky's next to his, the Bucky-wolf immediately laying down and resting his head on his paws as he stares morosely at the fire. Steve hesitantly sits on his bedroll next to him, not knowing what to say.

"It'll be alright, Buck," he finally says. "We'll figure out how to get you back."

Bucky just blinks. Steve grabs field rations from his pack, opening the corned beef as Bucky's head lifts as he licks his lips.

"Hungry?"

Bucky gives him a look that somehow manages to convey his exasperation even with no normal facial expressions. Steve chuckles, reaching in his pack again and drawing out a tin plate with raised sides. He spoons the corned beef onto the plate and places it in front of Bucky, feeling weird that he's feeding him like a dog. Bucky clearly feels the same way, as his expression is one of disgust before he huffs a sigh and stands up, beginning to eat. Steve pulls out his own tin and eats with a fork, seeing the other guys doing the same. They all carefully ignore the fact that Bucky is currently licking the plate clean, red still staining his muzzle in places.

"So," Dum Dum starts. "A wolf, huh?"

Bucky looks up, licking his lips.

"Why is he white? He has brown hair," Monty questions thoughtfully.

"But he is white," Jones notes. "Racially. Maybe white skin equals white hair for, you, know, wolves," he finishes awkwardly.

"Beats me," Morita says. "I'm more concerned with the fact that Barnes is a goddamned wolf now. I mean, what are we supposed to do?" He looks at Bucky. "No offense, pal."

Bucky huffs before sitting down on his haunches.

"Also, *why* the hell is he a wolf," Dum Dum says. He directs the question to Bucky. "Was it Zola?"

Bucky nods and then gives what appears to be an attempt at a shrug, his head dipping and shoulder blades drawing together.

"You don't know what he did?" Steve interprets.

Bucky nods.

"But why would Zola want a wolf?" Frenchie asks, voice heavily accented. "For war maybe?"
"Probably," Steve says darkly. "Just think of what you could do with soldiers who could transform into wolves at the drop of a hat. Well, obviously it doesn't work so well but..."

Dum Dum whistles. "If they managed to perfect that it would be terrifying. They could track people, sneak up easily, fight without weapons, you name it. You know, Bucky, if you figure out how to change back and forth this could be damn useful." Steve shoots him a glare and Dum Dum shrugs. "What? It's true."

"First we have to figure out how to get you back to human," Steve sighs, setting a hand on Bucky's back.

"Yeah, never thought I'd say this but I miss your voice," Dum Dum remarks dryly. "It gotta say, if I didn't know it was you I'd be scared witless right now. You kinda look terrifying, Barnes."

"Yeah, soon as those Hydra patrols saw you they about pissed their pants with fear," Morita adds. "And the way you ripped that guy's throat out...well, I'm sure glad you're on our side."

Steve can't read Bucky's expression, but his eyes look troubled.

"But why now?" Monty interjects. "I mean, if Zola did this, why did he only change now?"

"Wait, was this the first time you changed?" Steve questions, looking at Bucky.

Bucky nods.

Gabe looks thoughtful. "Well, maybe it was the adrenaline? Bucky almost got hit, and that's when he started acting weird. And then the Hydra agent was about to hit Steve. That sound right, Bucky?"

Bucky nods again.

"Huh," Dum Dum says. "So we just have to figure out how to get you back. All the werewolf stuff about the moon doesn't really seem to apply here I don't think." He squints upwards at the rising crescent moon. "Yup, definitely not a full moon."

Steve rolls his eyes. "He's not a werewolf."

"Isn't he though?" Morita muses. "I mean, what else do you call someone who turns into a wolf?"

"I dunno. Never heard of anything like this before."

"Yeah, none of us have."

There's a moment of silence before Steve sighs.

"Alright guys," he says. "Let's get some sleep and work out what to do in the morning. I'll take first watch."

The men grumble but settle down for the night, Dum Dum and Morita volunteering to trade off watches later in the night. Steve sits next to Bucky, leaning into his shoulder. They pass the hours in comfortable silence, Bucky's ears swiveling with every faint sound of the forest. Eventually they wake Dum Dum for his shift, settling down on their bedrolls. Bucky lays down and rests his head on his paws, a sigh escaping. Slowly, Steve extends a hand, resting it on Bucky's head and petting in gentle motions. Bucky wriggles closer, pressing his body against Steve and shoving his nose under his chin. Steve rests a hand on Bucky's back and eventually drifts off, Bucky's fur soft under
his hand and his body warm against Steve's.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone wants to do artwork at any point I'll love you forever and post it with this.
Chapter 3

Walking along snow,
As footprints of old.
Travel doth a print show.

Howling along the wind,
Winter wolf.
   Alone.

Suddenly speak,
   Growl to eat.

Winter wolf hunts,
   Along the ravine.

Howling snow,
   Blanketing the forest below.
   Waves of white,
   Dusting the darkest light.

Winter wolf,
   Howl unto the moon.
   Befriend a pack,
   To call your home.

Winter wolf,
   whose paws print the snow.
Travel doth those prints show.

Winter wolf,
Travel far and wide.
Moving miles a day,
Sometimes nights.

Winter wolf,
   Untamed and gallant tis thee.
   Howling unto the moon.
That derives itself the king.

Winter wolf,
   Move the land.
   Travel far and wide.
   Find your mate.

Create a pack,
   Howl together.
Within the Frozen wasteland,
   Of a snowy tundra.
Bucky wakes slowly, limbs aching and head pounding. He's pressed against something warm and soft - Steve, he realizes, as he cracks open his eyes. The events of the previous day rush back and he groans, pushing back from Steve with...hands? He blinks, staring at them in amazement. He takes a moment to feel his body and realizes that he's human again, a rush of relief flooding him. Steve is waking up now, eyes fluttering open and landing on Bucky. He smiles sleepily before his eyes widen and he sits up abruptly, staring at Bucky.

"You're back!" he exclaims.

"Never left, pal," Bucky rasps, throat raw. Every single part of him hurts from his head down to his toes and he's about to roll over when he realizes that he's naked except for his dog tags. Apt name, his brain informs him unhelpfully. "Uh, little help here," he says awkwardly.

"Oh. Right." Steve pulls out an extra pair of pants from Bucky's pack and hands them over. Bucky sits up with a groan, spine popping and muscles aching as he pulls on his pants. He grabs a green sweater from his pack as well, pulling it over his head and catching sight of the rest of the men waking up on the other side of the fire, Morita already awake for watch. Steve hands him his boots and he puts them on, lacing them up with clumsy fingers. He struggles to his feet as the men catch sight of him, eyes widening in disbelief. They clamber to their feet, faces overjoyed, and immediately rush towards him, Dum Dum clapping him on the shoulder as they all grin excitedly.

"Bucky! It's good to see you."

"Likewise," he says, voice still hoarse.

"How are you feeling?" Gabe asks.

"Like I got run over by a tank and then found the bottom of a liquor barrel," Bucky replies dryly. "I think something died in my mouth."

"That'd be the guy whose throat you ripped out. With your teeth," Morita says, deadpan. Bucky vaguely remembers doing so, only realizing with horror what he had done seconds after it had happened. It was like primal instinct had taken over, and it makes him shudder.

Morita hesitates. "By the way, you got a little something..." he points to his jaw.

"Uh, blood," Steve says. "Here, let me." He licks his finger before grabbing Bucky's chin and scrubbing at his jawline, Bucky rolling his eyes.

"You're worse than my ma," he grumbles.

"Hold still," Steve replies. "There, got it."

"Gee, thanks."

Dum Dum chuckles. "Thought you were gonna be a goddamned wolf forever, Barnes. Morita here was gonna make you a collar. Whaddya think, a red white and blue one? Little stars sewn on?"

Bucky rolls his eyes. "I hate you."
Dum Dum grabs him in a headlock, ruffling his hair. "Who's a good doggy?" He lets him go, Bucky grinning despite himself and the rest of the men laughing uproariously.

Suddenly Gabe peers at him. "Is it just me, or are your teeth kinda...sharper?" Bucky closes his mouth, blinking in surprise as the rest of the men stare at him.

"Wait, let me see," Dum Dum says.

Bucky raises an eyebrow. "You gotta be kidding me."

Steve shifts awkwardly. "I noticed it too, but I thought I was imagining it."

Bucky stares. "Shit."

"I still need to see this," Dum Dum presses. "Come on, open up."

Bucky scowls.

"Oh come on, we gotta see how bad this is. Can't have people asking questions," Morita says.

"Smile, Barnes," Dum Dum wheedles. "Who's a good boy?"

Bucky growls. He startles, the sound cutting off abruptly, and the men's eyes widen in disbelief. "What the hell?" Bucky swears.

Dum Dum blinks. "Okay, so you're still pretty wolfy even in human form. Good to know."

"Shit," Bucky repeats.

Morita brightens. "Can you bark?"

Bucky stares at him incredulously. "I am not barking."

"Do you have the temptation to chase squirrels?" Gabe asks, trying to keep a straight face.

Bucky growls again, and the men burst into laughter.

"Okay, okay, seriously," Steve says. "It's not that noticeable, Buck. If we weren't looking for it we wouldn't know."

"But maybe, I dunno, don't smile so much around other people," Morita notes.

"And no tail wagging," Dum Dum adds, grinning.

Steve nudges him in the side. "I don't think you're ever getting outta the dog jokes," he says wryly.

Bucky sighs. "Goddamn it." But he's smiling, thankful that they're treating him the same and joking about it instead of running for the hills.

When they've settled down a bit, Morita breaks the lighthearted atmosphere. "So, seriously, what are we going to do?" They all look at Steve and Bucky expectantly.

Steve looks to Bucky and gives him a look that says what do you want to do? Bucky shrugs.

"Should we tell someone?" Gabe asks, always the logical one.

Bucky shakes his head vehemently. "No. You know they'd just turn me into a lab rat, and we can't
risk anyone knowing about this, SS or Hydra. Who knows what they might try to do with that information."

The men's faces are grim as they digest this.

"Alright, so we don't tell anyone," Dum Dum says. "This information stays with us, right fellas?" He looks around as if daring anyone to contradict him. Everyone nods, and relief fills Bucky.

"Thank you," he says seriously.

Frenchie grins. "What is a unit for, no?"

"Are we ready to head back to base?" Steve asks. "They're probably wondering where we are."

There's a chorus of yeses.

"How do we know you're not gonna wolf out again?" Dum Dum asks Bucky.

Bucky shrugs. "I dunno. Don't feel like I did yesterday, though. I think I'm good." His skin is no longer crawling and blood burning like it had yesterday right before he turned, no desperate urge clawing at his insides.

"Well, if you can keep a lid on it when we're on base, next time we're out here alone maybe we can practice. Like I said yesterday, if you could control this it could be damn useful."

Bucky considers. "Yeah. I don't exactly want to turn into a wolf every time I see a little action and then be stuck like that the whole day. That'd be pretty inconvenient."

"I second that," Monty says.

"Alright then, let's head out," Steve orders. "If anyone asks what happened with the mission, just say we ran into trouble and had to retreat and regroup. Not a word about any of this."

They nod, and begin to pack up their stuff before heading out, eating on the way. Bucky shrugs into his blue coat, buttoning it up against the chill. Some of his stiffness and aching dissipates as he eats and stretches out his muscles, and by the time they arrive at base a few hours later he feels back to normal. Well, his new normal.

They're greeted by Colonel Phillips, who wears a disapproving frown. "You're late," he grunts out. "What the hell happened?"

"We ran into some trouble, sir," Steve says smoothly. "We had to retreat and regroup."

"What kinda trouble?"

"Uh, Hydra, sir. Some outlying patrols."

Colonel Phillips frowns. "Did you accomplish the mission?"

Steve nods. "Yes, sir. The base is nothing but ash."

The corner of the Colonel's lip quirks up. "Good."

They file into the strategy room on base, where Peggy is already there surrounded by uniformed men. She looks up at their entrance, eyes landing first on Steve as she assesses him. Her eyes flick to Bucky briefly and she gives him a small nod. They cluster around the large table, where a map
is dotted with small flags of bases that Steve had remembered from the map in Zola's lab. Colonel Phillips takes the one they just hit off, placing it in a small box to the side.

"One down, men, many more to go." He points to the next closest flag. "Now, the plan is..."

***

Bucky takes his time in the communal shower that evening, washing away the sweat and lingering smell of blood. He dresses in slacks and an undershirt before making his careful way to Steve's room, beads of water still dripping down his back. Steve ushers him in quickly, hair likewise just beginning to dry from his own shower. Bucky greets him with a soft kiss, smelling the plain soap that all the soldiers use but Steve's unique scent underling that. Steve suddenly chuckles faintly against Bucky's lips and he pulls away, frowning.

"What?"

Steve looks sheepish. "Sorry, it's just, I was trying to figure out why you smelled different, and there was something I couldn't quite put my finger on, but well, it just came back to me, and I mean it's not much, just like a hint, but-"

"Spit it out, Rogers," Bucky sighs.

"Wet dog," Steve blurs. "It's not, like, strong, but it reminds me of whenever we had to give old Sally's dog a bath. I bet no one else but me could smell that," he hurries to say. "And it's not bad. It's kinda nice."

Bucky raises an eyebrow. "You're telling me I smell like wet dog, but it's nice?"

Steve grimaces. "Uh, yes? I've always loved dogs," he says seriously, before his eyes widen and he claps a hand over his mouth.

Bucky can't help it - he laughs. He doubles over, cackling at Steve's mortified expression. "I've always loved dogs," he wheezes. "Oh my god."

Steve starts laughing as well, eyes crinkling with mirth. When Bucky can breathe again, he looks at Steve fondly.

"I can smell you too," he admits. "And there's a dog joke in there somewhere, I know. But it's like all my senses have been turned up to ten."

"I know what you mean," Steve says. "Everything seemed so loud and bright after the serum. Sometimes it's still overwhelming."

"Yeah," Bucky says quietly. He steps closer again, pulling Steve in for a kiss. He gives Steve's mouth an experimental nip, feeling his newly sharpened canines dig into his bottom lip. Steve sucks in a breath, pulling Bucky closer, and Bucky growls low in his throat.

"God, that's hot," Steve breathes. Bucky does it again, eliciting a full-body shiver from Steve. They eventually move to the bed, clothes discarded hastily and door locked securely, where Steve takes Bucky apart slowly.

They curl up afterwards, Bucky resting his head on Steve's chest as Steve pets his hair. It's soothing, and Bucky doesn't know whether he's always just liked this or whether it's his wolfish nature that makes him enjoy being petted. He's definitely never telling any of the guys this; he'd never hear the end of it. He falls asleep this way, Steve's heartbeat steady under his ear.
The next day they're off again, a caravan of trucks and soldiers going with them to assist. The soldiers will be backup, but the unit will do most of the fighting and split off from the soldiers at will. They bring along a film reel to catch them in action, as it will be used for propaganda back home. They won't be back at the London base for a while, and Peggy had given them both a goodbye kiss in Steve's room before they left.

"Stay safe," she had said softly. "I expect to see both of you soon." She had handed Steve a compass, a clipped photo of her inside. "For the films," she said, and smiled. With a last brush of her hand against Steve's cheek, she was gone.

The base they hit this time is large, but they've set Bucky up as sniper so he's not directly in the action, and so he manages to remain human. His sharpened eyesight and keen senses give him an edge, and he finds himself taking shots that would be impossible for a normal person. In no time the base is cleared and exploding into the sky in fiery trails as the soldiers regroup by the vehicles. The cameraperson films them as they pour over a map, Steve flicking open his compass to display Peggy's picture as the camera zooms in.

When they've made camp for the night the unit splits off slightly, carving out a space just to the side of the other soldiers. When darkness falls and everyone is asleep except for the watch, Steve and Bucky sneak off into the woods at the whispered words of the other men to practice.

They find a clearing not too far away, ears trained for anyone approaching. Bucky strips off his clothes and piles them on the ground, shivering in the chilly December air. He feels awkward standing naked in the middle of the woods, the moonlight glinting off the dog tags hanging around his neck.

"Okay, uh, just try to shift, I guess?" Steve whispers.

Bucky rolls his eyes before closing them and trying to find that burning heaviness that sits in his chest. He focuses on it, recalling what it felt like when he shifted. He thinks, wolf! and suddenly his veins flood with fire and his skin is too tight and the world blurs for a second before he comes to on all fours, panting. He can feel the difference, his bones rearranged and his perception different, fur blocking the cold breeze. He looks up and sees Steve, who looks awed. It's strange, having his shoulders about the height of Steve's waist, and he has to tip his head up to meet Steve's eyes. Steve moves closer, reaching out a hand and crouching down. Bucky pushes into it, Steve starting to smile as he scratches behind an ear.

"You're beautiful, Buck," he says softly. He stands up, backing way. "Okay, now can you shift back?"

This will be the hard part. Bucky takes deep breaths, closing his eyes again. He tries to find the pulsing thread inside him that connects him back to his human side, and focuses on willing the wolf away, picturing himself as human. He almost gets it but it slips away and he refocuses, reaching out for the thread again and pulling ever so slowly. It's like a ball of yarn being unraveled, and once he has hold of it he gives it a yank, feeling his bones shift and fur shrink as he becomes human. He's on his hands and knees on the forest floor, body aching all over.

Steve rushes forward, handing him articles of clothing as he puts them on with chilled fingers. Bucky leans on him heavily as they walk back to camp, eyes drooping with exhaustion. The men are still awake, and they eagerly shift closer as he sinks back onto his bedroll.

"Did it work?" Dum Dum whispers.
Bucky nods tiredly and Dum Dum grins, the others echoing his expression. Steve hands him a chocolate ration bar, eyes stern.

"Eat. You look like you're going to fall over," he says quietly. "I think shifting takes a lot outta you."

Bucky nods, accepting the bar and taking a large bite.

"Wait," Morita says in a panicked whisper. "Isn't chocolate poisonous to dogs?"

Bucky freezes in the middle of chewing, and the men all whip their heads to stare at him in alarm. Bucky shrugs, swallowing.

"I don't think that applies. I'm human, and I can eat normal food. I guess we'll see."

"You better not die Barnes," Dum Dum says, "because I will drag you back to life myself and punch you in your dumb mug for killing yourself with a goddamned chocolate bar."

They all laugh quietly, and Bucky finishes his bar, feeling marginally better. He lays down on his bedroll, sleep overtaking him quickly.

***

"You ready?" Steve asks. Bucky nods, fur rippling slightly in the breeze. He trots away with Steve at his side, towards the concealed building half-hidden by the woods. Using his nose and hearing, he pinpoints how many guards there are inside, creeping closer until he sees a small entrance along the side. He looks at Steve significantly, and Steve nods. They duck behind a tree and Bucky throws up his head and howls, the sound eerie in the quiet stillness of the woods. He hears exclamations from inside, fear lacing their voices. They don't know what to make of it.

Suddenly another sound echoes across the forest as the rest of the unit howls back, albeit less authentically. The buzz inside the Hydra base rises, filled with questioning words and barked orders. Bucky howls again and the entrance opens, Hydra soldiers peering out warily with guns at the ready. Bucky melts back into the woods, growling lowly as Steve starts to circle around silently. Their guns swing in Bucky's direction and their eyes betray their fear as they edge closer. Another human howl sounds from across the base and the soldiers swing around, a barked order given out. Before they can go back inside Bucky howls again, the soldiers whirling around as their faces drain of blood. They fire wildly in their panic, Bucky safe behind a thick tree. In the chaos Steve strikes from behind, flinging his shield before rushing into the fray. More soldiers rush out, and Bucky hears the sounds of the unit breaching the base from the other side. He circles around, the men's attention now focused on Steve. Finding a soldier close to the edge with gun aimed at Steve he lunges, sinking his teeth into his ankle and dragging him backwards. The man screams, eyes wide and terrified, and Bucky feels sickness claw at his gut. He dispatches him quickly with teeth around his throat, sinking back into the shadows.

The fight is over quickly, Steve's shield bouncing off a tree and returning to him with practiced skill. He jogs towards the entrance, Bucky following at his heels. They clear the room quickly, only a few Hydra agents in the aisle of pallets containing materials and weapons. Steve unhooks an explosive from the vest rigged over Bucky's shoulders and places it in the room, hurrying on the the next one. Bucky howls as they clear each one, signaling to the unit where they are and sowing fear and panic among the Hydra soldiers. When they finally reach the main room the fight is over, the men grinning when they see Steve and Bucky.
"We're all clear," Steve says. "She's ready to blow."

They race away from the base and Frenchie presses the trigger when they're far enough away. The small building explodes, sending pieces scattering to the wind. They pause, hands on knees as they try to catch their breath.

"I think I have our name," Dum Dum says.

"Name?" Gabe questions.

"Yeah, the name for our unit."

"What is it?" Steve asks warily.

Dum Dum grins. "The Howling Commandos."
There is nothing more than you......
      than there is in I.

I still think of you,
and still the frustration makes me cry.
   My darling.

You are no more than you....
      than I am I.

I will never lose you,
for you are within me,
even without me,
I know you still feel me there,
   right down,
   deep,
   down,
   there.

Please let go.
Choose, a direction.

Even if it is time to leave.
   I understand.
   Let go of me,
   let me go of me,
   let go of my hand....

Bereft.
My heart lies desolate,
because it believed,
in,
you.

You have to go,
you have to leave.

I was right,
not for you, you believe,
but I am more than you think;
   I understand,
dream of me,
   my sweet.

Follow the sun.
Gather your skin.  
Blink your eyes wide.  
Choose your direction.  
I will leave your side.  

Baby, my sweet, sweet baby,  
I loved our,  
fucked,  
up,  
ride.  

Black eyeliner stains my face.  
I cry to the moon.  
I howl at the sun.  
I wish i had 6 bullets,  
and a gun.  

There is nothing left,  
but,  
a,  
blank,  
white,  
page.  

My heart.  

It dreams of your mouth,  
telling me,  
what you need.  
I am,  
not,  
it.  

I,  
doubt of love,  
ever existing,  
again.  

Where are you?  

*Lone Wolf* by Rachel Stainthorpe

Winter drags on, and the Howling Commandos move steadily across the map, taking out Hydra bases. The Germans whisper that a wolf spirit follows them, and that his howls are a portent of destruction. Der weiße Wolf, they call him. *The White Wolf*. It's said he runs at Captain America's heels, and his fur is as white as the snow that blankets the earth, his mouth red with the blood of German soldiers, and his eyes blue as the deepest lake. *American*, they say. *The Americans have a demon*.  

But it's a ghost story, nothing more.
Steve looks down at the wolf sprawled across his lap, smiling softly. Bucky's mouth is lolling open in a smile, eyes bright and adoring as he stares up at Steve. Steve scratches him behind the ear in his favorite spot, chuckling as Bucky's eyes close and he leans into Steve's hand.

"Never let it be said that Barnes isn't a huge softie," Morita says, walking past and taking a seat on a stump, bowl of stew in hand.

Bucky growls softly from Steve's lap, eyes still closed, and Steve laughs.

"Oh god, are they being cute again?" Dum Dum sighs, settling down next to Morita with his own bowl of stew.
"You gotta be used to it by now," Gabe remarks as he sits down, closely followed by Monty and Frenchie.

Bucky huffs, getting up and grabbing his pile of clothes in his teeth before trotting off into the woods. He emerges minutes later, walking barefooted into camp and heading for his boots. He pulls them on before grabbing two bowls of stew and passing one to Steve, settling down next to him. Steve smiles, and thinks that right now, in this moment, everything is perfect. They may be in the middle of a war zone, but he has Bucky, and the best group of guys he's ever known. With them, he feels like he can do anything. He feels like they're invincible.
Steve pins Bucky down in the fresh snow and kisses him, lips red and chapped from the cold. Bucky kisses back, their breath crystallizing in the crisp winter air.

***

Spring arrives, and mud sucks at their boots as they trudge along the road, the rumble of trucks and jeeps all around them. The camera pans over them, Bucky's face set in that familiar pursed way to hide his teeth. Soldiers trudge after them, uniforms spattered with mud and faces tired.

***

Steve swipes a speck of mud off Bucky's face with his thumb, smiling fondly.

"C'mere, you punk," Bucky says, tugging Steve forward to land a kiss on his lips.

Dum Dum walks into the clearing and stops. Steve and Bucky break apart in horror as they stare at him.

Dum Dum clears his throat. "Right. We need you guys. Stop necking and come do your jobs." He turns and walks away, muttering. "Idiots. Can't stop kissing for two seconds..."

Steve and Bucky look at each other, and grin. When they return money is exchanging hands, and Morita is smiling smugly.

***

Bucky lopes towards Steve, white fur coated with mud.

"Jesus, Buck," Steve says. "Did you roll around in a mud puddle?"

Bucky gives him a wolfish grin before shaking, splattering Steve with droplets of mud. Steve wipes his face with a hand, chuckling despite himself.

"Thanks, pal. Really appreciate it."

***

"Happy Birthday!" The Commandos yell, ruffling Bucky's hair and laughing. They pass around a container of whisky Dum Dum managed to steal and a box of cigars, singing loudly as they drink and smoke. Bucky looks happy, laughing as the Commandos give him a new knife with a small paw print carved into the handle.

Steve gives him a picture he drew on a scrap piece of paper of himself as he used to be, small and skinny. He knows Bucky will understand. Bucky was the only one to ever see him for who he was. Bucky's eyes mist over and he tucks it into his inner pocket, over his heart.

***

"Happy Birthday, Buck," Steve says, winding his arms around his waist and resting his chin on Bucky's shoulder as they stare at the clear night sky. Stars speckle the heavens, and Bucky grabs Steve's hand and traces the constellations, his voice soft as he names them one by one.

***

Peggy is there as they file into a base in Germany, greeting them with a small smile and warm brown eyes. She pushes into Steve's tent that night, where Bucky is already in wolf form. Steve
explains and she stretches out a hand, face awed.

"Oh James, look at you," she breathes. "You're beautiful."

She runs a hand down his face, and Bucky melts.)

***

(They're in the middle of Nazi Germany, and Bucky teaches Steve how to steal a car as the Commandos pile in the back. They pull away with a peal of tires, mud spattering behind them. Dum Dum whoops, and Bucky cups a hand around his mouth and howls. The rest of the Commandos join in, discordant howls carried away by the wind.)
(Peggy's face is unreadable as they gather around the map.

"You know, I heard the most curious thing. The German soldiers report seeing a large white wolf running next to Captain America. Now, wherever do you think they got that idea?"

The Commandos look at each other with wide eyes, but Steve and Bucky only smile. Peggy's mouth quirks up and her eyes dance with humor as she looks up at Bucky.

"You ought to be more careful, James.")
(They crouch by the road, waiting for the tank to appear. Dernier runs out into the middle of the road, lying down and letting the tank pass over him as he sticks the explosive to the underside. A few moments later it explodes down the road. Dernier claps his hands together and the Commandos grin, the surrounding soldiers wearing impressed expressions.)

***

(They're in a city in France, backs to a brick wall as the camera pans to them. Bucky's only wearing his green sweater, too warm for his coat. Dum Dum is pretending to interview them, to Dernier's chagrin.

"So fellas, what country are we in?"

It's an inside joke. Bucky turns to Steve briefly, eyes crinkling.

"We're in France!" he says, shaking his head as he looks down, shoulders shaking with laughter. It's the only time he's laughed or smiled on camera, but no one notices his teeth in the quick motion. Steve looks back at the camera, smiling widely.)

***

(Peggy's fingers are deft as she undoes the buttons on Steve's dress uniform. Bucky comes up behind her, pressing a kiss to her shoulder. She smiles, and leans into his embrace, and Steve thinks he's never seen anything more beautiful than the two of them. Then they both refocus their attention on him, and Steve has never felt more loved.)

***

(The Howling Commandos don't stop laughing for minutes when they find out Steve's birthday is the Fourth of July.

"You were born to be Captain America," Dum Dum wheezes.

"Je n'ai jamais rien entendu d'aussi parfait," Dernier chokes, and Gabe doubles over again with laughter.

Bucky grins, patting Steve on the shoulder. "They're never gonna let this go, pal."

Steve sighs. "I figured.")

***

(Bucky gives Steve a proper birthday present later in his room at the inn, taking Steve apart slowly as cheers and drunken singing echo from the streets below, American soldiers celebrating independence day.)

***

(It's summer, and they're sweating through their uniforms.

"It's the dog days of summer," Dum Dum says, with a wink at Bucky. Steve choking back a laugh and Bucky growls just loud enough for Dum Dum to hear.

Dum Dum grins. "It's pawsitively scorching out here!"

Steve can't hold back his laughter anymore, doubling over as Bucky glares with a murderous
expression softened by the twinkle in his eye.)

***

(They descend the plank and splash through the water onto shore, soldiers streaming behind them. There's a camera on them, Steve jogging along the shore with his shield on his arm, a perfect symbol of American patriotism. He looks at the gaunt, exhausted faces of the soldiers around him and feels a similar exhaustion come to rest in his heart.)

***

(He revs the motorcycle, accelerating away as the building explodes behind him. He hears howls, and knows the Commandos are close by. It feels like it's been forever since they started this unit, since their first mission. Steve wonders how much longer it will be.)

***

(The bullet grazes Steve's shoulder and he stumbles, bringing up his shield as he turns around. There's a flash of white and the man who shot him goes down, Bucky's teeth around his throat. Bucky snarls, lips dripping with blood, and suddenly Steve feels nauseous. What has this war turned us into? he thinks.)

***

(He sews Bucky's leg up, trying not to let his hands shake. There's blood, so much blood, and he bites his lip to quell the panic that rises. A gentle hand finds his cheek.

"Hey, I'm alright," Bucky says, grinning slightly. "Don't worry about me."

I'll always worry, Steve thinks, but he gives him a tight smile in reply. The wound heals up in a couple days, Bucky's healing factor almost as fast as Steve's.)

***

(Leaves crunch underfoot as they move through the forest, the trees ablaze with hues of red and orange. Bucky is right behind Steve, gun raised as he prowls forward with predatory grace that seems natural now. He has hardened, Steve thinks. They both have hardened. Their hands are as red as the leaves underfoot, dripping with the blood of all the people they've killed. It must be harder for Bucky, Steve thinks, when he kills as a wolf. There's something deeply intimate about tearing someone's throat out with your teeth, and he sees the darkness in Bucky's eyes every time, though he tries to hide it.)

***

(It's Thanksgiving, and Steve catches Bucky hunched over a letter from his sister, eyes full of sadness. It's been over a year since he has seen his family, Steve knows. Becca writes him too, makes him promise to look after Bucky. Neither of them have told her about the wolf, and Steve wonders suddenly what they'll do when they go home. He hasn't thought of going home in a long time. He can barely picture what that would be like, to be away from this war and yet still bearing the products of it. Sometimes Steve doesn't think he can ever stop being Captain America, and where could a wolf roam in the city?)

***

(They huddle together for warmth in their tent, Bucky's head resting on Steve's chest. It's two
weeks to Christmas, and this is the last night before another mission. There's always missions, Steve thinks. They're making progress in defeating Hydra, and Steve believes in what they're doing, but sometimes he feels so tired.

Bucky is sleeping peacefully against Steve, face smoothed out. The perpetual tightness around his eyes and mouth is gone, eyelashes dark as they flutter against his skin, a strand of hair dangling over his forehead. He looks beautiful, and innocent, and young; so unlike the hardened man this war has turned him into. Steve wants to take him away from this, take him somewhere far away where nothing can ever touch him again, where there's no war and no suffering and they're just two boys from Brooklyn. But all he can do is stroke gentle fingers through Bucky's hair as they lay here, suspended in time.

***

It's two weeks to Christmas, and this is one of their most important missions yet. They've received word that Zola is on a train headed through the alps, and are going to try and intercept him. Bucky's jaw had tightened when he heard the name and his eyes had sharpened, taking on a predatory expression. Steve wants to get him just as bad, wants to put him away forever for what he did to Bucky in Azzano.

They're standing on the side of a mountain, snow painting the landscape in white and a zip line extending away into the fog. Monty peers out with his binoculars while Gabe and Morita fiddle with the Hydra receiver they'd managed to steal. Steve and Bucky are standing at the edge looking down at the zip line over the railroad tracks, wind whipping their hair.

"Remember when I made you ride the Cyclone at Coney Island?" Bucky asks.

"Yeah, and I threw up?"

"This isn't payback, is it?"

Steve turns, tracing the zip line above their heads. "Now why would I do that?" he says dryly. Bucky chuckles

"We were right," Gabe interjects. Steve and Bucky turn to look at him, stepping closer. "Dr. Zola's on the train. Hydra dispatcher gave him permission to open up the throttle. Wherever he's goin', they must need him bad."

Bucky looks over at Steve, expression unreadable, and Steve returns the glance for a second before putting on his helmet and turning to the zip line. Monty squints through his binoculars again.

"Let's get going, because they're moving like the devil."

Steve hurriedly hooks the handhold onto the line, gripping it tightly. "We've only got about a ten-second window. You miss that window, we're bugs on a windshield."

"Mind the gap," Monty says.

"Better get moving, bugs!" Dum Dum shouts over the rush of the wind.

Steve grips the bar, waiting for Frenchie's signal. He raises his hand, pauses, then, "Aller!"

Steve pushes off, gliding over the open air as wind buffets his body. Bucky and Gabe follow close behind, and they all drop onto the top of the train as it rockets around the corner. They run forwards across the top towards the front, keeping low so as not to be swept off their feet. Steve
reaches a ladder near the front and descends, Gabe staying on the roof for cover as Bucky follows. He knows Gabe will make his way to the front to try and arrest Zola while Steve and Bucky sweep the train.

They enter the car and Bucky pulls the door shut behind them. It's dark and quiet, racks of weapons making aisles in the middle of the car. They each take a side, moving forward cautiously. When they get to the end, Steve moves ahead into the next car while Bucky glances back, and suddenly the doors close between them. Steve whirls, looking through the small glass window where Bucky starts firing at his assailant. He hears a whine and turns to find a soldier decked out with huge guns standing in front of him, blue light emanating from the weapon. He fires before ducking a blast of blue light. He can hear rapid gunfire exchanged in the other car and can only pray Bucky is alright. He exchanges fire with the soldier a few more times before running down the aisle with his shield in front of him, using the sliding mechanism on the roof to propel himself forward and kick the soldier in the chest. He delivers a final blow to the back of his head with his shield, knocking him out.

He uses the blue gun to fire at the opposite door, breaking the seal. He runs through it and to the door to the next car, where he sees Bucky crouched in the corner, out of ammo and with an expression of horrified resignation on his face. He withdraws his spare gun and loads it, hitting the button to open the door and gesturing with his gun. Bucky nods, and he throws it over.

He sprints into his room with his shield over his head as Bucky covers him from the side. He pushes a large case of something and Bucky fires a shot, and the soldier is down. Bucky strides forward, breathing heavily.

"I had him on the ropes."

"I know you did," Steve says fondly.

There's another whir behind them and Steve turns just in time to see the soldier with the blue gauntlets aim straight at them. He pushes Bucky behind him, putting up his shield.

"Get down!"

The gun fires, ricocheting off the shield and ripping a hole in the side of the train as Steve is knocked back into the wall, shield slipping from his hands. Bucky, kneeling in the center of the car, grabs the shield. Steve puts an arm under himself just as Bucky picks up the shield with his left arm and shoots with his right.

The gun fires, and Bucky goes flying out of the car. Steve feels a stab of blind panic and he pushes to his feet, grabbing the shield and throwing it at the soldier with all his might. He is knocked back and Steve immediately turns, tearing off his helmet as he looks out onto the ripped car, where Bucky clings to the railing at the very end.

"Bucky!" he yells, beginning to make his way across the piece of metal, the wind whipping at his hair. He edges along the railing, Bucky flailing and slipping. He can see blood on his left arm, his hand scraped and coat torn, and his heart skips a beat. "Hang on!" He gets as far as he can on his railing, Bucky edging as close as he can on his. Steve flings out a hand, willing himself to reach. "Grab my hand!" he shouts desperately.

Bucky's railing slips, and then breaks as Bucky reaches out a hand.

"NO!" Steve screams, reaching out, but his hand closes on empty air as Bucky falls away.
Bucky cries out as he plummets into the icy ravine, hand still outstretched and blue eyes wide with fear, his face burned into Steve's vision. Steve grips the railing as he watches Bucky's form disappear from sight, the train speeding on and away into the distance.

Chapter End Notes

Stunning artwork by CRW (Solgress)!
Chapter 5

There is a wolf on my rooftop
I hear his paws pattering
There is a wolf on my rooftop

I am afraid to to leave my home
There is a wolf on my rooftop
My home in it I stay

The wolf on my rooftop
It howls my name
The wolf it howls from my roof

Of this wolf I am afraid
This devlish lycan
I am afraid of the wolf

The wolf want to devour
My soul and life
Devour me the wolf wants to

Yet I will not allow
The wolf to prevail
Allow the wolf I cannot

Because I am the wolf
On my rooftop
The wolf on the roof is me

Wolf by Kevin Garcia

Bucky's hand stretches out as he falls away, a cry tearing from his lips. The last thing he sees is Steve's face, desperate and terrified, hand reaching out like a lifeline. He falls for what feels like an eternity, white blurring all around him as he tumbles through the air. In the last moments before he hits the ground he prays, closing his eyes.

Ave maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum...

Then he slams into the ground, and everything goes dark.

***

He comes back into awareness slowly, disoriented and in pain. His head throbs with agony and he feels warm wetness trickle down the back of his neck, his vision blurry and distorted. He distantly registers pain in his body, and a heavy feeling in his left arm. His nose is numb with cold, and he hears the trickling of water to his left. As awareness returns, pain blossoms in his left arm, and when he tries to move his fingers he can't feel anything. He lifts his head to look, pain lancing through the back of his skull and sending bright spots dancing in his vision. When they clear his arm comes into view, and he stares in detached horror.
His left arm is laying in the stream at the bottom of the ravine, fingers black with cold. His elbow is mangled, wedged between two rocks, and his forearm drifts lifelessly in the current, bent in the wrong direction. His blue coat is in scraps around it, small pieces drifting down the stream. He stares for a moment in sick fascination, watching his fingers flutter in the current but unable to feel them. Frostbite steadily creeps up his hand, and somewhere inside him he knows it is lost.

Looking away he swallows, trying to order his thoughts. *They'll find me,* he thinks. He tips his head up, drawing in as deep a breath as he can through broken ribs, and howls. The sound bounces off the walls of the ravine, echoing as it gradually fades away into the silence. *They'll find me,* he thinks. They'll hear him, and they'll come for him. Steve will come for him.

But he's trapped for now, elbow crushed between two rocks and forearm hanging by a thread as icy water rushes past. He needs to get away, he knows, or the infection will kill him if the cold doesn't first. He tries to shift into his wolf but can't, his body too mangled and strength sapped. He tugs fruitlessly on his arm, only sending pulses of agony through his elbow and making him nearly black out again.

Finally he stops, panting heavily, breath misting in the air. He knows what he has to do, and he forces a calm detachment over himself as he reaches into his belt with his right hand and withdraws his knife. It's the one the Commandos gifted to him, with small paw prints engraved into the handle. He holds the knife right above his elbow, hand shaking slightly and knuckles white around the handle. He takes another breath and grits his teeth before lowering the knife and beginning to saw.

It's agony. He forces himself to keep going, locking his mind in a tiny box far away and trying not to think about it. Blood drips into the snow, running into the stream in red rivulets. He makes one final thrust, and blackness swallows him up again.

He wakes to find himself in the same position, right arm draped across his body and bloody knife lying in the snow. His arm now ends right above his elbow, his blue coat shredded just above it and stump bleeding sluggishly. Bucky manages to twist slightly, pressing the end of the stump into the snow to stop the bleeding. He blacks out for a second and then drags himself away from the stream with his right arm, legs dragging limply behind him. He thinks his spine is broken.

He runs out of strength after getting a few feet and lays on his back, staring up at the sky as small snowflakes drift past. His mind is growing muddled again, vision blurring and eyelids drooping. *They'll find me,* his feverish mind repeats. *Steve will find me.*

He's woken by voices, and hands pulling at his body. The world blurs between blinks, and he only catches small bursts of clarity. Men in fur caps leaning over him. Russians, he thinks distantly. He's being rescued. *Where's Steve?* Then he is being dragged, watching as the stump of his arm leaves a red trail through the snow. He tries to say something, anything, but he only falls back into unconsciousness.

***

When he wakes he is lying on a table, a sheet pulled up to his chest. He sees white coats hovering over him, and he feels relief. He has been saved. He can't move his body, can only blink sluggishly as the world swirls around him distortedly. They inject him with something and he watches as someone approaches with a saw, and he tries to scream *stop! I'm awake!* but no sound comes out and he blacks out again as the saw starts to cut through his arm with fiery agony.

***
When he wakes again he is still on the table, body aching but less so than before. His arm throbs, but he doesn't dare look. He looks around blearily and a face looms in his vision, a small smile gracing it.

"Ah, Sergeant Barnes, you are awake," the man says with a heavy Russian accent, eyes sharp with curiosity.

Bucky tries to speak but only croaks, throat dry and raw. The man disappears before returning with a glass of water, propping Bucky's head up with a strong hand and tipping the glass to his lips. Bucky drinks greedily, water spilling down his chin. When he's finished the man sets his head back down and the glass disappears, his face coming back into view.

"How are you feeling?"

"Hurts," Bucky rasps.

The man's lips quirk up, something dangerous glinting in his eyes. "Yes, I expect so. Quite the injuries you sustained, Sergeant Barnes. A normal man would be dead right now. I do wonder, why aren't you?"

Bucky swallows, heart rate increasing. "I don't know."

The man leans closer. "Oh, I think you do....White Wolf."

Bucky freezes and his eyes widen, and the man's smile grows.

"I see I was right," he says, and Bucky's heart sinks. "I wasn't sure until now."

"No," he stammers. "No, I'm not, no-I don't know what you're talking about-"

The man frowns. "I am not a fool, Sergeant Barnes. I know the whispers. How do you think we found you? We heard a howl, one that no human could make. And your body speaks for itself. It is amazing, how you heal, and your teeth are so sharp and strong. Just extraordinary." He leans closer. "Tell me, what are you?"

Bucky meets his gaze, trying not to bely his fear. "James Barnes, Sergeant, 32557038," he says flatly. "Where is Steve? Surely he's coming for Bucky. The Russians are their allies. He must know Bucky is here. He must be coming. Bucky just has to wait."

The man sighs. "Such a shame. But don't worry, we'll find out, one way or another." He turns, barking out something in Russian.

Men approach, grabbing Bucky roughly and dragging him off the table. They throw his right arm around someone's shoulders and he goes limply, too weak to resist. He sees the stump of his left arm covered by bandages, and he is dressed in white slacks but no shirt. His dog tags are gone. They drag him to a cell before throwing him in. He stumbles and barely catches himself with his right hand. He crawls over to the small cot on the far wall, sitting down and leaning back against the cold cement. The man from before steps up to the bars, expression unreadable.

"Why are you doing this?" Bucky grits out. "We're allies. I'm an American soldier."

The man's eyebrows raise. "You are not even human. Your allegiances mean nothing." With that he turns and strides away, leaving Bucky cold and alone. It settles into his gut, the realization that he has not been rescued, but he clings to the hope that Steve will find him, will take him away from this place, will take him home. All at once, he wants to go home.
He curls onto his right side, squeezing his eyes shut. *He wants to go home.* He wants to hug Becca, and eat his ma's soup, and kiss Steve in the quiet of their Brooklyn apartment. He's tired of war, and suffering, and death. He just wants to go home.

He falls asleep that way, heart aching in time with his arm.

***

He's woken by a loud clanging. He jerks up, momentarily disoriented before the events of the last...however long come back to him. The man is standing outside his cell, hands folded behind his back as soldiers open the door with a creak of metal. They grab Bucky, dragging him out of the cell and down a narrow hallway. He struggles, but he's weak and the lack of his left arm leaves him unbalanced. He's brought into a cement room with a drain in the middle, and he swallows in apprehension. The door slams shut behind him and the soldiers deposit him on the floor in a heap, moving to surround him. The man steps up, face expressionless.

"You will become the wolf," he orders.

Bucky glares. "No."

"If you will not do it willingly, we will have to make you," he says dispassionately.

"Just who the hell do you think you are, pal?" Bucky spits. "I'm not doing a damn thing for you."

"My name is General Aleksander Lukin. You will obey, or will will make you obey." Bucky growls, and Lukin looks pleased. "Ah, there it is. Now, I need proof that you are truly the White Wolf that they say. If you do, you will not be punished."

Bucky spits at his feet. "Go to hell."

"Very well. Солдаты!"

The soldiers step forward, withdrawing batons. Bucky just has time to shield himself with his right arm before the first one comes down with a resounding crack. He feels the hot pressure in his chest, the wolf surging forward at the threat. The hit adds another bloom of pain to his already aching body, barely healed from the fall. He looks across the room to the door, thinking if he can just get to it...

He waits until the soldier has swung his baton up before surging forward, shifting in midair and closing his teeth around the soldier's neck. He goes down, and Bucky rips his throat out in a spurt of red, turning to the others. He lunges at the next one-

And suddenly crashes to the floor, teeth clicking together as his chin cracks against the cement. He struggles to get up but he only has one foreleg, the other a stump ending a few inches below the shoulder, bloody bandages coming unraveled. He scrabbles, heaving himself to his remaining three feet and staggering, off-balance and unsteady. He's shaking with exhaustion and he snarls at the circling soldiers with impotent rage, swaying as he fights to remain upright.

There's a slow clapping, and Lukin steps forward, eyes alight with excitement.


Bucky glares at him as he pants, the soldiers' faces around him betraying their fear. Even injured, exhausted, and starving, Bucky knows they're terrified of him. He can smell their fear mingled with the blood of the soldier he'd killed. Their eyes keep flicking to the lifeless body, wide
and horrified. *Good*, he thinks savagely. *You better be damn scared of me.*

Lukin is still studying him like a fly caught in a web. "Can you understand me, Sergeant Barnes?" Bucky growls. Lukin smiles. "I see you can. Good. That will make things easier. Now, I think you deserve a rest, no? You are still weak. Be a good boy, and come along back to your cell."

Bucky snarls, hating Lukin with every fiber of his being for his patronizing air. It was fine when the Commandos made dog jokes, but here it's just degrading, humiliating. He'll die before he complies with this sorry excuse for a Russian general.

Lukin sighs. "Your defiance is becoming tiresome, Sergeant Barnes. I have allowed it until now, but you need to learn your place. You are an animal, nothing more. You will follow my orders quietly and without resistance, or there shall be consequences." He motions to the soldiers. "*Намочите его.*"

One of the soldiers walks over to a nearby table and picks up a black muzzle, approaching Bucky. Bucky stumbles backwards, feeling sick. The soldiers advance as he snarls futilely, snapping at hands that get too close. He sinks his teeth into one, relishing in the pained cry he elicits as he bites down hard, hearing bones crunch under his teeth. But hands grab him and pin him to the floor, more clamping his jaws shut as they shove the muzzle onto his face. His snarls have turned to whines as his body throbs with pain, crushed against the cold cement floor and with knees and hands digging into tender spots, the stump of his left foreleg being bumped and scraped mercilessly.

They strap the muzzle on securely before backing away, and Bucky surges to his feet. He shakes his head, wanting it off, *get it off* but it won't budge and he can't even use a paw to swipe at it without falling. He can barely open his mouth to breathe, and he's never felt more helpless. He considers shifting back, but he has the feeling it would only make this worse. His pants are lying in scraps in the middle of the room, and he doesn't think they'll be kind enough to give him new ones if he shifts. He's already been humiliated enough without adding nudity to the mix.

The soldiers approach again, this time buckling a wide leather collar around his neck as he struggles helplessly. They proceed to drag him across the room, Bucky stumbling and falling, bashing his stump into the ground each time. The soldiers don't relent, following Lukin's barked Russian and hauling him down the narrow hallway and back to his cell. They throw him in, and Bucky hits the ground hard as the door slams behind him. Lukin comes up to the bars again, eyes glittering in the dim light.

"*You must learn your lesson, valchonak. You are not human. You belong to Mother Russia now, and Mother Russia commands obedience.*"

***

They leave a bowl of water in his cell, taunting him as he cannot drink through the muzzle. He curls up in the corner, body aching as he breathes shallowly through his nose. Hours pass, and his thirst doubles, tongue thick and swollen in his mouth and throat raw.

Eventually he breaks, and shifts back to human. He rips the muzzle off with a hand, uncaring of anything as he picks up the bowl and brings it to his lips, drinking in long gulps. He takes care not to drink it all at once, knowing the dangers of doing so and wanting to save some for later. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, taking deep breaths through his mouth and reveling in the feeling of being able to move his jaw.

There's movement, and Lukin reappears at the bars.
"You were not told to shift back, волчонок."

"Go to hell," Bucky snarls, hunched in the corner of the cell in a vain attempt to maintain his dignity. He looks up, meeting Lukin's eyes. "The Commandos will come for me. Steve's gonna rescue me, and then I'm gonna rip your throat out."

Lukin only smiles. "Oh no, Sergeant Barnes. No one is coming for you."

"If you believe that, then you got another thing coming, pal."

"I know it," Lukin replies smoothly. "It was I who told Captain Rogers myself of your tragic demise."

Bucky's blood runs cold. "What?" he chokes out.

"Oh yes. We happily volunteered to search for your body. Such a shame that all we found were your remains, too disturbing for anyone to see. I provided Captain Rogers with your dog tags, of course. He appeared very affected. He must have cared about you a great deal."


"So you see, Sergeant Barnes, no one is coming for you."

Bucky presses back against the wall, feeling his hopes crumble into ash. "No," he says. "No. Steve will find out. He'll come for me. He'll come for me, he thinks desperately.

Lukin looks almost pitying. "Oh, волчонок. Such faith. Wasted on an American. Your Captain Rogers is nothing but a science experiment, a dancing monkey for American propaganda. Soon you will see, and your loyalties will shift."

Bucky is murderous. "Steve Rogers is worth ten of you. I would rather dig my own grave than ever serve you."

Lukin just purses his lips. "We shall see, волчонок. We shall see."

***

They beat him until he shifts back, and bowls of food and water are placed in his cell. He eventually gives in and eats the mushy substance from the bowl, too hungry to care that he's being fed like a dog. When he is done they muzzle him again before dragging him to the lab, where men in white lab coats poke and prod him as he snarls and whines in pain. They're fascinated by him, and spend hours drawing blood and measuring him before ordering him to shift. He resists only a few times before giving in, figuring he's only delaying the inevitable and too tired to care. They leave him naked and strap him to the table, taking more blood samples and measurements as he stares at the ceiling blankly and repeats his mantra over and over again in his mind. Steve will come for me. Steve will come for me.

A distant part of him knows that he won't, that everyone thinks him dead, but it is all he has, and he clutches it tightly like a dying man.

***

His arm heals into a shiny stump. When he is in wolf form, the fur is patchy around the edge and the stump ends close to his shoulder, often hitting against the floor when he stumbles. He has to
relearn his balance in both forms, and he wakes up sometimes reaching for his arm only to find empty space.

He scratches the days into the wall of his cell with a dirty fingernail. Each day brings new tests and demeaning tasks, and he finds his hopes shrinking as the days pass by with no Steve. He is only allowed to eat in wolf form, and they feed him unrecognizable slop from dog dishes that make anger and humiliation rise in Bucky. But he has long since stopped protesting, after he had refused to eat that way and they had let him starve for a week.

Whenever he is outside the cell in wolf form he is muzzled, the soldiers all wary of him since that first day. But over time they realize his helplessness and begin to taunt him with words and kicks, the dog jokes a fresh stripe of humiliation on Bucky's soul. He pictures tearing out their throats with his teeth but can only growl in frustration, jaws pinned together and lack of front leg rendering him as threatening as a newborn puppy. He does bite one's finger off once, in human form, which leads to another beating, and they eventually fashion a sort of mask-like muzzle for his human form.

Whenever he is in human form he is naked. They haven't given him clothes after the first day, and he has long since stopped caring.

Lukin seems frustrated by his disability and continued attempts at resistance, and Bucky catches snatches of conversation with other officers and the name 'Zola,' which makes his blood run cold. He still doesn't know exactly what Lukin wants him for. He knows the scientists are studying him in case they can make more, but Lukin seems to have a higher goal, one that involves Bucky's loyalty to him. Bucky manages to piece together that he wants to use him as a weapon, but he needs to fix his arm and his noncompliance, and it sends a shiver down his spine. Steve will come for me, he prays desperately.

No sooner has he come to his realization then the torture starts.

***

They fashion cuffs and a collar that prevents him from shifting when activated. The collar expands and contracts to match his shifts, and doubles as a shock collar controlled by a device that Lukin holds. They use the cuffs to strap him down and torture him. They start with waterboarding, then move to electric shocks, then knives, interspersed with regular beatings. Every time, it's the same questions.

"What is your name?"

"James Barnes, Sergeant, 32557038."

"Wrong." Pain. "You are not human. You don't have a name." Pain. "Who do you belong to?"

"No one."

"Wrong." Pain. "You belong to me." Pain. "You belong to Russia."

***

They apply heated rods to his skin, and watch in fascination as the burns heal. They cut into his skin with different knives and marvel as the cuts close up within a day without scars. They break every bone in his body one by one, and when he bites through his tongue that, too, heals.
He tries to escape, over and over. He is most unsuccessful in his wolf form, where he can barely hobble along, but can run faster in his human form. He manages to make it almost to the door of the compound, he thinks, when the collar sends shocks racing through his body and he collapses, limbs twitching. They burn the bottom of his feet for this, and make him run barefoot in circles around the cement room, leaving trails of blood and skin behind. He chants in his mind as he limps along, trying to block out the pain. *Steve will come for me. Steve will come for me.*

***

The worst torture is always in his human form. He receives meals and is allowed to sleep in wolf form, and gradually he begins to prefer it, if only because it comes with the least amount of pain. He feels his humanity lessen with every passing day, and he loses himself in the wolf to escape from his tortured existence. Sometimes he forgets how to speak, and can only snarl at the hands that reach for him. The collar stays on, and for the first few weeks it bleeds continually as it chafes at his neck, the skin always healing only to be torn open again. Eventually it stops, as if his body has given up, and he ignores the constant pain and pressure around his throat. *Steve will come for me,* he thinks.

***

Lukin tries to train him like a dog, shocking him with the collar whenever he does something that displeases him and barking commands in Russian. When he is good, Lukin gives his head a gentle stroke, his touch hated and yet yearned for by Bucky, and tells him "Хороший мальчик." *Good boy.* He calls him волчонок, *little wolf,* and sometimes gives him treats of jerky and cheese through the bars of his cell. Bucky hates Lukin, and yet finds himself wanting to obey if only to stop the pain and receive the fragments of pleasure that Lukin offers. He hates himself for this.

He picks up Russian, his brain able to remember and learn huge quantities of new information because of whatever Zola did. He files away whole conversations he is not expected to understand, and learns that Lukin has decided to work with Hydra. The thought sends dread coursing through him, for he knows that though the Russians are bad, Hydra is far worse. *Steve will come for me,* he thinks.

***

They can control when he shifts now with the collar, having wired it into his spine after one too many attempts to pry it off. He obeys, realizing there is no point in resisting. He lets them strap the muzzle on without protest, and eventually they only have to hold it in front of him and he puts his mouth in automatically. After all, what is the point? It's not like he's betraying his country or spilling secrets. It will make no difference whether he puts his mouth in or they hold him down and do it for him, only one ends with more pain. *It matters to your pride,* a small voice says, but the voice gets quieter and quieter as his will crumbles, and eventually disappears entirely. Pride is not a thing he knows any more.

*Steve will come for me,* he thinks, but he thinks it might be too late.

***

He has stopped scratching days on the walls of his cell, the last mark he had made the fortieth such one. He doesn't know how long ago that was. He knows it's 1945 now, wonders if his birthday has passed yet. His hair is starting to grow out, dangling in limp strands over his forehead, and no one touches it although they keep his face shaved for the mask. The only cleanliness he gets is hoses full of cold water on his human form. He doesn't know how long it's been, doesn't know what's happening outside. He doesn't know anything but pain, and the endless grey walls of his
prison. *Steve will come for me,* he thinks, but he wonders when he stopped believing it.

***

Lukin strides up to the bars, a newspaper clutched in his hand. Bucky stares at the wall, ignoring him.

"I have news, волчонок. Your precious Captain is dead."

Bucky's head snaps around. "What?" he croaks.

Lukin smiles coldly. "Yes. He's gone. As I said, no one is coming for you."

"You're lying," Bucky says, panic curdling in his gut.

Lukin holds up the newspaper, pushing it through the bars. "See for yourself."

Bucky darts forward, grabbing the newspaper and retreating to his corner again. It's dated March 5, 1945, and bears Steve's face blown up large on the front. Bucky traces his face with a finger before reading.

*Rogers Disappears*

*A few days ago, a Hydra plane piloted by Johann Schmidt, known as the 'Red Skull,' headed for New York for an attack that would have decimated half the Eastern Seaboard. In a heroic act, Captain Rogers seized control and plunged the plane into the Arctic, where there has been no trace of him since. He is presumed dead...*

The paper slips from his fingers as his world shatters.

***

"What is your name?"

He stares at the ceiling blankly, a dead sort of resignation filling him. *Steve isn't coming. Steve is dead. Steve isn't coming.* He's never getting out of here. Something inside him breaks with this knowledge, the last spark of resistance dying to a smoldering ember. He will never get to go home, will never get to kiss Steve again or wrap his little sisters in a hug, never get eat his ma's stew as she fusses over him, his pa reading a newspaper in his favorite chair by the fire. He will die here, cold and alone, with the knowledge that he has failed in the one thing he has always sworn to do: Protect Steve.

He swallows, closing his eyes as he sends up one final thought. *Forgive me, Steve.*

"I have no name," he says, for there is no Bucky without Steve. He is no one, and nothing.

"And who do you belong to?"

He's crying now, tears making tracks down his face. "Steve," he whispers brokenly. "I belong to Steve."
Steve grips the railing with numb fingers. His heart feels like it has been ripped from his chest the way Bucky has been ripped from him. He doesn't know how long he stays there, the wind whipping his face as the train continues on and Bucky grows further and further away. Eventually, he climbs back into the car when his fingers start to become so numb with cold that he's in danger of slipping off.

He wonders if that wouldn't be a blessing.

The train slows, and Steve can only move blindly on training, checking to make sure the armed soldier is dead before robotically moving towards the front of the train. We have to go back, he thinks. We have to find Bucky. He hopes, prays that he is still alive, that his enhanced healing factor means he could survive the fall. He can't think about the alternative. I have to find Bucky.

He finds Gabe in the first car, submachine gun trained on Zola. Gabe turns at the sound of his footsteps, relaxing when he sees it's him but then frowning.

"Where's Sarge?"

Steve feels as if he's walking through a thick fog, everything unreal and grey. He swallows. "He-" his voice breaks, and Gabe's expression turns to one of horror.

"What happened?"

"The side of the train blew out," he says numbly. "We were being hit by a soldier with enhanced guns. Bucky picked up the shield, but a blast hit it, and he was thrown out. He managed to grab the railing, but-" he swallows. "It broke. I tried to reach him, but-" he trails off. "He fell."

He sees Gabe swallow, then visibly collect himself.

Steve can tell Gabe thinks the worst, and feels anger choke him. "He's not dead," he says harshly. "He's not. We have to find him."

Gabe looks almost pitying. "Alright, Cap," he says softly. "We'll look for him."
Behind Gabe, Zola wears an expression of curious contemplation. His eyes glint with a hint of something knowing and excited. Steve feels a rush of rage towards him for being not only the one who tortured and experimented on Bucky but the reason he's lying in a ravine, cold and injured. Not dead, he thinks desperately. He's not dead.

***

It takes the Commandos and the army trucks an hour to get to them after the train stops. Steve and Gabe stand in silence, faces grim and guns trained on Zola, who wears a permanent expression of disdain. Steve hears the rumble of the trucks first, their brakes squeaking slightly as they come to a stop, and then the crunching of boots on snow. Gabe jerks his gun at Zola and they march him out of the cabin, the faces of the Commandos coming into view. They look pleased when they see Zola captured, but Steve can see the instant they realize Bucky is nowhere in sight. They meet just outside the train, soldiers coming to handcuff Zola and take him into custody.

"Where's Barnes?" Dum Dum asks. "Don't tell me he's gone wolfy again." He grins, and the rest of the Commandos echo it.

Steve swallows heavily and Gabe looks down, face grim. Dum Dum's smile falters, dread creeping into his expression.

"Where is he?" Morita questions, voice thready.

Gabe hesitates, looking at Steve. "He fell," he says quietly. "There was an accident." He turns and looks back at the train, where the car can still be seen, a gaping hole in the side. The Commandos follow his gaze, eyes widening and expressions falling.

"We're going to find him," Steve says, voice shaking. "We're going to find him."

Dum Dum squeezes his shoulder. "Of course we are," he replies, but his voice is rough. "Of course we are."

***

They won't let them set out immediately to find Bucky, saying it's too dangerous and they need to get Zola back to base. They don't have the fuel or resources to launch a rescue mission, and this is Russian territory. Steve wants to ignore this and just run to find Bucky, but Monty seems to read his mind and quells him with a look, and Steve knows it wouldn't solve anything. Even if he found Bucky, he might not be able to get him back to base, and he could get lost in the vast white wilderness of Russia. Still, it grates.

Steve is almost shaking with the desire to find Bucky the whole way back to base, and the Commandos shoot him worried glances. He doesn't care. All he cares about is finding Bucky. It takes another two hours to get back, snow falling around them in flakes of white that blanket the world in a serene stillness incongruous with the storm raging inside Steve. I have to find Bucky, he repeats to himself. I have to find him.

***

"I'm sorry, Captain Rogers, but you can't go," one of the commanders says. "We've made contact with a Soviet patrol in the area, and they've agreed to search for him. There's nothing you can do but wait."

Steve feels helpless rage build inside him but schools his expression, giving the man a tight nod. "Yes, sir." His fingernails dig into his palms, carving painful crescents that help to ground him. He
sits back down at the cramped table, the room silent and drawn. The Commandos sit around with tense expressions, the small, dim room seeming even bleaker in the silence.

The minutes stretch into hours, and Steve changes out of his Captain America uniform and into his dress uniform. At some point, someone brings food, but Steve barely tastes it.

Finally, there's commotion, and a squad of Soviet soldiers stride into the room. Steve stands up, heart beating fast in his chest as he takes in their unreadable expressions. The man in front steps forward, face stern and eyes sharp under his fur cap.

"Captain Rogers, I am General Aleksander Lukin. It is an honor to meet you," he says, voice accented and crisp.

Steve forgoes all pleasantries. He can feel the Commandos, the whole room holding it's breath. "You found him?" he breathes, heartbeat loud in his ears.

The man's mouth tightens and he reaches into his pocket, withdrawing something silver and glinting. He holds out his hand palm up, and they're Bucky's dog tags.

"I am sorry for your loss," he says, and Steve's world comes to a grinding halt.

***

He doesn't remember how they get back to London Allied headquarters eventually. Everything seems far away, icy coldness stealing into Steve's heart. The Commandos do not joke or laugh, but stare ahead with grief-laded expressions, mouths pressed in thin lines. Colonel Phillips takes one look at them, the absence of Bucky, and Steve sees his face tighten, the most emotion he's ever seen him display.

Peggy looks up when Steve walks into the room and stills, face falling and eyes widening. No, she breathes, and Steve cannot look at her.

Where's Sergeant Barnes? Howard asks, eyes betraying a worried vulnerability. When he finally understands, his stunned silence is the most unnerving of all.

He's in the bar now, the same one where this had all started, where he asked ready to follow Captain America into the jaws of death and oh, to take back those words now, to make Bucky go home where he would have been safe but no, Steve had asked and he knew that Bucky wouldn't say no, would never leave Steve but it hurts, and it's his fault that Bucky is dead, his fault they can't even give him a proper burial because there was nothing to salvage, his fault that Bucky's family will be torn apart, and Becca had made him promise, she will be shattered...

He pours another drink from the bottle, hating the fact that his head is still clear. He doesn't want to think. He doesn't want to exist in a world where there is no Bucky. The bar around him is nothing but rubble from bombing and it's fitting, somehow. There is nothing but destruction around him, in him. Bucky was beautiful, and now he is gone, has been torn apart as by wolves at the bottom of an icy ravine. A horrible irony, in the end.

He hears the sound of heeled footsteps coming closer. They stop in the doorway and he glances over, returning to his glass when he sees it's Peggy. She walks into the room and his sniffles, attempting to wipe his face before reaching across to pour another drink.

"Dr. Erskine said that the serum didn't just affect my muscles. It affected my cells. Created a protective system of regeneration and healing. Which means, um-" He looks down at his glass. "I can't get drunk." There's a pause. "Did you know that?"
"Your metabolism burns four times faster than the average person," Peggy replies, pulling up a chair to the small table where he's seated. "He thought it could be one of the side effects." He can see her expression out of the corner of his eye, brown eyes warm and filled with grief. "It wasn't your fault," she says gently.

"Did you read the report?"

"Yes."

He scoffs. "Then you know that's not true."

"You did everything you could." There's a moment of silence. He stares down at his glass, not responding. "Did you believe in him?" Peggy presses. He looks up, the question rhetorical. "Did you respect him?" Peggy's gaze is forgiving, understanding. "Then stop blaming yourself. Allow James the dignity of his choice. He damn well thought you were worth it."

"I don't care," Steve finds himself saying. His voice is choked up, fingernails cutting into his palm. "I don't care. He's gone. I loved him, and he's gone, and it's my fault."

"I loved him too, Steve," Peggy says sharply, voice tinged with pain.

He looks up, feeling a fresh wave of guilt, and reaches out a hand to clasp Peggy's. He realizes it's the first time he's ever heard Peggy admit that, about either of them.

"I'm sorry," he croaks.

Peggy squeezes his hand, tears slipping down her face. "I know," she says softly. "I know."

He feels a sort of dull rage overtake the grief in his chest. "I'm going after Schmidt. I'm not going to stop until all of Hydra is dead or captured."

Peggy's grip tightens. "You won't be alone."

***

Christmas comes and goes, and Steve tries not to think of Bucky's family, who would have received the news by now. The Barnes's had always invited Steve and his ma to share Christmas with them, and he remembers how wonderful it had been. He remembers a warm house filled with laughter and light, the scent of cooking ham and potatoes wafting from the kitchen as he and Bucky drank eggnog and exchanged presents. The crinkle of Bucky's eyes as he opened his, usually a drawing since Steve was too poor to buy him anything. Bucky always acted like it was the best present he'd ever gotten, and always kept every single one of Steve's drawings. He'd died with Steve's last drawing in his jacket, next to his heart.

He'd died with Steve's last drawing in his jacket, next to his heart. He remembers going to midnight mass on Christmas Eve, and falling asleep on Bucky's shoulder in the dim candlelight. Making snow angels in the unplowed street, snowball fights with Bucky's sisters that left him out of breath but smiling from ear to ear, Bucky's cheeks pink with cold and lips red and chapped. He'd looked the same before he fell, hair windblown and breath misting in the frosty air.

He thinks back to the last Christmas they'd shared, different and yet the same. Steve's mother had been gone, Bucky moved out of his parents' house, but they had gone back for Christmas day. Bucky had hugged his ma and his sisters, grown now, and they had exchanged presents just as before as Mrs. Barnes made her famous Christmas dinner. But it had been tense with the war looming over them, the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor just weeks before, and after dinner Bucky had taken a deep breath and announced, I've enlisted in the Army, and Steve had been stubbornly determined to follow him.
They'd never talked about it, but after Azzano Steve had realized with a sinking feeling that Bucky hadn't enlisted, that his service number (32557038, Bucky mumbled over and over on that table, like he'd been tortured.) was a draft number. He had lied. He hadn't even wanted to go, he thinks. He'd never wanted this war, no, that was Steve. But he had stayed for Steve, and Steve had led him straight into his grave.

***

The Commandos keep hitting bases with terrifying focus for two months, no more jokes or quips during missions. They are deadly and efficient, striking without mercy and leaving nothing but scorched earth behind them. They keep howling, not only in remembrance but so no one makes the connection between their missing soldier and the missing wolf. Steve feels they owe it to Bucky to keep this secret, to let him die in peace. Besides, they leave no one alive to tell.

***

It's February 28, ten days to Bucky's birthday. Grim faces line the strategy table. Colonel Phillips stands at the head, the Commandos, Peggy, and Howard filling out the seats all around and Steve at the opposite end. Colonel Phillips had interrogated Zola before he was put into a SSR prison to be dealt with later, and the weak willed scientist had spilled all. They know that Schmidt is planning a massive attack on the US tomorrow, but they need an effective plan to stop him.

"Johann Schmidt belongs in a bug house. He thinks he's a God. He's willing to blow up half the world to prove it, starting with the USA," Colonel Phillips says.

Howard chimes in. "Schmidt's working with powers beyond our capabilities. He gets across the Atlantic, he will wipe out the entire eastern sea board in an hour."

"How much time we got?" Gabe questions.


"Where is he now?" Dernier interjects.

"Hydra's last base is here." Colonel Phillips holds up a photo and points to a base. "In the Alps. Five hundred feet below the surface."

Morita raises an eyebrow. "So, what are we supposed to do? I mean, it's not like we can just knock on the front door."

Steve's mouth presses together and he feels that blank rage rise up again. He wants to burn Hydra to the ground, no matter what he has to do. "Why not?" he says. "That's exactly what we're gonna do."

***

It's March first, nine days to Bucky's birthday. Steve drives the motorcycle through the woods, a pack of Hydra agents swinging behind him. The blue blasts from their guns bounce off the shield on Steve's back. He dispatches them by clotheslining them, then fire from his engine, and then blows the last two up, feeling nothing. He aims for the base with his shield in front of him, pressing a button to fire at the approaching tank, blowing it up. He revs up and over the inclined wall, pressing another button on the bike and vaulting off as it continues towards the base and explodes, ripping open the door. He dispatches Hydra agents with prejudice, determined to take as many as he can down. Finally he is surrounded by flamethrowers, which disappear only to be replaced by a circle of agents.
He lets them handcuff him and walk him through the base, until they arrive at a large room with vaulted ceilings, Schmidt's red skull becoming visible as he steps forward into the light, coming to stand in front of Steve.

"Arrogance may not be a uniquely American trait, but I must say you do it better than anyone. But there are limits to what even you can do, Captain. Or did Erskine tell you otherwise?"

"He told me you were insane," Steve replies.

"Ah," Schmidt breathes. "He resented my genius and tried to deny me what was rightfully mine. But he gave you everything. So, what made you so special?"

Steve flicks his eyes over Schmidt before meeting his gaze with a small smirk. "Nothin'." He pauses. "I'm just a kid from Brooklyn."

Schmidt snaps, hitting Steve and driving him too his knees, the breath knocked out of him. He slowly raises his head to glare at Schmidt, feeling the familiar words on his tongue he's said all his life.

"I could do this all day."

Schmidt's expression is still furious. "Oh, of course you can. Of course." He draws a gun. "But unfortunately I am on a tight schedule." He points the gun between Steve's eyes.

Steve hears a thunk and a whistle as the Commandos shoot towards them, Schmidt turning towards the sound. "So am I," he says lowly, wrenching the guard to his left in front of him just as Schmidt fires. He explodes into blue vapor as Gabe, Monty, and Dum Dum smash through the window, firing on the Hydra agents. Schmidt runs off as Steve hastens to follow him.

"Rogers!" Steve turns to look back and sees Monty with his shield. "You might need this!" He throws the shield to Steve, who catches it effortlessly.

"Thanks!" Steve turns and runs after Schmidt, leaving the Commandos behind. He turns down a hallway, hearing explosions that mean Morita and Dernier are breaching the base and gunfire signaling Colonel Phillips, Peggy, and the other soldiers aren't far behind.

He catches up with Schmidt eventually, using his shield to block the rays of blue light he fires behind him. Schmidt disappears through a door that rapidly closes, and Steve throws his shield with all his might, wedging it into the door. He's about to move forward when another soldier with flamethrowers appears, making him duck into a crevice in the wall. He gets closer and closer until sudden gunfire sounds. He peers out around the corner to see the man down and on fire, and jogs past him to find Peggy Carter and a group of soldiers rounding the bend.

"You're late," he says, stepping closer. The tension is palpable, both running high on adrenaline as they stare at each other heatedly.

"Weren't you about to-"

Steve jolts out of his trance. "Right." He runs down the hallway, removing his wedged shield and slipping through the door just as it closes behind him. He emerges onto an underground airstrip just in time to see a large plane taxiing down the runway behind a large squad of Hydra agents. He runs towards it, knocking Hydra agents out of his way as if they're no more than flies, singleminded in his focus. He launches himself off of a crate and uses a chain to swing forward over their heads, landing on the other side and continuing his sprint towards the accelerating plane. He's losing ground, the plane too fast even for his enhanced body, and he slows to a stop before a car screeches
to a halt next to him, Colonel Phillips driving with Peggy in the back seat.

"Get in!" Colonel Phillips orders, and Steve jumps in the passenger seat as they take off with a squeal of tires. Colonel Phillips presses a button, and Steve is pressed back against his seat as the car shoots forward, flames coming from the sides. He stands up as they approach the plane, ready to launch himself at it.

"Keep it steady!" he shouts over the roar of the engine.

"Wait!" Peggy grabs his uniform, pulling him down for a kiss. It's gentle, and yet desperate, a silent I love you they've never had a chance to say. "Go get 'em," she says, and Steve hears everything they've never said.

He looks over at Colonel Phillips. "I'm not kissing you," the man grumbles.

Steve turns to the plane, slinging his shield on his back and pressing himself flat as the rotor blades spark against his shield. They're almost to the end of the runway, emerging from the long tunnel and out into the blue sky. Steve throws himself forward, clinging to the wheel of the plane as it takes off. He looks back to see the car getting smaller and smaller on the edge of the runway, Peggy just a speck of brown against the white mountain.

The hydraulics lift until the wheel and Steve are inside the plane, and he starts to make his way forward. He sees bombs, and then there's Hydra agents, and he ends up outside the plane in the air, struggling over a manned rocket. He finally manages to land it back in the plane, and keeps moving forward. He enters the cabin, creeping forward silently towards the pilot's seat. He edges around until it becomes clear, and it is empty.

He whirls around just in time to block a blast of blue that Schmidt fires in his direction.

"You don't give up, do you?" Schmidt shouts.

"Nope!" Steve runs forward, blocking blasts until he can engage Schmidt one on one. They exchange blows, moving around the cabin until Steve throws Schmidt against the controls, the plane tilting down dangerously and sending them flying. Schmidt eventually manages to put it on autopilot, and it levels out as Steve falls to the floor, breathing heavily.

"You could have the power of the gods!" Schmidt yells, shooting wildly at him from across the cabin. "Yet you wear a flag on your chest and think you fight a battle of nations! I have seen the future, Captain! There are no flags!"

"Not my future!" Steve dives for his shield lying abandoned on the floor, blocking another blast before hurling it at Schmidt. He falls back, smashing into the glowing blue console in the middle. Blue light sparks upwards and around it.

"What have you done?" Schmidt rasps. "No!" He picks up a cube of blue light in his hand, which starts to glow. Pulses of blue light begin to stretch upwards, and suddenly the roof opens into a starry sky with swirls of galaxies, infinitely beautiful and vast. Steve stares in amazement and trepidation as the blue pulses of light increase, and Schmidt's hand starts to dissolve as he holds the cube. His expression turns to confusion and horror as the light engulfs him, letting out a scream as Steve covers his eyes against the blinding light. Schmidt is sucked upwards into a shaft of light, and suddenly there is a whoosh and the light fades until just the cube remains. It drops to the floor, burning through it and falling away towards the ocean.

Steve jogs to the pilot's seat, taking off his helmet and sitting down as he looks over the controls.
The course is set for New York City, and when he looks ahead all he can see is clouds, the sun setting over the horizon and painting the sky in soft colors. It's breathtakingly beautiful, and the world seems to quiet as the plane glides through the air.

He finds the radio, tunes into the right frequency. "Come in. This is Captain Rogers. Do you read me?"

Morita's voice responds. "Captain Rogers, what is your-"

"Steve is that you? Are you all right?" Peggy's frantic voice interrupts.

"Peggy! Schmidt's dead," he responds.

"What about the plane?"

He huffs a breath, searching the console for the controls. "That's a little bit tougher to explain."

"Give me your coordinates, I'll find you a safe landing site."

The wind roars through the smashed glass, and Steve's eyes fix on the image of the plane on the console, riddled with bombs.

"There's not going to be a safe landing. But I can try and force it down."

He hears Peggy stammer the way she never does. "I-I'll get Howard on the line. He'll know what to do."

"There's not enough time. This thing's moving too fast and it's heading for New York." He takes a breath, watching the sun glint through the clouds. "I gotta put her in the water."

Peggy sounds desperate. "P-please, don't do this. We have time. We can work it out." Her voice breaks.

I'm sorry, Peggy, Steve thinks. "Right now I'm in the middle of nowhere. If I wait any longer a lot of people are going to die." It's true, but it's only an excuse. "Peggy," he says. "This is my choice." He knows she'll understand. Allow James the dignity of his choice.

He pulls out the compass with Peggy's picture, placing it on the console. Bucky's dog tags are around his neck, close to his heart. He puts a hand against his chest, feeling the small lump, before he grasps the controls and pushes them down. He glances at the picture of Peggy, guilt and sadness clawing at his heart. He loves her, he knows. Maybe in another life they would have gotten married after the war, had children. But he loved Bucky first, and it seems they were not made for happy endings. No, they are made for anger and violence and death, and Peggy deserves more than half of a person. For that is what Steve is, without Bucky. Bucky was half of his soul, and now he is gone.

"Peggy?" he says again. He needs her, in these last moments. Needs her to let him go so he can see Bucky again.

"I'm here."

"I'm gonna need a rain check on that dance." I might even, when this is all over, go dancing. (What are you waiting for?) The right partner.

"All right," Peggy says softly, tremulously. Her voice strengthens. "A week, next Saturday, at the
"You got it." The ice grows closer, wind whipping at Steve's hair as he breaks through the clouds.

"Eight o'clock on the dot. Don't you dare be late, understood?"

He can't make that promise. "You know, I still don't know how to dance," he says. He'd danced with Bucky, of course, but never with a woman. He thinks he would like dancing with Peggy. He's being pulled in two directions, between Peggy and Bucky. The two smart, witty, selfless brunettes who had captured his heart. *I think you have a type,* Bucky had said. He just wishes they could all be together again, one more time. But he must go. Peggy will find her way in the world without him.

Peggy's voice is almost inaudible, choked off. "I'll show you how. Just be there."

His heart pounds in his ears, the ice rapidly approaching through the glass. "We'll have the band play something slow. I'd hate to step on your-"

The plane slams into the ice, and Steve is thrown forwards, hitting his head on the console. The plane is tilting and sinking, icy water rushing into the cabin.

"Steve?" Peggy's voice crackles through the radio, tearful and soft. "Steve?" Icy water rushes over it, and the sound cuts off. *Goodbye, Peggy,* he thinks quietly. *I love you.*

Steve pulls himself to the back of the pilot's chair, sitting down and leaning back against it as the plane tips down. The world is blurring, head aching as water laps at his chest. He could probably swim out, he knows, but he simply leans back and closes his eyes. He's ready to go home, for Bucky is the only home he's ever known. He's tired of fighting, and violence, and death. He just wants to hold Bucky one more time, to let the world pass by as they lay there, unconcerned by war and heartbreak. Cold creeps up his limbs, everything numb as he floats in the rising water. Fitting, he thinks, that they should both die in the cold. But when he thinks of Bucky he thinks of summer, of cigarette smoke and sweat and blue-grey eyes crinkling at the edges as Bucky smiles, of sun glinting off the water and tracing the shapes of clouds as they lay on their backs, young and carefree and innocent.

It's only a little more than a week until Bucky's birthday. He would have been twenty-eight. Steve is only twenty-six. He raises a hand to his chest, where Bucky's dog tags lie, and he feels a sense of peace wash over him.

*I'll see you soon, Bucky,* he thinks. *My darling, I'm coming home to you.*

***

He wakes up sixty-six years later, and he is alone.
Chapter 7

there is a wolf
waiting outside
the door for you
it has an eye tooth snarl
ready to muzzle you
and everything is on fire
but you

There is a wolf waiting outside by dazmb

"The war is over," General Lukin says. "The Allies have won."

*Good*, Bucky thinks distantly, but he doesn't have the strength to care. It has been a while since Steve died. Weeks, maybe months. He knows no one is coming for him, now. He stares ahead blankly, not acknowledging Lukin.

"And I have even better news," Lukin continues. "We have finished the arm." Bucky looks up, and Lukin smiles. "Hydra is quite resourceful, I must say. It was fortunate indeed that I joined them. Dr. Zola's work is incredible, and we are in constant communication. Hydra has managed to infiltrate the SSR, and they are none the wiser." He laughs, harsh and twisted. "And you, my волчонок, you shall no longer be crippled by your unfortunate injury. You shall be glorious. You shall be the new fist of Hydra."

***

They put him on the table again, collar activated to prevent him from shifting. They inject him with a paralytic and shove a tube down his throat to keep him breathing. Bucky is unable to move or cry out as he watches himself be cut open. They reinforce his ribs, clavicles, and spine with metal, strange coils of mesh-like material that they wrap around each bone. *To allow for movement when he shifts*, he hears them say. *We must make sure the arm will adapt to the shift and is usable for both anatomies.* They implant sensors and electrodes along his spine and throughout his shoulder and the stump of his arm to detect the shift and allow him to control the arm, we need him to be able to feel pressure, needs fine motor control, Dr. Zola's notes say...

He drifts off into his own head as the surgery progresses, the pain like nothing he's ever felt before. He can feel their hands inside his body, touching his bones and muscles and poking and prodding with no concern for his pain. He wants to scream, thrash, howl, *anything* but can only move his eyes slightly, trapped in his own body. He retreats into the calm quietness of his mind, the bright white lights of the operating room fading from his vision.

His muscles twitch just as they are sewing him up, the paralytic wearing off.

"Stay still," they say, threading the needle through his skin. Someone pulls the tube out of his throat, making him choke and gag before he draws in a rasping breath through raw airways.

The hands on his body disappear and he blinks, looking around as his body comes back under conscious control. White-coated doctors are standing around the table, one writing on a clipboard
to his left, back turned to him. His shoulder, back, and chest ache with a persistent throb, and he raises his hands, he has two hands. The left one is metal, gleaming under the harsh lights as he studies it in amazement and horror. The doctor turns, coming closer to lean over the arm, inspecting it, and Bucky reaches up and latches the hand around his throat, squeezing tighter and tighter in fear and pain and rage at what they have done to him. Someone hits the button and electricity shoots through his collar, the hand loosening from the doctor's throat as he arches and tenses on the table, hands going to the collar at his neck. He whines, a plaintive, desperate sound filled with pain and confusion. The shocks stop and he lays there panting, harsh, ragged sobs torn from his throat. Lukin's face looms over him, mouth pressed in a thin line.

"Ah, волчонок, why are you upset?" He reaches out a hand, brushing a strand of hair from Bucky's forehead. "It was a gift." His voice is chiding, as if talking to a child. "We have given you a new arm, a home, food and water, a purpose. That is more than you deserve. You are nothing but a dog, yet we treat you with respect. No one else would accept you. They would lock you away, shun you, think you monstrous."

He continues to stroke Bucky's hair, and Bucky is too weak and confused to resist, body still trembling. "But not me, волчонок," Lukin continues. "I accept you. I do not make you hide who you are. I am the only one you can trust, the only one who will be there for you. Now, tell me. Why did you strangle the doctor?" His voice is calm, soothing almost, and his strokes don't let up. Bucky's mind feels muddled, the soft touch feeling like salvation to his aching body. The gentle voice makes him want to press into his hand, to curl up beside him and let him take Bucky's troubles away. No! a small voice says. I hate him! He did this to me! But Bucky is tired, and cold, and empty, and Lukin's voice is the only spark of warmth in his miserable existence.

"It-it hurts," he rasps. "It hurt-I-I was awake-" he chokes off.

Lukin continues to stroke his hair. "You know you burn through sedatives," he says calmly. "We could not afford to waste them on you. It is just pain, волчонок. Order comes through pain, you know this. You have been given a great gift, one you do not deserve. You have no right to complain."

Bucky swallows, mind rebelling against Lukin's words but unable to form a coherent argument against them. "But I didn't-I didn't want it-" he tries. "No-I don't-you can't-I-"

Lukin's eyes sharpen. "You do not have wants, волчонок. You are a dog. You follow orders, nothing more."

Bucky's mind is starting to clear, and his breaths begin to become shallow once more with anger. "N-no. No-I'm a person. I'm an American soldier. You-you're holding me prisoner. You-no- I'll never-I'll never serve you. Never." He jerks his head away from Lukin's hand, breaths ratcheting up. "I don't want-no-get it out! Get it out-no-no-no!" He flings his right hand over, scrabbling at where he can feel metal fused into his flesh, a thing attached to his body that he doesn't want; he doesn't want it get it off get it off get it off-

His fingers dig into the seam, a raw open wound that runs across his shoulder. He digs sharp fingernails into it and rips, scoring deep gouges into his shoulder before a shock jolts through him again. He screams, fingers still digging into his skin as blood streams from them. The shocks stop just long enough for hands to pin him down, wrenching his fingers away and strapping him down to the table. He thrashes against the reinforced cuffs and straps and sees Lukin standing back a few feet, a disappointed expression on his face as he watches him.

"I'll rip your throat out!" Bucky screams.
"General Lukin, stress to his body will undo all of our careful work," one of the doctors says in frantic Russian.

Lukin waves a hand. "Fine. Do what you need to. Punishment will come later."

One of the doctors stabs his thigh with a needle and Bucky finds his body growing paralyzed again, his struggles getting weaker and weaker.

"N-no," he chokes out as his body goes limp. "N-

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He lays on the table, staring upwards blankly. One, two, three, four, he counts, the small imperfections in the white ceiling as familiar now as his own body. More familiar now, really. For his body is no longer his own, hasn't been since Steve pulled him off that table in Azzano. Zola had turned him into an animal, but Lukin had made him inhuman. Part of him now is metal, wires and servers and plates replacing flesh and blood and bone. He thinks it's almost fitting, his body a reflection of what he's become: Something not human, a creature of pain and grief and impossibility.

He thinks it's been hours since he had first woken up, hours since the paralytic finally wore off and they left him here, dazed and unresponsive. He can feel the surgical cuts slowly healing, and his whole upper body thrums with a constant pain. The gouges on his pectoral have stopped bleeding, but dried blood is still painted down his chest. It's no use, he knows. The arm is grafted onto his shoulder, encasing the stump of his arm and attached with pins and synthetic tissue. There is no getting it out.

Doctors return after a few hours, checking his stitches and cleaning off the blood. If he turns his head slightly he can see where the metal arm attaches to his shoulder, a jagged line of twisted flesh lining the seam where it has been grafted into his skin. It's still oozing blood slowly, unable to be sewed up because of the metal. He looks down into the incision, small links of metal lining the one side as far down as he can see, where he knows it's melded to his shoulder with the same mesh-like material attached to the underside of the plating, the doctors counting on his healing factor making skin grow over the mesh and securing the arm to his shoulder. That way the metal plating will not move or slide over his shoulder but literally become part of it, or at least that's what he gleaned from the doctor's commentary and watching his own surgery. He knows the stump of his arm is still under the metal, but as his skin grows into the mesh he knows he will never see it again. As the hours tick by the metal arm slowly becomes part of him, and he resigns himself to the fact that he will never be free of it. They have made him into a machine.

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He lays there for what feels like days, though he has no sense of time in the room, with the constant glare of the lights and windowless walls the only things in his vision. He knows the doctors and Lukin are able to watch him continuously through the cameras that are littered throughout the base, but he's stopped caring. The doctors check on him every so often, removing the stitches as the incisions heal into smooth skin, an IV taped to his hand that delivers fluids. It almost bothers him, that he never scars. Sometimes he wonders if he imagined the torture, when the evidence erases itself over and over.

But the seam of the metal arm does scar. There's a ridge of twisted tissue, red and irritated, and the gouges he had carved outwards remain as starbursts of white as if to remind him of his failure.

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Footsteps sound, loud on the cement floor. Multiple people, approaching Bucky and stopping at various distances. Lukin's face blots out his vision.

"Good morning, волчонок. Are you ready to comply?"

Bucky stares just to the right of Lukin's face, not responding. Lukin sighs before raising a hand and slapping him hard across the face. Bucky blinks, cheek stinging and Lukin's face sharpening in his vision.

"You will respond when spoken to," Lukin orders. "Are you ready to comply?"

Bucky nods slowly, eyes finding Lukin's. He smiles, benevolent once more. "Хороший мальчик." Good boy.

He undoes the straps and cuffs, soldiers rushing forward to pull Bucky off the table. His legs are unsteady under him, weak from surgery and lying still for days. When he's standing the soldiers back away, forming a circle around him interspersed with doctors.

Lukin raises his device, pressing a button that makes the blue light ringing Bucky's collar fade. "Shift," he commands.

Bucky doesn't even think about resisting. He hunches, shifting into wolf form. His paws hit the ground and he realizes that he's standing on four legs, the metal arm having shifted with him to become his left foreleg. The metal covers his shoulder and curves around the front of his chest, fur falling over the scars Bucky knows are there underneath. He takes a tentative step forward, the leg moving smoothly and metal paw clicking against the floor, the small joints moving to spread apart slightly as they take his weight, allowing him more stability and traction. He's amazed for a second, the technology breathtaking. He had forgotten what it felt like to be able to walk normally as a wolf. But then reality crashes back down and he's surrounded by soldiers and doctors, a prisoner of their twisted schemes.

Suddenly, however, he realizes that he can walk. He can run. They haven't put the muzzle back on yet, and now he is no longer crippled by a missing leg. It seems the men realize this too, as they shift uncomfortably with nervous expressions, soldiers' hands tight on their batons. Bucky ducks his head, pretending to limp on the metal leg and whine. He holds it up, a silent invitation to the doctors to fix it.

"I think there's something wrong," one says worriedly in Russian. "Maybe the arm didn't shift correctly."

"Muzzle him," Lukin says, watching Bucky with suspicious eyes. Bucky maintains his pathetic pose, pinning his ears back and looking pained. A soldier approaches with the muzzle, obviously nervous. Bucky waits until he crouches down to strike, springing past him and launching himself at the nearest soldier. He goes down with teeth to his throat, and Bucky turns to the next one before they have time to react. His leg throbs but he ignores it, heading for Lukin, who has the device for his collar. If he can make it in time...

Lukin presses it just as he leaps, and he goes crashing to the floor in front of him, spasming in pain.

He snarls, helpless rage filling him at being so close to freedom. Lukin spins the dial on the device and the shock ratchets up, Bucky's snarls turning to yelps and breathy whines as his paws scrabble at the floor, metal one leaving gouges in the cement.

"Shift," Lukin orders, voice harsh and filled with anger.
Bucky whines, pressing into the floor as the shocks continue.

"Shift!" Lukin repeats, and the shocks stop.

Bucky shifts, panting as he lays on the cool cement, teeth gritted against the pain running through his body. He hears Lukin stride forward, crouching down and grasping Bucky by the hair, wrenching his head up.

"You ungrateful dog," he spits, expression murderous. "You are worthless. I should've put you down months ago." He takes a breath, schooling his expression. "But, unfortunately, you are the only one of your kind. For some reason, we have been unable to replicate Zola's serum on anyone else. They die, or go insane. But not you, no. What makes you so special?" He gives Bucky's head a shake, fingers digging into his scalp. "Answer me!"

"I don't-I don't know," Bucky gasps out, eyes tearing from the pain.

Lukin releases him suddenly, Bucky's head almost cracking against the floor. When he looks up, Lukin's expression is full of disgust. He waves a hand at the soldiers, barking orders in Russian. "Take him to the conditioning room. We'll look at the arm later."

Rough hands grab Bucky, pulling him up. He fights back weakly, but all the strength has gone out of his body and he can barely stand up. They drag him from the room and down the familiar hallway, to the room that makes blind fear ring through Bucky's mind. He tries to retreat into his mind as Lukin enters, his collar lighting up blue as the cart of instruments is wheeled closer.

"You have been disobedient, волчонок," says Lukin, as the man Bucky only ever calls the torturer in his mind rolls up his sleeves. Lukin never gets his hands dirty. "You know what happens when you are disobedient." He leans in. "Remember, you deserve this."

***

He lays on the table, body shaking and soaked in sweat. The torturer leaves and Lukin steps forward, stroking sweaty strands of hair away from Bucky's forehead. The touch soothes his frayed nerves, sending tendrils of warmth through him.

"Shhh волчонок, it's all right now. I'm here. I'm sorry that I had to do that to you. I didn't want to. But you are so difficult, sometimes. You disobeyed, and you hurt the people who were trying to help you. You know the consequences of that."

Bucky whines, turning his face into Lukin's hand, and Lukin cups his cheek.

"Come, my волчонок," he says softly. "Shift, and I will take you back so you can rest." He undoes the straps and cuffs, turning Bucky's collar off, and helps him off the table. Bucky shifts, letting the wolf take over as he sways on his feet. Lukin tangles a hand in Bucky's fur as he moves towards the door and Bucky follows, mind numb and relying on animal instincts. He doesn't even realize he isn't muzzled.

They reach his cell, Lukin ushering him inside before leaving. He returns a moment later with a bowl of water and a sachet of jerky, entering Bucky's cell and placing the bowl down. Bucky stumbles towards it, drinking greedily. Lukin settles on the small pad in the corner, patting the space next to him and holding the jerky enticingly. Bucky moves towards him on instinct, the smell of the jerky making his mouth water. He lays down next to Lukin obediently, eyes trained on
the jerky. Lukin takes a small piece and holds it out, and Bucky takes it from his hand to wolf it down. Lukin rests a hand on his head, stroking comfortably as he feeds Bucky small pieces of jerky. Bucky leans into the touch, wolf starved for affection and his mind and body too weak and muddled to protest.


Eventually Lukin leaves as Bucky's lids grow heavy, and Bucky curls up on the pad, falling asleep immediately.

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He wakes only to throw up, revulsion and shame churning in his gut.

***

The doctors examine the metal arm in wolf form, making sure it works correctly. Then Lukin begins training, acclimating him to the metal arm and honing his skills. Bucky resists at first, but it only ends in pain, and eventually he figures there's no use. It's not like he's killing anyone for them. It's the first time he's been given clothes, too, tactical pants and combat boots but no shirt. A part of him whispers that they must be planning to use him for something, that he will end up killing for them, but he ignores it. Nothing could make him kill for them.

He tries to fight back, too, when they give him knives and weapons to use. But with a press of a button, Lukin has him whining on the floor, safe behind a bulletproof observation window. So he stops killing the soldiers around him, though he takes every chance to inflict injuries whenever he can. Lukin doesn't seem to care if he hurts them as long as he's not actively fighting back, and soon the soldiers are all terrified of him again. They stop mocking him for good when someone pats his head once and he bites their hand off. Lukin only says, "He's not a pet, or a toy. He's a weapon, and I am the only person who gets to do that. Keep your hands to yourself, or you will find yourself without them."

So Bucky takes out his aggression on the soldiers, and day by day his humanity continues to slip. He trains for hours, whirling and kicking and flipping knives until he drops with exhaustion, curling up in his cell each night as a wolf. Lukin pushes him hard, failure met with punishment and success met with treats and pets, sometimes special privileges. Bucky rarely speaks anymore, and whenever he isn't training he is in wolf form, sinking into the quietness of animal instinct and letting rational thought slip away. A part of his mind knows what Lukin is doing, knows he is trying to win Bucky over with his soft words and gentle pets and treats, but like everything else he has stopped caring. At least when he is doing that, he isn't hurting Bucky. And it's not like Bucky truly is loyal to him, or buys into anything. It's not like he's killing anyone for them. So what's the harm in escaping from pain for a little while and satiating the part of him that's starved for affection and touch that doesn't hurt?

He knows he is wrong, but he has stopped caring.

He thinks it's summer now. The base (prison) is hot now, making sweat drip down the back of Bucky's neck when he trains and his tongue pant out in wolf form, his thick fur making him even hotter. He almost looks forward to being hosed down with cold water after each training. His hair continues to grow out, curling around his ears and brushing his cheekbones. It's only with the threat of his collar that technicians are able to shave his face, and Bucky isn't sure who is more afraid during those sessions, him or them.

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They bring out the prisoner. A man, thin and bruised, eyes wide with fear, mouth gagged by a cloth and hands tied behind his back as he stumbles into the room.

"Kill him," Lukin orders, voice grating through the speaker. A soldier hands him a gun, one bullet in the chamber. Bucky stares in horror at the man, nausea curling in his gut. He had known it would come to this, hadn't he?

He speaks for the first time in a week, voice muffled through the mask that muzzles him. "No," he growls, gripping the gun tightly. "No." The man blinks, breaths easing as he stares at Bucky curiously, eyes drawn to his metal arm.

"You will comply, or there will be consequences," Lukin says.

Bucky snarls under the mask, lip curled. "No."

The shock brings him to his knees. He looks down at the gun gripped tightly in his hand, wondering if he can make it in time. He's tried, over and over, to kill himself with whatever weapon they give him. But his collar always stops him, and he is punished severely. He thinks he has to try one more time because he knows, somewhere deep inside, how this will end. He knows he will break, eventually, and he will kill this man. They will use him as a weapon, and he can never let that happen. He raises the gun to his head in one swift motion, pulling the trigger.

The shock rips through him, his arm veering off course as the gun fires. Fiery pain rips through the top of his right ear, the bullet carving a blazing path through the side of his head. He falls to the floor, electricity arcing through his body and blood gushing down the side of his head, screaming in frustration. The useless gun clatters beside him, soldiers rushing forward to restrain him.

"Take him to the deprivation room," Lukin orders. The soldiers grab him, and Bucky struggles and screams but is incapacitated by the steady shocks still emanating from the collar. They drag him down an unfamiliar hallway to a small padded room and throw him inside, slamming a heavy door behind him. He is surrounded on all sides by blank whiteness, bright lights harsh and unforgiving. He stumbles into a corner, ripping off his mask with a metal hand and pressing his flesh hand against his right ear, the tip of it missing and his hair sticky with blood.

The room is silent except for his harsh breathing, no sounds audible from outside. It's unnerving, the dead silence. Bucky is used to being able to hear everything around him. The walls are padded and white, the room approximately ten feet by teen feet, a suffocating cube lit by fluorescent lights in the ceiling, a small toilet in the corner. On the wall opposite him a camera is mounted, red light blinking as Bucky stares at it. There are more rectangular lights lining the walls, but they're not turned on.

Bucky doesn't know what they intend to do to him, the lack of punishment unusual. He waits, but no one enters, and minutes turn to hours. His head and ear stop bleeding, leaving a trail of dried blood down the side of his head and all the way down his arm. He knows the cut on his head will heal, but the tip of his ear will never grow back, a ragged flat line marking the end of it now. He shifts, stretching his legs out in front of him, and still no one comes. The silence starts to feel oppressive, the white walls closing in on Bucky. He leans his head back against the wall and taps out a pattern on the floor. Three dots, two dashes, two dots, three dashes, five dots, five dots, two dashes, two dots, five dashes, three dots, two dashes, three dashes, two dots. His service number. 32557038. It's a pattern he's picked up to ground himself, one he taps endlessly during hours left in his cell or strapped to a table.

Taptaptap, tap tap, taptap, tap tap tap, taptaptaptaptap, taptaptaptaptap, tap tap, taptap, tap tap tap tap tap tap, taptaptap, tap tap, tap tap tap, taptap.
Eventually he closes his eyes, deciding to try and sleep. A shock jerks him awake, eyes flying open in confusion as he tenses. He waits, but no shocks follow. After a few minutes he closes his eyes again only for another shock to course through his body, understanding settling in his stomach. This is the torture he's been waiting for. He's heard about sleep deprivation, how it can drive men insane. He's had his fair share of sleepless nights during the war, fighting through the night and keeping watch, but he has a feeling he's only scraped the surface. He shudders, settling against the wall again with his eyes open, trying to conserve his energy.

Hours drag by, he thinks, although there's no way to tell time. Exhaustion sets in, Bucky weak from training and losing blood. He finds his head nodding, unaware he's drifted off until shocks drag him back to consciousness. He gets up, pacing around the room. The silence presses down on him.

***

He taps with the metal hand, desperate for sound to break the silence. He paces some more.

***

He takes off his boots, chucking them into the corner and wiggling his cramped feet. He rinses off the blood using the small sink set next to the toilet, sticks his head under the faucet and slakes his thirst.

***

*Taptaptap, tap tap, tap tap, tap tap tap, taptaptaptaptap, tap tap, tap tap, tap tap tap tap tap tap, tap tap, tap tap, tap tap tap, taptaptap, tap tap, tap tap tap, taptap.*

***

He jerks awake to the shock, blinking heavily. His mouth is dry and his tongue feels swollen. He thinks about getting a drink but can't summon the energy to get off the floor.

***

*Taptaptap, tap tap, tap tap, tap tap tap tap tap tap, taptaptaptaptap, tap tap, tap tap, tap tap tap tap tap tap, tap tap, tap tap, tap tap tap, taptaptap, tap tap, tap tap tap, taptap.*

***

His head feels like it's stuffed with cotton wool, eyes itchy and strained from the bright lights. He thinks it's been days, now. The shocks barely bring him back wakefulness, Bucky too tired to care. The lights on the walls suddenly turn on, flashing irregularly. Bucky tries to close his eyes, but shocks make him open them again and he can't escape the flashing lights that ring the room. He curls into the corner, head pounding and hand shaking. The flashing lights continue, and he thinks he's going insane.

***

The flashing lights shut off, and Bucky blinks in confusion, the need for sleep so great it physically *hurts*, like something clawing at his chest, his head muddled and hazy. Shapes swim in front of him, Steve standing with his hand outstretched, a smile on his face.

"It's me, it's Steve," he says. "You're safe now."

"Steve," Bucky croaks. *He came for him.* He stretches out a trembling hand, but it passes right
through Steve and Bucky frowns in confusion. "N-no. Wha-?"

His whole body is shaking, he realizes, the world spinning and distorting in front of his eyes. People appear in front of him, disjointed swirls of colors and shapes. His ma, holding a wooden spoon, apron wrapped around her waist. Becca, hair tied in a ribbon. Steve, over and over, rescuing Bucky. The Commandos, who howl discordantly, making Bucky press his hands over his ears. The howls turn to a high-pitched whistle that sends daggers through his head and the hallucinations disappear, the sound emanating from speakers set in the wall. The sound grows louder, Bucky's hands pressed tightly over his ears as he brings his knees up, curling over them.

"M-make it stop," he sobs, and he is so tired, he just wants to sleep, why won't they let him sleep, he wants it to stop, he wants to go home. "Make it stop, make it stop make it stop-" he's crying, his whole body shaking and ears ringing with pain. "Please, p-please, make it stop, make it stop-"

***

His cheek rests against the wall, eyes open and glazed. Tremors run through him every so often, and the unrelenting sound sends stabbing pain through his eardrums. His knees are pulled up to his chest, hands limp in his lap. He has stopped covering his ears.

The sound stops suddenly, but Bucky doesn't move. The door opens and footsteps sound, drawing closer. He whimpers, head pounding. Everything is confusing and fractured. Nothing seems real.

"Shhh, волчонок," a soft voice says. "I'm here." A warm hand strokes over his hair and cups his cheek, and Bucky leans into the touch. He finds himself gently pulled downwards and onto his side, his head resting on something soft. "It's alright," the voice continues. "You can sleep now, волчонок." Gentle fingers run through his hair and Bucky closes his eyes, sinking into sleep.

***

When he wakes he is back in his cell, curled on his cot. He sits up slowly, muscles aching and head pounding with a dull throb. He has confusing memories of the white room, of sleep deprivation and confusion and flashing lights and high-pitched sounds. Looking around he wonders if it was a dream, but when he raises a hand to his ear he finds a ragged edge halfway to where it should end, and he is still dressed in only his tac pants. The memories seem blurred and yet more vivid than anything else, a sense of incomparable horror and fear but only flashes of images. Him, huddled in the corner. Taps on the floor. Shocks. Flashes of light. Figures, hallucinations. Screaming. His hand, shaking. An ear-splitting sound. A soft voice, gentle hands on his hair.

Footsteps sound, approaching his cell, and he looks up. Lukin appears, studying him intently. A soft voice, gentle hands on his hair, letting Bucky sleep.

"Good morning, волчонок. Are you ready to comply?"

Bucky nods slowly, mind buzzing with numbness. The memory of the room sits in his mind like a steel trap, a distant sense of horror in his mind that is overridden by protective blankness. You've gone insane, a small voice whispers, they broke you, but it fades away into nothingness.

Lukin smiles. "Хороший мальчик." Good boy. He gestures, and soldiers approach carrying bowls of food and water which they slide through the opening. Bucky's mouth waters and his stomach rumbles, pinched with hunger. He looks up at Lukin, waiting for his command. "Shift, and you may eat," Lukin says benevolently, and the blue light fades from Bucky's collar. He strips off his pants robotically, shifting before stumbling forwards towards the food. He chokes it down in moments, drinking from the water bowl until it's empty. When he's done he looks back up at Lukin,
waiting.

A soldier comes over with his boots, slipping them into the cell. "Get dressed," Lukin commands. "Then we shall resume training."

Bucky shifts, then pulls his pants back on and does up his boots, the soldiers opening the door. One approaches with his mask, and Bucky stays still as he slips it over his face and secures it in the back. He follows Lukin down the hallway to the training room while Lukin splits off to his observation window. He warms up, stretching and flexing, before the soldiers put him through his paces. Hand-to-hand combat, target practice with various guns, knife skills, flexibility and gymnastics. When he's done, barely even breathing hard, they bring out the prisoner again, and Bucky freezes.

The man looks even worse, fresh bruises on his face and hollows under his eyes that speak of starvation. His eyes find Bucky's, and Bucky sees himself reflected in them. They are both prisoners, slaves to the whims of Hydra and the Russians. The man looks terrified and exhausted, eyes filled with fear as he looks at Bucky. Bucky swallows, looking away from the familiarity in his gaze. His eyes are blue.

"Kill him," Lukin orders.

Bucky stays still, looking down at the floor.

"Kill him, волчонок, or I shall be forced to take you back to the room. You don't want that, do you?"

Bucky flinches, feeling ice trickle down his spine. His heart rate ratchets up and he swallows, eyes flicking to the prisoner. He stares back, eyes wide and pleading. Bucky's hand shakes around the gun. He takes a step back, breathing shallowly. He drops the gun.

Shocks bring him to his knees again and he sways, squeezing his eyes shut. Then hands grab his arms and he is being dragged away, back to the white room.

***

Lukin's voice is soft as he murmurs reassurances, his hand stroking Bucky's hair. Bucky leans into the touch, mind numb with exhaustion. He is being tugged out of the room, stumbling down the hallway supported by Lukin. They're in a room, the training room, he registers distantly. There's a man in the center, blurry and distorted. He's pushed until he's in front of him. The man is kneeling on the floor with hands tied behind his back. This is wrong, some part of Bucky thinks. He doesn't know how he got here. Who is the man? What is he doing here?

Something is pressed into his hand and he looks down, swaying. A gun. His hand is shaking, and is that normal? He squints back at the man in front of him, eyes wide and..blue? There's something...something he's supposed to know about that, but it slips from his mind. He's so tired. Why aren't they letting him sleep? What is happening?

"Kill him," the voice says, the one that makes the pain go away but no, he also brings pain and he's so confused but he doesn't want to kill the man, he just wants to sleep why won't they let him sleep...

A hand grabs his wrist, raising his arm and pointing it at the man. Bucky's arm is limp in his grasp, weighed down by exhaustion. He's trembling, the gun wavering as it points straight at the man's forehead, steadied by Lukin. The back of a hand strokes against his temple and he blinks, leaning
"Just pull the trigger," Lukin says softly. "Be a good boy, and pull the trigger. Then you can sleep."

It sounds so simple. Bucky is so tired, and Lukin's voice is low and soothing, his touch gentle. He blinks slowly, finger curling towards the trigger, but then pauses. Something isn't right. His muddled brain tries to think, a vague sense of wrongness pushing at him. He opens his mouth, finding his voice.

"I-no-" he rasps out weakly. "I-

"All you have to do is pull the trigger. Then all of this will go away. You want to sleep, don't you волчонок?"

He nods slowly, laboriously, but the wrong feeling intensifies.

"You don't want to make me take you back to the room, do you?"

He shudders, teeth pressing into his lip. "N-no, b-but, but-" He tries to think through the fog. "I don't-no-"

"You will pull the trigger, or there will be consequences."

Tears spill from his eyes and he screws up his face in frustration, biting down on his lip. The gun shakes in his hand. The man is looking up at him, eyes filled with tears and they're blue, so blue. "No," he chokes out, "No, no-I won't, no, no-" He's crying now, and he just wants to go home. He wants this to stop. He just wants to sleep.

Lukin grabs the gun from his grasp, whipping him across the face with it. Bucky cries out, collapsing to the ground.

"You worthless dog," Lukin snarls, and a boot connects with his ribs, making him wheeze. "What do I have to do to get you to comply?" Bucky lays curled on the ground, tears still streaming down his face and small choked off whines escaping from his lips. He hears Lukin sigh. "Dr. Zola was right. More...advanced techniques may be necessary. Don't worry, he will be here in person soon."

He crouches down next to Bucky, running a hand through his hair. "Eventually, волчонок, you will comply." **

He is strapped down to the table, everything hazy. A metal finger taps out a pattern on the table. Taptaptap, tap tap, tap tap, tap tap tap, taptaptaptaptap, taptaptaptaptap, tap tap, tap tap, tap tap, tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap, tap tap. A face looms over him, sending fear shooting through him. Round glasses on a round face, beady eyes, a bowtie visible above a white coat.

"Sergeant Barnes," he says with a twisted smile, and Bucky's blood runs cold. **

"The procedure has already started..." Zola's voice is distorted, Bucky weaving in and out of consciousness. There's a needle in his arm, his body strapped to the table. White coats blur around him, and he falls back into nothingness.
"Put him on ice."

He is being shoved across the room, stumbling and naked, towards an upright cylinder that looks like a coffin. He's shoved inside, and the door slams on his face. He looks through the small window and his reflection stares back at him, confused and scared. He raises his metal hand towards the glass but frost creeps up his body inexorably, and he sinks into icy darkness.
Chapter 8

The wolves sing
Such a lovely song;
Howling, howling,
Calling the pack home.

The lone wolf
Hears the angelic sound,
Despairing, for he is all alone.
He follows the sound,
Remembering his own pack;
So similar, yet so different.
The sounds of playful competition,
The smell of his own kind.

Right in front of him,
Yet so distant,
The pack sees, smells, hears him.
He knows he’s unwelcome;
He feels it.
But the lone wolf
Has been alone for too long.

The wolf pushes forward,
Daring another to challenge him.
The pack doesn’t attack
But the lone wolf’s presence
-Startling and sudden-
Is not acknowledged,
Making it known
The lone wolf is just that;
A solitary, deranged, unwanted wolf.

He stays.
The lone wolf joins the pack,
Unwelcome as he is.
He’s not permitted to join
The hunt, the feast, the camaraderie.
But he knows how to survive on his own.

His lone howl
Calls to the moon,
Calls to his lost family,
Calls to those he’ll never see again.
He’s joined a new pack
But they don’t see him as a pack mate;
“Not yet” he thinks,
“Not yet, but they will.”
The lone wolf goes to sleep
   Each and every night,
   Waiting, just waiting
   For the next day
When the pack will accept him,
Count him as one of their own.

The Lone Wolf by Dev A.

Shield gives him an apartment, a modern thing with a too-soft bed and bare walls. It's not home. It'll never be home. They also give him files on the Commandos, all dead now. He stares at each, unable to process the fact that the world has moved on without him. He remembers seeing them just two weeks ago, young and vibrant. Now they are buried in the ground, each having lived a full life. They have children and grandchildren now. He wonders what they've been told about him, what tales the Commandos had spun. He's famous, even more so than before. His name is printed in history books, his shield pasted across comic books.

Almost none of it is true.

Bucky's file is there too, stamped with Killed in Action across the first page. Steve's hand moves to his chest, where he still wears Bucky's dog tags. It's an ache in his chest, the sense that something is missing, like someone had reached in and carved a hole there. When he'd put the Valkyrie down he'd thought he was going to see Bucky again, but now he is further away than ever. Bucky is another name in the history books, forever known as Steve Roger's best friend who was killed in action. They don't say how he was half of Steve's soul. They certainly don't seem to mention the fact that they were in love, or the wolf. It seems the Commandos took those secrets to their graves.

Howard Stark is dead, too, killed in a car crash with his wife. He left a son behind. Tony. Apparently he's made even more of a name for himself than Howard. There's a file on him, saying he's built some sort of robot suit and is called "Iron Man." Only a Stark, Steve thinks.

Peggy is alive, though she's ninety years old now. She's in England, in a nursing home. He stares at the phone, not prepared to talk to her again. For him it's been two weeks since he put the Valkyrie into the ice, but for her it's been sixty-six years. She'd gotten married, had kids and grandkids and most importantly founded Shield, remaining a force of nature throughout her whole life. It was everything he had wanted for her, in his last moments. His eyes tear up when he sees the name. Of course Peggy had called it Shield.

Finally he picks up the phone, dialing the number of the home in her file. It rings twice before cutting off, a crisp female voice on the other end.

"Merryweather nursing home, how may I help you?"

He swallows. "I'd like to speak to Peggy Carter."

***

He walks the streets of New York, so unfamiliar now. He walks through Brooklyn, past where he and Bucky used to live, but there's nothing left. Their old building has been torn down and a new one put up, and young hipsters walk down the street carrying cups of coffee (Starbucks) and
walking their dogs. He pulls the brim of his hat lower, feeling even more out of place in this strange world.

***

July 24, 2011, five days after he woke up, they had legalized gay marriage in New York. Men can marry now, and Bucky is dead. He only finds this out later, when they give him packets of information about the modern world and show him how to use the internet. They act like they think Steve would be against it, carefully explaining that things have changed, Captain Rogers, I know this is a shock- and Steve wants to shake them and scream I'm queer! I've been in love with a man for over a decade! but he doesn't. There isn't much point, now.

Everyone has this idea of who he is, and there's not a single person besides Peggy who knows differently. But even she doesn't always. Alzheimers, the nurses say. She forgets things. Some days she is happy to talk to him, sometimes she cries and is amazed he is alive, and others she doesn't recognize him at all. He doesn't know which is worse.

***

He sits at a small cafe, sketching the skyline. A waitress approaches, holding a carafe of coffee.

"Waitin' on the big guy?"

He frowns. "Ma'm?"

"Iron Man," she clarifies, nodding. "Lot of people wait here just to see him fly by."

Steve watches the sky. "Right," he says dryly. He pulls out his wallet. "Maybe another time."

"Oh no, it's yours as long as you like," the waitress says, refilling his coffee. "Nobody's waiting on it." She turns to leave. "Plus we've got free wireless."

Steve squints, confused for a moment. "Radio?" But the waitress doesn't hear him. She turns back as she walks away, giving him a flirtatious look.

"Ask for her number, you moron," an old man leans over from another table. Steve sighs, turning back to his drawing. It's only been a few months for him, since he was young and in love. Now one lies dead, the other old and memory fading.

***

He punches the bag over and over, memories flashing through his mind. Bucky, eyes crinkling in mirth. The Commandos, laughing and drinking. Gunfire as they sprint through the trees. The blue cube. I gotta put her in the water! Wind whipping at his hair. Icy water lapping at his chest. Peggy's voice. You won't be alone. Bucky, hand outstretched as he falls away.

He slams his fist into the bag, splitting it and sending it flying across the room. He stands for a moment, breathing heavily, before picking up another bag and hanging it on the hook. He takes a breath, sweeping a strand of hair out of his eyes before starting up again. The door opens and footsteps sound across the floor, growing nearer.

"Trouble sleeping?" He stops and looks over, seeing Nick Fury standing in the entryway. He turns back to the bag.

"I slept for seventy years, sir. I think I've had my fill." In truth, he hasn't been able to sleep since he
woke up. His bed is too soft, too big. Too alone.

"Then you should be out, celebrating, seeing the world," Fury says as he strides closer. Right, Steve thinks. Celebrating.

He stops, looking at Fury before beginning to unwrap his hands. "I went under, the world was at war. I wake up, they say we won. They didn't say what we lost." I lost everything.

"We've made some mistakes along the way," Fury says. "Some very recently."

Steve glances up briefly, cutting to the point. "You here with a mission, sir?"

"I am."

"Trying to get me back into the world?"

"Trying to save it." Fury holds out a file, and Steve hesitates before taking it. He flips it open, seeing a photo of the blue cube Schmidt had had. The Tesseract, apparently.

"Hydra's secret weapon," he says.

"Howard Stark fished that out of the ocean when he was looking for you. He thought what we think; the Tesseract could be the key to unlimited sustainable energy. That's something the world sorely needs."

Steve closes the folder, handing it back to Fury. If they're talking about it, it must be lost. "Who took it from you?"

"He's called Loki. He's...not from around here. There's a lot we'll have to bring you up to speed on if you're in. The world has gotten even stranger than you already know."

Steve sighs. "At this point, I doubt anything would surprise me." He puts the punching bag back on the pile.

"Ten bucks says you're wrong," Fury replies. "There's a debriefing package waiting for you back at your apartment." Steve picks up a couple punching bags, turning and walking out of the gym. "Is there anything you can tell us about the Tesseract that we ought to know now?" Fury questions behind him.

Steve keeps walking. "You shoulda left it in the ocean."

***

He sits inside the quinjet, flipping through the information about the Avengers on the tablet in front of him. He's on the Hulk, watching him tear through an entire army.

"So this Dr. Banner was trying to replicate the serum that was used on me?" The idea makes him sick.

"A lot of people were," the agent who'd introduced himself as Coulson says. "You were the world's first superhero. Banner thought gamma radiation might hold the key to unlocking Erskine's original formula."

On the screen, the Hulk roars as he tears a jeep apart. "Didn't really go his way, did it?" Steve comments flatly.
"Not so much. When he's not that thing, though, guy's like a Stephen Hawking." Steve looks up in confusion. "He's-like a smart person," Coulson amends. There's a pause. "I gotta say, it's an honor to meet you. Officially." Steve gives him a small smile. "I sort of met you, I mean, I watched you when you were sleeping." Steve looks down, pressing his lips together and torn between amusement and uncomfortableness. Coulson stammers. "I mean, I was-I was present while you were unconscious from the ice." Steve gets up, moving to see out the cockpit, resting a hand on the overhang. Coulson follows him, mirroring his position, and Steve feels a twinge of irritation. "You know, it's really, it's just a-just a huge honor to have you on board."

"Well, I hope I'm the man for the job," Steve replies.

Coulson's head is bobbing like some ridiculous toy Steve had seen in a touristy shop window. "Oh you are, absolutely. Uh, we've made some modifications to the uniform. I had a little...design input."

Steve looks at him. "The uniform? Aren't the stars and stripes a little..." He sighs, shrugging. "Old fashioned?" It comes out almost bitter.

Coulson smiles slightly. "With everything that's happening, and the things that are about to come to light, people might just need a little old-fashioned."

***

The quinjet eventually lands on an enormous battleship-looking thing called a helicarrier. Steve and Agent Coulson descend the ramp, a red-haired woman approaching who Steve recognizes from the files as Natasha Romanoff, ex-KGB assassin turned Shield agent.

"Agent Romanoff. Captain Rogers," Coulson introduces.

Steve gives her a nod. "Ma'm."

"Hi," she says. She looks at Coulson. "They need you on the bridge. They're starting the face-trace."

"See you there." Coulson sweeps between them, heading off. Romanoff looks him up and down before turning to walk towards the railing, Steve following.

"There was quite the buzz around here, finding you in the ice. I thought Coulson was gonna swoon." Steve smirks. "Did he ask you to sign his trading cards?" Romanoff asks, eyebrows raised sardonically.

"Trading cards?" Steve grins slightly.

"They're vintage. He's very proud." Steve finds himself liking her, the dry wit familiar. He spots Dr. Banner wandering confusedly by a small plane as pilots rush past.

"Dr. Banner," he calls out. The man turns around, coming over to shake Steve's hand.

"Oh, yeah, hi. They told me you'd be coming."

"Word is you can find the cube."

Banner looks nervous, glancing around. "Is that the...only word on me?"

Steve gives him a nod. "Only word I care about." He knows what it's like for people to see the
serum, and not him.

Banner looks grateful, and he gestures slightly around them. "Must be strange for you, all of this."

Steve looks around at the soldiers running past in regiments, planes all around. "Well, this is actually kind of familiar."

"Gentlemen, you might wanna step inside in a minute," Natasha interjects from behind them. "It's gonna get a little hard to breathe."

There's slight shaking, and loud clunking noises as men run by. "Secure the deck!" he hears.

"Is this a submarine?" Steve wonders out loud.

"Really? They want me in a pressurized submerged metal container?" Bruce remarks sarcastically.

They walk closer to the edge, peering over. Steve watches in awe as huge circular rotors rise out of the water, coming up on all sides of the ship and starting to propel them upwards.

Bruce chuckles. "Oh no, this is much worse."

***

Steve's standing in his uniform, and of course they put him in tights, goddamnit, watching a German crowd kneel before a man dressed in green. This, at least, is familiar. Humanity never changes. There is an older man standing up, refusing to kneel, and Steve feels pride swell in his chest. Humanity never changes.

He jumps from the quinjet just in time to block a blast of light from the staff with his shield, sending it back to hit Loki. He rises slowly, staring him down as he strides forward.

"You know, the last time I was in Germany and saw a man standing above everybody else, we ended up disagreeing." People are getting to their feet around him, emboldened.

"The soldier. A man out of time," Loki sneers, climbing to his feet.

"I'm not the one who's out of time," Steve replies.

Natasha arrives with the quinjet, ordering Loki to stand down. There's a fight, and Loki presses his scepter down on Steve's helmet, knees digging into the ground.

"Kneel," Loki snarls.

"Not today."

Loki's just thrown him to the ground when music echoes through the air, a comet of red and gold swooping towards them. Blasts shoot from its hands and hit Loki, knocking him back as the figure lands, raising it's arms and pointing an array of weaponry at him.

"Make your move, Reindeer Games," the figure quips, as Steve comes to stand next to him. Loki raises his hands, horns and armor shimmering away. "Good move," Iron Man says, dropping his hands. Stark says.

"Mr. Stark," Steve acknowledges, breathing heavily.

"Captain."
They lose Loki, and find him again. Steve breaks up a fight between Stark and Thor, who is apparently a god, but also an alien. Honestly, nothing surprises him anymore.

They're back on the helicarrier, sitting around a table and watching Loki smirk at the camera. They discuss Loki's plans before Stark waltzes in, immediately latching on to Bruce and generally being a nuisance. Steve starts to get the impression more and more that Tony is very different from his father. Way more irritating, at least. The feeling intensifies when he walks in the lab to see Stark jab Banner with a miniature electrical prod, peering in his eyes as he jumps and exclaims "ow!" He tells Stark off, liking him less and less with every minute but admitting he's got a point in wondering if Fury isn't telling them everything. He goes exploring and what he finds makes rage churn in his gut. Hydra weapons. It seems humanity really hasn't changed.

Of course, Fury tries to justify it, saying they had to be prepared for more like Thor. Everyone's squabbling, tensions rising in the room. Every word out of Stark's mouth makes Steve's temper rise, longing to punch him in the mouth just to shut him up.

"Big man in a suit of armor. Take that off, what are you?"

"Genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist."

"I know guys with none of that worth ten of you." Bucky, always giving Steve everything even when they had nothing. The Commandos, following him into battle. Bucky, giving his life for Steve. "Yeah, I've seen the footage," he says, vicious with grief. "The only thing you really fight for is yourself. You're not the guy to make the sacrifice play, to lay down on a wire and let the other guy crawl over you."

"I think I would just cut the wire," Stark quips.

Steve smiles, a twisted thing full of bitterness. "Always a way out. You know, you may not be a threat, but you better stop pretending to be a hero."

He knows he's hit a nerve. Stark's face is full of equal bitterness and anger. "A hero? Like you? You're a lab rat, Rogers. Everything special about you came out of a bottle!" What's so special about you? (Nothing, I'm just a kid from Brooklyn).

They're sitting around the table, a heavy silence pervading the room.

"These were in Phil Coulson's jacket. I guess he never did get you to sign them," Fury says, tossing the bloodstained pack of trading cards across the table. Steve reaches and picks one up, staring at the image of himself soaked with blood. Fitting, he thinks. His hands are stained with blood, dripping with the weight of the things he's done. Just one more person who's died for him.

"Is this the first time you've lost a soldier?" Steve asks, thinking of wind and cold and a hand stretched towards his.

"We are not soldiers!" Stark yells, and Steve suddenly realizes that while he is, Stark isn't. Stark isn't used to war and bloodshed and death. He's a civilian, someone who's not trained for this, but has been through more than most people go through in a lifetime. Steve feels a sad sort of sympathy well up, understanding tempering his irritation.
They're flying out, starting to feel like a team. This is familiar, at least. There's aliens, and a rip in
the sky leading to outer space, but Steve is giving orders and they're working in harmony like
they've been doing this for years. It feels good to have people at his back again, to take control of a
situation and actually know what he's doing. This is what he's good at - fighting. *You could be
alone in the middle'a the desert an' you'd pick a fight with a cactus.* Bucky had always said.
Without Bucky, without a home, fighting is all Steve has left.

Bruce and Thor show up, turning the tide. As hard as they fight though, more keep coming.

"I can close it!" Romanoff shouts through the comms, and Steve breaths a sigh of relief.

"Do it!"

"No! Wait!" Stark yells.

"Stark, these things are still coming!"

"I got a nuke coming in, it's gonna blow in less than a minute. And I know just where to put it."

Steve watches as Tony's form shoots across the sky, clutching the bomb as he aims straight for the
portal. Steve's heart clenches.

"Stark, you know that's a one-way trip?"

Stark doesn't reply, flying higher and higher until he disappears through the portal. Suddenly all the
Chitauri soldiers keel over, shaking before stopping entirely. Steve looks up at the sky, seeing the
explosion blossoming.

"Close it," he says to Romanoff, voice rough. The portal starts to shrink, and just as it closes a
small figure falls through, just a red speck in the sky.

Steve grins. "Son of a gun." But his smile falters as Stark keeps falling.

"He's not slowing down," Thor says, beginning to swing his hammer. Just as he flies up the hulk
grabs Stark out of the air, clawing down the side of a building before crashing to the ground,
throwing Stark off of him. Thor and Steve run over, turning him over as Thor rips off Stark's
faceplate. Steve leans down to listen to his chest, not hearing a heartbeat. The glowing device in
Stark's chest is white and dead as Steve runs a hand over it, Stark's face still and serene. Steve sits
back, feeling guilt and grief war within him.

The hulk roars, and suddenly Stark jerks awake, gasping. The circle on his chest glows with blue
light as he looks around, confused.

"What the hell? What just happened? Please tell me nobody kissed me."

Steve lets out a breath, looking around. "We won."

***

They do eat shwarma, something Steve's never heard of before. It's good, greasy and filling, and
they all sprawl around the table in the destroyed shop, exhausted and silent. Steve can almost
imagine he's back with the Commandos, tucking into a meal after a hard mission, but when he
opens his eyes everything is different and the faces around him are unfamiliar. He's grown to like
them, though, in the short time he's known them. They all have more baggage than probably anyone else in the world, but Steve's always been at home with misfits and outcasts. He thinks, for the first time, that maybe he has a place in this world. He will always keep Bucky close to his heart, will remember the Commandos with fondness and grief, but maybe he doesn't have to stay trapped in the past. Maybe he can start to move forward, to build a new life.

But they go their separate ways, after it's over, and Steve is alone once more.
Chapter 9

I am a prisoner
of another's need
to make the world
feel small...
and hollow.
A sacrifice
to someone else's
fears and foibles;
an unholy law
now forced upon
this weary brow...
I suffer for crimes
not committed,
for sins never dared.
There is no hope
of rescue --
there is no helping
hand.
(Where is my defense?
My redemption?)
No one cares
as long as no
payment is required
or requested--
only my soul demanded!
Prisoner? Sacrifice?
No difference, no
matter now...
I have been thrown
to the wolves,
without remorse,
without conscience,
without a second thought.

To the Wolves by Adelaide Caron Dyson

He is being dragged. He is cold, so cold, and he shivers as he cracks open his eyes. He sees walls,
and there are hands pulling at him, his arms around strong shoulders, water running down his
naked body and dripping from hair that falls in his eyes. Everything hurts, and he is so cold.

He's in a room now, and there are hands on him, rubbing him with towels, more propping him up
as he sways on unsteady legs. He shivers, cold and confused. His teeth chatter. The hands are not
gentle.

Awareness starts to come back as he warms up, blood pumping through his body with a burning
sensation. Everything burns. He is on fire. Rough hands keep scrubbing with towels, voices
swirling around him. His hair is still wet. The burning fades into a tingling and his vision clears. He can make out the forms of technicians surrounding him, soldiers further back watching, but they look... wrong. The uniforms are different. He tries to speak but only makes small croaks and there's a light shining in his eyes, a hand gripping his chin as voices dictate in Russian.

"Pupil response normal, seems confused but aware"-

"No cellular damage apparent, skin lividity within normal range, muscle reflexes good"

A pair of pants is thrust towards him. He takes them blindly, mind muddled and everything hazy. Clumsy fingers grip them and he attempts to put them on but stumbles and falls, body uncoordinated and weak. There's a sigh, then hands are grabbing him again and someone pulls his pants on, doing them up.

"He supposed to be like this?"

"We honestly don't know. There's no basis for comparison. Dr. Zola knew the risks, but he thought his enhanced body could take it. I'm guessing this will wear off once his healing factor kicks in."

"Well I don't want to be around when it does. I've heard the stories. They say he'll take your hand off with his teeth. He's a fucking wolf."

"Better get him in the chair, then. Lukin's waiting for him."

More hands grab him again, slinging his arms over soldiers' shoulders and dragging him from the room. The hallways are as unfamiliar as the soldiers' uniforms. They take him to a new room filled with various screens and wires and machinery. In the middle stands an imposing chair, secured to the floor with cuffs on the arms and a strange metal halo attached overhead. He's shoved into it, and the cuffs snap over his arms before he can try to escape. His heart rate accelerates, his mind starting to clear and panic setting in.

A man steps forward, and after a moment Bucky recognizes him as Lukin. He blinks in confusion. Lukin looks at least ten years older, with a new uniform that is a muted blue with accents, accolades dripping from his chest. But his eyes are the same, piercing and stern as they gaze at Bucky.

"Good morning, волчонок," he says.

"What-what-?" Bucky rasps.

"You have been asleep, волчонок. It is 1963."

Bucky blinks, horrified. He knows instinctively Lukin is telling the truth; he looks older, everything is different, and the last thing he remembers...

They had frozen him, he realizes. Like a piece of meat.

"Where-?" he questions, swallowing.

"We are still in Russia. Hydra is everywhere now, and I have moved up the ranks. The KGB is very interested in your capabilities. You shall be an extraordinary asset."

KGB? Bucky thinks. He has no idea what Lukin is talking about, but he knows he will never comply.
He shakes his head. "No-no, I won't—you can't—"

Lukin smiles. "You will not have a choice. It took almost twenty years, but Zola has managed to come up with a solution, with some input from his good friend Dr. Fennhoff. Unfortunately, both are in America right now, but I'm sure they will be eager to hear the results of their experiment."

Bucky glares at him. "Do whatever you want. I will never serve you."

Lukin chuckles. "Oh волчонок, did you listen to nothing I have said? You will not have a choice."

He motions to the technicians standing around. "Wipe him."

The technicians spring into action, pushing buttons and typing furiously. Bucky hears a whir above him, and he sees the halo start to descend, the sound of crackling electricity in the air. He strains against the cuffs, breaths coming fast and panicked. Then metal clamps around his head, and his world whites out in pain.

***

He gasps, jerking in the chair as the electricity stops, the pieces of metal still pressing against the sides of his face and head. Someone is speaking, even and low.

"желание, ржавый, Семнадцать, Рассвет, Печь, Девять, добросердечный, возвращение на родину, Один, грузовой вагон."

Everything is muddled. He is in a chair, there is the chair...how did he get here? What....what is happening? Wipe him. He's-there's something he's supposed to know. Something-something he's supposed to be doing, he thinks. Something is wrong, but his head hurts and he's in the chair and he's so confused-

"What is your name?" a voice asks, and he knows that voice, he's supposed to-he's supposed to...

His mouth opens, and his throat is raw, so raw—from screaming—and he knows this, he has a name...

"Bucky," he rasps suddenly. "My name is Bucky." His finger taps, reflexively, on the chair, and it's metal, did he always have a metal hand? And there's another name, something he's supposed to know, it's important, but he can't remember...

"Again," the voice says, and again what? How did he get here? Everything hurts - why can't he remember - and suddenly the name comes to him, like a shaft of sunlight, and he thinks of blonde hair and blue eyes and the smell of graphite and Steve, he's important, he's everything, how could he have forgotten? Clarity rushes in and he remembers but there's a crackling and electricity sparks through his mind and everything dissolves in a burst of light.

***

"желание, ржавый, Семнадцать, Рассвет, Печь, Девять, добросердечный, возвращение на родину, Один, грузовой вагон." Longing, rusted, seventeen, daybreak, furnace, nine, benign, homecoming, one, freight car, and it's Russian, he knows, but he doesn't know how he knows and he gasps, shuddering as the electricity fades.

He is-he is in the chair, he is in the chair - why does he know this, he doesn't know where he is but he's in the chair, this he knows - and there's a man, he knows the man - it's alright, волчонок-волчонок, little wolf, this is him - he is a wolf - 'white wolf,' laughing voices, 'good boy,' - someone smiles, blue eyes and blonde hair, 'I've always loved dogs'-
"What is your name?" and this is English, he knows, but he doesn't know how he knows and his mouth opens, throat raw - *screaming* - and he responds - *you will respond when spoken to* -

-but he doesn't know, he doesn't know, does he have a name? He must, he thinks, people have names, he knows, but how does he know this? Is he a person? He thinks, and his mouth opens and closes, and there's something on the tip of his tongue - *taptaptap, tap tap, taaptap, tap tap tap, taaptaptaptaptap, taaptaptaptaptap, tap tap, taaptap, tap tap tap tap tap, taaptaptap, tap tap, tap tap tap, taaptaptap* -

"What is your name?" the voice repeats, and he searches, but he can't *remember* - *taptaptap, tap tap, taaptap, tap tap tap, taaptaptaptaptap, taaptaptaptaptap, tap tap, taaptap, tap tap tap tap tap, taaptaptap, tap tap, taaptap, tap tap tap* - and there's an echo, someone's voice, blonde hair and blue eyes, *come on, Buck,* and he says it, finds the words, *English,* he thinks he speaks English-

"Buck-Bucky," he breathes, like a revelation. *His name is Bucky.* He has a name - he's a person, he must be-

"You do not have a name," the voice says, and there's a crushing in his chest. But *no,* this is wrong, the man is wrong, he *has* a name and his fist clenches - *taptaptap, tap tap, taaptap, tap tap tap, taaptaptaptaptap, taaptaptaptaptap, tap tap, taaptap, tap tap tap tap tap, taaptaptap, tap tap, tap tap tap, taaptaptap* -

"No," he says, and there is anger, and he doesn't know why he's angry but he *hates* this man, he hates him and he *has a name.* "No, my-my name is Bucky," he repeats, and it's familiar, there's something just out of reach but he can't grasp it - *his hand outstretched, falling away, blonde hair and blue eyes*-

"Again," and *no,* he thinks, *no, I don't want it, stop, make it stop, I want to go home* but where is home why can't he *remember*-

***

"*Longing, rusted, seventeen, daybreak, furnace, nine, benign, homecoming, one, freight car*"-

- and he's in the chair, the chair, he knows but he doesn't know how he knows; there's a man, he knows the man, a voice-

"What is your name?"

- but he doesn't know, he doesn't know anything. Where is he, *who is he?* There's an answer, he knows, the words swim up - *longing, rusted, seventeen, daybreak, furnace, nine, benign, homecoming, one, freight car* -

"I don't have a name," he says, and it feels-it feels *wrong,* but this is the answer, he *remembers* - *you are not human* - and there was a man, *the man,* and pain, and everything hurts now but the man is speaking again and he wants to be good - *good boy* - wants the pain to end, wants to go *home*-

"*Good boy,*" the man says, in Russian. Is he Russian? - *soft voice and gentle hands,* 'good morning волчонок' that's him, he's the wolf-

"Who do you belong to?" the man continues, and it's English, why is it English? His head hurts but he knows this too, he thinks, answers pried from lips with pain, a table, strapped down - *taptaptap, tap tap, taaptap, tap tap tap, taaptaptaptaptap, taaptaptaptaptap, tap tap, taaptap, tap tap tap tap tap, taaptaptap, tap tap, tap tap tap, taaptaptap* -
"Steve," he says, voice hoarse - screaming - and that's right, Steve, he knows him, he's-his - blonde hair and blue eyes, a hand stretched out - "I belong to Steve."

There's a bubble of warmth; this is right, he knows this, feels it in his soul and he doesn't have a name but there's Steve, everything is Steve, he's coming for me-

"Again," the voice says and the bubble bursts and Bucky feels hot rage and confusion - no, no, please - and he doesn't know why the man is angry. He's right, this is the right answer why is he doing this why won't it stop he just wants it to stop-

***

"Longing, rusted, seventeen, daybreak, furnace, nine, benign, homecoming, one, freight car."

He breathes, muscles trembling and mind quieting. He is in the chair, this he knows. The words - there are always the words. A low, even voice. Good morning, волчонок -

"What is your name?"

"I don't have a name." Rasped through raw throat - screaming - remember you deserve this -

"Good boy. Who do you belong to?"

He frowns, the metal still clamped around his head, mind numb and blank. "H-hydra."

"Good boy." The voice is warm - soft voice and gentle hands, stroking his hair - and he feels relief.

"Who else?"

"You. I-I belong to you."

"Very good, волчонок." The metal releases his face, whirring back into position above him. He blinks, raising his head and looking around. His gaze lands on the man -blue coat and stern eyes. "Do you know who I am?" the man asks.

He searches, mind hazy. "Lukin," he finally manages. He-he takes care of him, he thinks. A cell, food and water, soft voice and gentle hands - it's okay, волчонок, I'm here-

"Correct. What do you remember?"

"I-" he pauses, confused. "There was-a cell. Pain. Cold."

Lukin nods. "You are a wolf. Hydra owns you. I am your master. We have made you into a perfect weapon, and you will bring great change to the world. Remember, волчонок, order comes through pain."

He digests this. Something feels...off, but he has nothing to base his feeling on. He can't remember. He peers up at Lukin, squinting. "Why-why can't I remember?"

"There is nothing to remember," Lukin responds. "We created you. But you were malfunctioning. You see and hear things that aren't real, волчонок. We had to fix you. The chair makes those go away, but it can also make you confused. That is okay. You do not need to think about it, волчонок. You are a dog, and dogs only obey."

He frowns. Lukin moves forward, placing a hand on his cheek. He leans into it, closing his eyes. This he remembers.
"All you have to do is follow orders," Lukin says softly. "If you do, you will be rewarded. If you fail, you will be punished. Do you understand?"

He nods against Lukin's hand.

"Come, волчонок," Lukin says, stepping back. "Shift, then you can eat and rest. Tomorrow we will resume training."

He nods, a metal finger clicking against the chair in a repetitive motion. Taptaptap, tap tap, taptap, tap tap tap, taptap taptap taptap, tap tap tap tap tap tap tap, tap tap tap tap tap tap, tap tap tap tap, tap tap tap tap tap, tap tap.

***

He whirls, sending the agents flying. More are spread out around the training room, groaning in distress. He stands still, breaths shallow and even.

"Good!" a voice barks in Russian. "Again!"

More agents come forward and he tenses, eyes narrowed above the mask. Then with a fluid movement he begins again, mind blank and focused.

***

A hand strokes his head, scratching behind an ear. "Good boy," Lukin says, as he leads him to his cage. Once he is inside Lukin takes off the muzzle, signaling it is okay to eat. He dives in, wolfing down the food from the bowl. When he is done he curls up in the corner of the small cage on the small mat there. Within moments he is asleep, exhausted from the day of training.

***

A prisoner is brought into the room, bruised and battered.

"Kill him," Lukin orders.

He takes the gun, and shoots him between the eyes.

***

It's been a week since he awoke, since the chair. His head has started to ache, a dull pounding behind his eyes. Flashes of images come to him in his sleep. Voices whisper in his ear. He does not tell Lukin.

***

They bring in a prisoner, blonde hair streaked with blood. When he looks up, his eyes are wide and blue. Blonde hair and blue eyes...

"Kill him," Lukin orders.

He takes the gun and aims it between the prisoner's eyes. He hesitates.

"Kill him," Lukin repeats. His voice is tinged with apprehension.

His hand shakes. Blonde hair and blue eyes, a hand stretched out...
He drops the gun, backing away. "No-n-no, no-

A shock brings him to his knees, hands clutching at his collar. His head throbs with pain.

"Why are you disobeying, волчонок?"

"No," he says, childlike. "No-I-I don't want to-I won't-"

"You do not have wants."

"No-No-" There's something just out of reach, something he knows deep in his soul. He looks at the prisoner again, at blue eyes that are confused and scared. He's-he's small, slim shoulders and floppy blonde hair-

"Steve," he gasps, and he's crying now, though he doesn't know why. He only knows a name, a name so important it's carved into his soul. He thinks - blonde hair and blue eyes, slim shoulders, a smile - hey, Buck- a hand outstretched, falling-

"Steve," he sobs, voice breaking, a plea. He's coming for him.

There's a frustrated sigh. "Take him to the chair."

"No-no," he protests, shaking, not the chair no don't take this from me, Steve, please-

Hands grab him and he screams, thrashing. The shocks ratchet up and he goes limp, muscles seized up. They drag him away, down the hallway and into the room with the chair. They throw him into it and he surges forward before the cuffs latch around his arms and pin him down. He strains uselessly against them, chest heaving and body shaking. This is wrong, Lukin lied to him, he knows-he knows Steve and they took that from him, he's-he's a prisoner, no, he's a soldier, taptaptap, tap tap, taptap, tap tap tap, taptaptaptaptap, taptaptaptaptap, tap tap, taptap, tap tap tap taptaptap, taptaptap, tap tap, tap tap tap, taptap-

The metal closes over his face, and everything disappears.

***

"Longing, rusted, seventeen, daybreak, furnace, nine, benign, homecoming, one, freight car."

The metal recedes from his head, leaving him panting harshly as he stares ahead, mind blank and quiet.

"What is your name?"

"I don't have a name."

"Who do you belong to?"

"Hydra. You."

"Good boy. Welcome back, волчонок."

"Ready to comply."

***

There's a mission, in America. Texas. The flight over is long and silent, his breathing muted.
through the mask and agents watching him warily.

He perches in a building, peering through the scope of his rifle. His metal arm gleams, the red star of Russia emblazoned on the shoulder. He sees the motorcade crawling down the street and lines up his shot, waiting for his cue. Gunfire rings out from the opposite direction, pinging off the car as people scream. He pulls the trigger, the man's head snapping forwards as he crumples onto the woman next to him.

He slips away, returning to the extraction point. He climbs into the waiting van, the door slamming behind him. They return to base before getting back on a plane. He stared ahead blankly, metal fingers clicking softly on the arm rest. Taptaptap, tap tap, taapatap, tap tap tap, taptaptaptaptap, taptaptaptaptap, tap tap, taapatap, tap tap tap tap tap, taptaptap, tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap.

***

They give him skintight pants and a shirt made out of a mesh-like material, a small blue electrode above his heart. More electrodes are attached to his flesh arm, a different mask with a breathing apparatus put over his face. He's shoved in the cryo chamber again, the ice rapidly overtaking him.

***

Hands grab him, his body limp and unresisting. Someone undoes the mask from his face and he takes a rasping breath, feeling warmth run through his body from the material covering him. He's being dragged between two people, arms around their shoulders and hair dangling in his face. It's chin length, now, but he doesn't know why that seems wrong.

They deposit him in the chair, cuffs encircling his arms. He's weak and confused, bare feet skimming the floor and numb with cold. There's a whirring and crackling of electricity, and he tenses as metal clamps down on his head, pain ricocheting through him.

He screams, hands clenching into fists and arms straining against the cuffs. Finally the electricity stops, the metal releasing him with a jerk.

"Longing, rusted, seventeen, daybreak, furnace, nine, benign, homecoming, one, freight car," someone recites in Russian, his mind growing quieter with every word and awareness returning. He breathes before looking up, eyes finding Lukin.

Lukin smiles, snapping a small red book shut. "Good morning, волчонок."

"Ready to comply."

***

He's in America again, this time Tennessee. He sets up across the street from a motel, sign proclaiming it The Lorraine Motel. He's on the second floor of the rooming house across from it, looking out the bathroom window. He trains the rifle on the balcony of room 306, waiting. A man steps out, dark skin and cropped black hair in a trim suit and necktie, expression pensive. He takes a breath and fires.

He dumps a package on his way out, a rifle and binoculars with someone else's fingerprints.

***

He closes his eyes, welcoming the ice.
"Longing, rusted, seventeen, daybreak, furnace, nine, benign, homecoming, one, freight car."

"Good morning, волчонок."

"Ready to comply."

He aims, takes a breath, and fires.

He does not dream, in the ice.

His metal hand closes around the woman's throat, her hands scrabbling uselessly at his wrist. Eventually she goes limp, eyes glassy, and he releases his hold. He leaves her where she lies, sprawled on the bed, still in her nightclothes.

He does not recognize any of the technicians who prep him for cryo. Lukin's hair is turning grey.

He dispatches the agents, knife singing through the air. The target scrabbles backwards on the floor, eyes wide with terror. He stalks forwards, grabbing the man by the hair and slicing his throat open. He slumps to the ground, dead.

He doesn't know the year. They don't tell him. He doesn't know why the information would matter, anyway.
"Good morning, волчонок."

"Ready to comply."

***

He slinks forwards in his wolf form, paws silent against the ground. A moment of stillness, and he leaps, teeth sinking into the target's throat. Blood spurts into his mouth, running down his chin, staining the white fur.

***


The target falls through his scope.

***

He snarls at his guards, ears back and teeth bared. They clutch their batons tightly, eyes wide with barely suppressed fear. The cage behind him stands open, the muzzle lying on the ground. He is full of an unexplainable rage, a deep-seated fear that he can't shake. His head flashes with images and sounds, his whole body trembling. His forelegs are splayed apart slightly, his head dipped low as he growls, and he sees the guards swallow.

"What do we do? I've never seen him like this."

"You've heard the stories. I'm not going near him."

"I don't even know what happened. We just tried to muzzle him, like always."

"Beats me. Sometimes he just goes crazy. Too long between wipes."

Footsteps sound, loud and clear against the cement floor. Lukin comes up behind the guards and steps forward, raising his hands at them to stand down.

"It's okay, little wolf. I'm here. I can make all of this stop." He edges forward slowly, expression calm and confident. The wolf stays still, panting as his head whirs in confusion. Lukin crouches down in front of him, extending a hand. He sniffs it before moving closer, bumping his nose against the hand. "There we go," Lukin says. "Good boy." He strokes his head, running a hand over his ragged ear and scratching. The wolf presses into his touch, calming.

"I know you're confused," Lukin murmurs. "Don't worry, I'm going to make all of this go away. It's time for another wipe, yes?"

The wolf stiffens. Wipe him. Again. Pain, confusion, blonde hair and blue eyes - hey Buck - a hand reaching out-

There's a sound echoing through his head, and he thinks of a metal hand on a white floor. Tap tap tap, tap tap, tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap tap tap tap tap, tap tap tap tap tap tap, tap tap tap tap tap tap.

Lukin doesn't notice his internal turmoil, expression placid as he pets the wolf's head. He has no fear, no reason to think that the wolf will lash out against him.
A flash - eventually, you will comply - a hand striking his face - why are you doing this - a leering smile, eyes cold and piercing - you worthless dog - twisting a dial as he writhes in pain - you will not have a choice-

He lunges, sinking his teeth into Lukin's throat. There's a moment of silence as he rips, stumbling backwards. Lukin's hand reaches up to his throat as blood spills down. His eyes meet the wolf's for a moment, wide and stunned, before he crumples to the floor.

***

"Longing, rusted, seventeen, daybreak, furnace, nine, benign, homecoming, one, freight car."

He opens his eyes to see an unfamiliar face, hard and cold.

"Good morning, soldier," the man says.

He feels like there should be someone else, someone different, but he can't remember. He frowns, squinting at the man.

"Who-?"

"My name is Colonel Vasily Karpov. You are The Winter Soldier. You belong to Hydra. You will not speak unless spoken to. You will follow my orders, or you will be punished. Do you understand?"

He nods, eventually. "Ready to comply."

***

He is always muzzled, except for when he shifts and eats. Guards aim guns at him, and he is beaten for talking without being prompted. They address him as Soldier, but he almost expects to hear something different, each time. Karpov does not touch him except to inflict pain. He doesn't know why he gets flashes of a soft voice and gentle hands stroking his head, why he expects to hear a smooth voice call him волчонок-

***

He completes the mission, silent and deadly. It is a relief, almost, to go back into the ice.

***

He doesn't remember the last time he talked. He doesn't remember anything, really, except pain and orders and the sense-memory of training. He thinks something is different, not right, but he can't put his finger on it. He has memories of a soft voice and gentle hands, of being reassured, of talking freely. He doesn't tell Karpov.

***

"Longing, rusted, seventeen, daybreak, furnace, nine, benign, homecoming, one, freight car."

He shudders, breathing slowing as his eyes flick up to Karpov's face. Karpov closes the book with a snap.

"Good morning, soldier."

These are the only words he ever speaks, he thinks. "Ready to comply."
The car crashes as he turns the motorcycle around, skidding to a stop by the trunk. He opens it, making sure the briefcase with the pouches is there. He walks around the side of the car, the target crawling along the ground.

"Help my wife. Please. Help."

He grabs him by the hair, wrenching his head up. The man's expression goes confused and wondering as he stares at him and the soldier pauses, something tugging at him.

"Sergeant Barnes?"

Something snaps in him and he lashes out, striking the man's face over and over with his metal fist. He releases him, the man crumpling forwards, face bloody. He picks him up by the collar, dragging him to the car and positioning him with his face pressed into the steering wheel.

"Howard!" a woman's voice breathes fearfully.

He walks around to the other side of the car, reaching down and closing his flesh hand around the woman's throat. When her breaths subside he removes his grip, walking around again to shoot out the camera. He grabs the briefcase and rides off into the night, his head aching with a persistent throb.

***

"Get me out of here," Karpov commands, and he moves to comply. Karpov points a gun at his head as he moves forward, clearing the way. Chaos reigns, the rogue soldiers tearing guards apart with glee. He slams the gate behind them, snarling softly.

***

He sees the rogue soldiers already in their cryo pods as he's led past, breathing through the mask-like apparatus. They hook him up to the technologically advanced chamber and he closes his eyes, ice creeping up his body as the tank hisses shut.

***

The pain of the chair subsides but no words follow. He blinks in confusion, looking up into an unfamiliar face, sandy hair and blue eyes that twinkle with curiosity.

"Hello," the man says with a small smile, and that is not right either but he is not allowed to question so he waits. "My name is Alexander Pierce," he continues. "It's an honor to finally meet you."

A metal finger twitches against the armrest, clinking softly. Tap tap tap, tap tap, tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap tap tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap tap tap tap, tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap tap tap tap tap, tap tap.
Chapter 10

I let the ashes burn me
To remind me of the pain
This life is never ending
Climbing ladders w/o a gain
Losing myself with each step
Higher & higher there i go
Departing from my skin
Gone with the wind down below
Its getting harder to breathe
As the ladder becomes steep
I wonder who i'll be
When theres nothing left to climb
And i cannot see underneath.

_Lone Wolf_ by Zara Wolfe

It's six months after the Chitauri invasion, and Steve is moving. He's been offered a long-term job with Shield, and he's decided to accept. He doesn't really know what else he would do. The headquarters are in DC, so he's renting an apartment nearby with the seemingly bottomless bank account he has. They really did give him seventy years of back pay. Besides, there's nothing left for him in New York. Nothing is familiar, and seeing Brooklyn only makes his heart squeeze in pain. He needs a fresh start, needs to try and carve out a new life away from all this.

He packs up his meagre belongings, the only things he really values being Bucky's dog tags around his neck and a sketchbook from before the war that a museum had returned to him. They had never displayed it, something he is infinitely grateful for. The pages are littered with drawings of Bucky - Bucky sleeping, Bucky sitting, Bucky sitting on the fire escape, cigarette in hand, his eyes, the curve of his lips - and they tell a story of love with each careful pencil stroke. Sure, they could be interpreted as an artist practicing on the only person around, which he knows is how everyone interpreted it, but to him his feelings are laid bare on the worn pages, his heart scattered across for all to see. This is all he has left of Bucky, now. A chain of silver and a few faded drawings. Bucky's presence has long faded from the earth, if not from Steve's heart.

Sighing, he throws the last of his things in the trailer hitched behind his motorcycle. He pulls on his helmet - infernal state law - and starts it, the engine purring under him as he settles into the seat. With a last glance at the vacated apartment he pulls away, leaving New York behind.

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He wakes the first night before the crack of dawn, bed too soft and dreams haunted by Bucky's face. He pulls on running gear and jogs down the street, not knowing where he's headed. He ends up by the Washington monument, watching the sun rise as rays of light sparkle on the reflecting pool. When he's pushed his body to it's limit he returns home - no, not home, never home - and showers before making breakfast, the apartment quiet and still. He makes coffee and sits by the window, watching as the city wakes. All at once he feels small and terribly, heartbreakingly, alone.

***
He goes to work, receiving awed stares from most of the people in the Triskelion. Fury is there, imposing as always in his black coat and eyepatch. To his surprise Agent Romanoff is there as well, giving him a catlike smirk when she sees him and somehow making him feel more comfortable. At least he's known her longer than anyone else in the building, even if that happens to be only a few days. He's briefed and given a tour of the Triskelion, slightly irritated by but used to the stares that follow him. Romanoff sidles up to him, a curious gleam in her eyes.

"So, Captain Rogers, decided to suit up again?"

He chuckles. "I don't think I ever stopped." It's uncomfortably close to the truth, and she gives him an assessing gaze before handing him something. It's a phone, sleek and modern, the Shield logo evident.

"For communication," she says. "Numbers are pre-programmed in there. You know how to use a phone, right?"

Steve almost wants to roll his eyes. "I'm sure I can figure it out," he says dryly.

She just smirks. "Let me know if you need any help with that."

"I'll hold you to that," he says, meeting her cool gaze.

***

There's missions, every so often, and they help to take his mind off the crushing loneliness that threatens to drown him. He tries to keep moving to stave it off, uses all his stubbornness and grit to just make it through one day at a time. Nights are the worst, when there's nothing to distract him from his dark thoughts. The bed feels too big, and Steve reaches for Bucky in the night only to find empty space in the bed and in his heart. He runs every morning, pushing himself farther and faster and faster as if he can outrun his demons. Sometimes he wishes he were small and sickly again if only so the pain would remind him that he is still alive.

***

Romanoff grows on him, becomes Natasha in his mind. She has a dark past and a steel wall up, but she's smart and funny and doesn't fawn over him like all the others. They work well together, and Fury starts pairing them up more and more. Natasha subtly digs into Steve's life with offhanded comments and questions, prodding at him to get back into the world. Once, when Clint is there, he suggests that Steve make a list of things to catch up on, rattling off a few things of his own.

"Dog cops," he says, nodding. "Best show ever."

_Dog cops?_ Steve thinks, and he almost turns to make a joke about it to Bucky before he realizes that Bucky's not there.

***

Winter turns to spring, and Steve finds his way to Arlington national cemetery on March tenth, 2013. Bucky's grave sits next to Steve's, his monument dwarfed by the taller one dedicated to Captain America. Someone has placed flowers around it, a small American flag stuck into the ground. Steve kneels in front of it, smoothing a hand over the etching.

> James Buchanan Barnes

_Sergeant_
He hears footsteps approaching and stands, pulling the brim of his cap lower over his face. He glances up into the approaching figure's face and exhales sharply, pain stabbing his heart as for a moment he thinks it's Bucky standing there.

Then he blinks, and it isn't Bucky, though the similarity is striking. The dark hair is styled and modern, blue-grey eyes softer and lacking the crinkles at the corners that Bucky's did. His cheekbones are slightly lower, the bridge of his nose sharper and chin less defined. The man's eyes widen before he grimaces, an apologetic expression on his face. Steve notices a small girl clutching his hand, watching Steve in shy admiration.

"Sorry," the man says. "Didn't mean to startle you."

Steve swallows, blinking rapidly. "No, it's fine, you just...look like someone I used to know."

The man's lip twitches up but his eyes are sad. "Bucky, yeah, I know. Nana B always said I was a dead ringer."

Steve frowns, realizing their trajectory is toward's Bucky's grave. "Are you—are you related?"

He nods, reaching out a hand. "James Barnes-Proctor. Rebecca Barnes-Proctor was my grandmother."

Steve swallows again, shaking his hand. James Barnes. He knows Becca is dead now, but it seems Bucky's legacy still lives on. "Wow. I had no idea. Steve Rogers. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise." He gestures to the girl clinging to his hand. "This is my daughter, Isabelle. Izzie, can you say hello?"

The girl nods solemnly, pressing against his leg, dark hair falling in curls around her face. "Hello, Mr. Captain America."

Steve smiles. "Please, call me Steve." He shifts. "So you—you still come out here?"

James nods. "Yeah, Nana B always made a trip out to Bucky's grave in Brooklyn every year. We moved here a little while ago, and I figured I'd keep the tradition alive. Show Izzie her ancestry."

Steve nods. "I'm glad." He pauses. "Well, I'll let you get to it. Maybe I'll see you around." He's nothing but history to them, he knows. They're not family, have nothing in common. He'll probably never see James again.
He turns to leave when a voice stops him. "You know, she uh, she talked about you. My
grandmother." Steve turns back slightly to meet James' eyes, soft and sad and familiar. "She never
blamed you for anything. She would have wanted you to be happy."

Steve swallows, tears pricking his eyes. He nods jerkily before turning again and walking away,
heart aching.

***

Steve watches as fireworks explode over the DC skyline, trying not to flinch at the sounds that call
to mind gunfire and explosions. He'd been pushed into leading the National Independence Day
Parade down Constitution Avenue earlier in the day by Natasha, who had actually cackled when he
told her it was her birthday. Clint had teased him mercilessly, and had even managed to procure a
pair of the most godawful Captain America socks which he had cheerfully presented to Steve as a
birthday gift. Tony Stark had sent him an entire gaudy suit with the tag can't wait to see you in the
parade, Capsicle. He had worn it.

Now he is finally back in the stillness of his apartment, ninety-five and yet only twenty-eight,
although now his age is not quite exact, having gone under the ice in March of 1945 at twenty-six
and woken up in July of 2011, a few weeks after his birthday. This is his first birthday without
Bucky. He remembers last year how the Commandos had teased him about it, how Bucky had
spent hours unraveling Steve in solitude of their room at the inn, cheering and singing drifting up
from the streets below. Back in Brooklyn they used to go to Coney Island for the day and then
watch the fireworks at night from the boardwalk, like true New Yorkers. When he thinks of those
days he thinks of hot dogs and ice cream and red, sunburned faces, the scent of the ocean and a
cool breeze ruffling their hair; Bucky's grin, wide and bright, a strong arm wound around his
shoulders as they stare up at the sky.

He sits in his modern apartment with a hand clutched around Bucky's dog tags, utterly and
completely alone.

***

Peggy moves to DC that fall. She tells Steve that she wants to be with him as much as possible
before she goes, and she has family in DC. He goes to see her as soon as she moves in, trying not to
let his shock and grief at her appearance show. She is still beautiful, of course, but her hair is grey,
hers face lined with wrinkles. Only her eyes are the same, warm and brown and sparkling with
intelligence.

She clutches his hand in one of her lucid moments, eyes sharp and knowing.

"Don't bullshit me, Steven Grant Rogers. You're lonely. When I go - no, don't give me that look I'm
old, it's my time - you're going to need other people to rely on."

"I'm okay, Pegs," he says. "I can get by on my own." The thing is, you don't have to. I'm with ya till
the end of the line, pal.

She raises an eyebrow. "Always trying to shoulder the weight of the world. It's okay to need help,
you know. You may be strong but this-" she raises a trembling finger to prod his chest, over his
heart "-this is the same. You're only human."

He smiles softly, catching her hand as it pulls away from his chest. He meets her gaze, emotion
welling within him, his walls down in front of Peggy. "I miss him," he whispers.
Her eyes are sad, and she looks older than ever. "I know." Her voice cracks. "I know."

***

There are more missions, and the weeks slip away. Steve's now heading up a special team called STRIKE, a squad of elite shield agents including Natasha Romanoff and Clint Barton, who themselves make up STRIKE team Delta. They're efficient and work well together, but it's still not the same as the Howling Commandos. While the men seem fine, there's just something about them that sometimes rubs Steve the wrong way, and he can never fall into an easy camaraderie with them like the Commandos.

***

Steve laps the man again with a small, "on your left," speeding off. He does it again a minute later, and then again, and again.

"On your left."

"Uh-huh, on my left, got it."

"Don't you say it-don't you say it-"

"On your left."

"-Come on!"

He finds the guy sitting by a tree afterwards, breathing heavily. Steve's noticed him before, an attractive stocky man with cropped hair who wears army sweatshirts and is always running at this time. Steve's been seeing him for weeks and has a strange desire to talk to him, maybe because he's a fellow soldier. He enjoyed teasing him during the run, and wanders over to try and make contact.

"Need a medic?"

The guy chuckles. "I need a new set of lungs. Dude, you just ran, like, 13 miles in 30 minutes."

"Guess I got a late start," Steve says dryly.

"Really? You should be ashamed of yourself, should take another lap." He looks away for a second before grinning. "Did you just take - I assume you just took it."

Steve points to his sweatshirt. "What unit you with?"

"58th pararescue. But now I'm working down at the VA."

Steve nods.

The guy holds up a hand to take. "Sam Wilson."

Steve grips his hand, hauling him up. "Steve Rogers."

"Yeah I kinda put that together."

"Musta freaked you out coming home after the whole defrosting thing."

A wall slams down in Steve's mind and he sighs. "Takes some getting used to. It's good to meet you Sam." He turns to walk away before Sam's voice stops him.
"It's your bed, right?"

Steve turns. "What's that?"

"Your bed. It's too soft. When I was over there, I'd sleep on the ground, used rocks for pillows like a caveman. Now I'm home, lyin' in my bed, and it's like..."

"Lying on a marshmallow, feel like I'm gonna sink right to the floor," Steve finishes, feeling relief. Sam understands. "How long?" he asks.

Sam shrugs slightly. "Two tours." He crosses his arms. "You must miss the good old days, huh?"

Steve sighs, smirking slightly. "Well, things aren't so bad. Food's a lot better, we used to boil everything. No polio's good. Internet, so helpful. Been reading that a lot trying to catch up."

Sam grins before pausing, gesturing with a hand in the air. "Marvin Gaye, 1972, Trouble Man soundtrack. Everything you missed jammed into one album."

Steve pulls out his small notebook that Clint had made him start. "I'll put it on the list." His phone rings, and he withdraws it from his pocket. It's from Nat, a simple mission notification with a smiley face at the end. "Alright Sam, duty calls," he says. "Thanks for the run..." he smirks as he shakes Sam's hand. "If that's what you want to call running."

Sam's eyebrows raise incredulously. "Oh, that's how it is?" But it's light, teasing.

"Oh, that's how it is."

"Okay." He chuckles. Steve turns to walk away. "Anytime you wanna stop by the VA, make me look awesome in front of the girl at the front desk, let me know." It's a genuine offer couched as Steve doing him a favor. A simple statement letting him know Sam has his back.

"I'll keep it in mind," he replies, hearing revving as Nat pulls up to the curb. The window rolls down.

"Hey fellas. Either one of you know where the Smithsonian is? I'm here to pick up a fossil."

Steve strides towards the car. "That's hilarious."

Sam crouches down as Nat peers around Steve curiously. "How ya doing?" Sam asks with a grin.

"Hey," Nat replies.

Steve looks over at Sam. "Can't run everywhere."

Sam is grinning. "No you can't."

With a squeal of tires they pull away, Steve's mood lifted significantly.

***

The mission is sketchy, everything about it feeling off to Steve and disappointment writhing in his gut that Natasha and Fury hadn't told him everything. He confronts Fury, and the feeling of wrongness intensifies. When he sees the Helicarriers, he almost feels sick. Project Insight. It's everything he fought against for years during the war, people who tried to establish absolute control and tyranny over others. It's inhuman.
"I thought the punishment usually came after the crime," he remarks.

"We can't afford to wait that long," Fury replies, and that is everything that is wrong with the world today, Steve thinks. Fury goes into a spiel about the world security council and safety, but Steve doesn't want to hear it.

"By holding a gun to everyone on earth and calling it protection," he says, and it's bitter.

"You know, I read those SSR files. The 'greatest generation'? You guys did some nasty stuff.

"Yeah. We compromised. Sometimes in ways that made us not sleep so well. But we did it so that people could be free. This isn't freedom, this is fear."

"Shield takes the world as it is, not as we'd like it to be. It's getting damn near past time for you to get with that program, Cap." Does Fury think he's naive, that he doesn't know what the world is like? He knows it's cruel, and cold, but he also knows that this is wrong. There are still good people out there, more than there are bad, and he knows once you start down the path of treating everyone like a potential threat it's a short step to genocide. He's not going to stand by and let that happen.

"Don't hold your breath," he says, and walks away.

***

He walks into the museum, searching for some sense of perspective. Maybe Fury's right, and he's too stuck in the past, but he knows in his heart that he's right. He hasn't ever been here before, having no interest in reading more sensationalized history about him. But maybe it will help, give him a tie back to his past. He walks through the entrance, cap pulled low over his head as a voiceover begins to speak.

Denied enlistment due to poor health, Steven Rogers was chosen for a program unique in the annals of American warfare. One that would transform him into the world's first super soldier.

There's pictures of him, big and small, superimposed on a screen, and kids excitedly measure themselves next to them. He turns to see one looking at him, obviously having recognized him. He raises a finger to his lips and the kid nods solemnly.

There's videos of him and the Howling Commandos, and he remembers the film reel that had followed them around.

Battle-tested, Captain America and his Howling Commandos quickly earned their stripes. Their mission: taking down Hydra, the Nazi rogue science division.

There's a huge display of mannequins wearing actual or replicas of the Howling Commando uniforms, a large painted mural behind them. Bucky is to Steve's left, his face serious and determined in the mural. His uniform is all replicated, Steve knows. There was nothing left to salvage.

He turns, coming to face a large glass wall dedicated to Bucky. It's entitled: "A Fallen Comrade," and Bucky looks tired and haunted in the greyed-out image.

Best friends since childhood, Bucky Barnes and Steven Rogers were inseparable on both schoolyard and battlefield. Barnes is the only Howling Commando to give his life in service of his country.
There’s a small screen playing more film reels underneath, and he watches as Bucky laughs and Steve grins in a single rare shot, both of them young and happy and whole. Steve remembers filming it, Dum Dum's voice - *so fellas, what country are we in?* - and Bucky's eyes crinkling with mirth - *we're in France!* - the only time he'd smiled or laughed on camera. It seems a world away, now.

He turns, seeing a smaller display, entitled: "The White Wolf Legend," with an artist’s rendering of a huge white wolf standing proudly by Steve’s shield, more drawings scattered around the glass. There’s a paragraph in the center, and Steve reads curiously.

_No one knows how it started, but during the war German soldiers began to spin tales of a large white wolf that followed at Captain America's heels. It is believed that this stemmed from the very name of Captain America's unit, the "Howling Commandos," as German soldiers reported that the Commandos would howl to signal their locations, and that when they heard a wolf's cry their doom was near. While clearly a myth meant to spread fear among German ranks, there is much debate and conspiracy surrounding it. There are a few German veterans who swear to have seen the wolf in person, and even American troops recalled hearing howls that "couldn't possibly be human."

_The wolf was described as abnormally large, with blue eyes and dog tags around its neck. The members of the Howling Commandos all assert that the legend started because of their strange penchant for howling, and that they simply encouraged it to try and strike fear into the hearts of Hydra. There has never emerged any definitive proof of the presence of a wolf during the war, though the legend continues to be a hotly debated conspiracy theory to this day. Many artists have tried to render an image of the wolf, with varying interpretations. The stories and artwork of those claiming to have seen the white wolf have generously been donated to the museum, where visitors can make their own judgements of the truth._

He turns away, shaking his head. The Commandos had kept the secret well, though the legend remained. It seemed Bucky was even more famous than anyone knew. He wonders what people would think, if they knew the truth. Would it destroy Bucky's memory, or add to it? He wants Bucky to be remembered for the person he was, not what Zola turned him into. While he had accepted and loved the wolf, it was forever tainted by the knowledge that it had been Zola who had done that to him.

He finds himself in a small theater, watching a short film about him. Peggy is speaking, the title reading 1953.

_That was a difficult winter. A blizzard had trapped half our battalion behind the German line. Steve - Captain Rogers - he fought his way through a Hydra blockade that had pinned our allies down for months. He saved over a thousand men. Including the man who would...who would become my husband, as it turned out._

He withdraws the compass from his pocket, Peggy's face staring up at him.

_Even after he died, Steve was still changing my life._

***

He sits by Peggy's bedside, holding her hand.

"You should be proud of yourself, Peggy." He looks over at the pictures by her bedside, her family smiling from the frames. She looks over as well, shifting on the pillows.

"Mmhm. I have lived a life. My only regret is that you didn't get to live yours." With Bucky, she means. *With us.*
He's silent, thinking of regrets and truth and right and wrong.

"What is it?" Peggy asks, always able to read him.

He hesitates. "For as long as I can remember I just wanted to do what was right. I guess I'm not quite sure what that is anymore." He pauses. "And I thought I could...throw myself back in, follow orders, serve. It's just not the same."

Peggy chuckles. "Always so dramatic." He chuckles despite himself. "Look, you saved the world. We rather...mucked it up."

"You didn't," he says softly. "Knowing you helped found Shield is half the reason I stay."

Peggy grips his hand, drawing him nearer. "The world has changed. None of us can go back. All we can do is our best. And sometimes, the best that we can do is to s-start over." she coughs, and Steve jolts up to retrieve a glass of water from the nightstand.

Peggy looks back at him, and suddenly her eyes start to widen and heartbreakingly hopeful disbelief spreads over her face.

"Steve?" she whispers, and Steve knows she's gone again.

"Yeah?" he says quietly.

Her eyes fill with tears. "Y-you-you're alive. You-you came-you came back!"

His heart is shattering into pieces. "Yeah. Yeah Peggy," he whispers.

Peggy is crying, eyes filled with pain and voice choked. "It's been so long. So long."

"Well I couldn't leave my best girl." He smiles through the pain. "Not when she owes me a dance."

***

He walks into the VA, leaning on the doorframe as he listens to the end of the session. A woman is talking.

"The thing is, I think it's getting worse. A cop pulled me over last week, he thought I was drunk. I swerved to miss a plastic bag. I thought it was an IED."

Sam's voice replies, the man leaning on a podium at the head of the room. "Some stuff you leave there, other stuff you bring back. It's our job to figure out how to carry it. Is it gonna be in a big suitcase or in a little man-purse? It's up to you."

Steve suddenly realizes that all these people are dealing with the same thing, that he's not alone in feeling lost and overwhelmed by the world. His circumstances may be different, but in the end they're all soldiers. It's comforting, somehow.

The meeting ends and Steve waits for Sam, watching him bid the other veterans goodbye. Sam's face brightens when he sees Steve, wandering over nonchalantly.

"Look who it is. The running man."

"Caught the last few minutes. It's pretty intense."

Sam nods. "Yeah, brother, we all got the same problems. Guilt, regret." There's something in his
face that Steve recognizes from his mirror.

"You lose someone?"

Sam nods. "My wingman, Riley. Flying a night mission. Standard PJ rescue op, nothing we hadn't done a thousand times before, till an RPG knocks Riley's dumb ass outta the sky. Nothing I could do. It's like I was up there just to watch."

_Bucky hand outstretched, a scream as he falls away, Steve clinging to the railing helplessly._

He swallows. "I'm sorry."

Sam shrugs. "After that, I had a really hard time finding a reason for being over there, you know?"

"But you're happy now, back in the world?" Steve asks. _Tell me it gets better._

Sam grins a bit. "Hey, the number of people giving me orders is down to about...zero. So, hell yeah." He pauses, assessing Steve. "You thinking about getting out?"

Steve's surprised he can read him so quickly. "No." He pauses. "I don't know," he admits. "To be honest, I don't know what I would do with myself if I did." He is being honest, more open and honest than he's been with anyone since before the ice.

"Ultimate fighting?" Sam suggests wryly, and Steve laughs despite himself. "It's just a great idea off the top of my head. But seriously, you could do whatever you want to do. What makes you happy?"

Steve thinks. _An arm slung around his shoulders, blue-grey eyes crinkled in laughter, cigarette smoke and sweat, fingers stained with graphite, a warm body pressed against his._

"I don't know," he says.

***

He walks back to his apartment, stopping to chat with his neighbor. She's pretty, and there's a moment of flirtation, but he knows it won't lead anywhere. He already met the loves of his life, and there's no room in his heart for anyone else.

She makes an offhand comment, _I think you left your stereo on_ , and instantly he's on high alert. He knows he didn't, so someone must have been in his apartment. He goes back around, climbing in through the window in case they're waiting for him. He grabs his shield that's leaning against a shelf, moving towards the music. He peers around the corner to see the record spinning, _it's been a long time_ , and Nick Fury sitting in an armchair in the corner. He relaxes, leaning against the wall in irritation.

"I don't remember giving you a key."

There's a strangled sound as Fury sits up. "You really think I'd need one?" He leans forward. "My wife kicked me out."

"Didn't know you were married," Steve returns.

Fury tips his head. "Lot of things you don't know about me."

Steve walks forward, turning on the lamp. "I know Nick, that's the problem." He stops when he sees Fury's face, bloodied and bruised. Fury holds up a hand and turns the light back off, tapping
something on his phone. He turns the screen towards Steve.

_Ears everywhere_

Steve feels dread, and automatically scans around for bugs.

"I'm sorry to have to do this but I had no place else to crash," Fury continues significantly. He shows Steve the screen once more.

_Shield compromised_

"Who else knows about your wife?"

Fury gets up, limping towards him as the screen turns. _You and me._ "Just...my friends," he says.

"Is that what we are?"

"That's up to you."

Suddenly there's gunshots through the wall and Fury cries out as they rip through him, falling to the floor. Steve lunges towards him, crouching down and dragging him out of the line of fire. He sees metal glinting through the window, a shadowy shape on the roof. He drags Fury into the kitchen and Fury grabs his wrist, opening his hand to reveal something. It's a flash drive. Steve takes it.

"Don't...trust....anyone," Fury grits out.

There's the sound of his door breaking down and Steve whirls, ready to fight.

"Captain Rogers?" comes his neighbor's voice. Kate. He watches her move in, gun raised. "Captain. I'm Agent 13, Shield special service. I'm assigned to protect you."

"On whose orders?"

She sees Fury, expression growing horrified. "His." She crouches down, frantically checking for a pulse. She withdraws a radio from her pocket, speaking into it.

"Foxtrot is down, he's unresponsive. I need EMTs."

"Do we have a twenty on the shooter?" he hears crackle through the radio.

He looks out the window, where there's a glint of metal and a shadowy figure running away on the next roof. "Tell them I'm in pursuit."

He takes off, smashing through the window and into the next building. He rolls, setting off at a run and smashing through doors and walls as he tracks the figure running above him on the roof. He bursts out onto the next rooftop, rolling and flinging his shield at the figure. The figure turns at the last moment, catching the shield with a gleaming metal arm. His face is masked, eyes blackened with paint and dark hair long and tangled. His eyes seem to bore into Steve for a moment before he flings the shield back, the force shoving Steve backwards as he catches it. When he looks up again, the figure is gone.
The first and last death you'll ever receive
and the last breath you'll ever breathe
comes before and after you.

I've turned into the creature
you thought was a myth
now you're paralyzed, I've made you stiffed.

I am the pure born Shadow Wolf
that lurks day and night
ripping your throat out
what a painful frightening sight.

Close your eyes
say good night
pray in death
to go to the...
light

*Shadow Wolf*

His metal hand twitches with restlessness on the arm of the chair. *Taptaptap, tap tap, tap tap, tap tap tap, taptaptaptaptap, taptaptaptaptap, taptaptaptaptap, taptaptaptaptap, taptaptaptaptap, taptaptaptaptap, tap tap, taptap, tap tap tap tap tap, taptaptap, tap tap, tap tap, taptap.* His mind is filled with noise, a constant swirling mass of thoughts. They haven't used the words, the words he knows make everything silent, make his mind go blank. They haven't used the words, and everything is wrong. He completed the mission, but everything is wrong.

Footsteps sound, echoing on the floor. The man - *Pierce, blue eyes and blonde hair no that's someone else, someone different, there's another man, who is he -*approaches, smile wide and self-satisfied as he talks to the technician beside him.

"He performed perfectly. The Russians thought I couldn't handle him, but just look at our success. It's simple, really. Just wipe him and point him in the right direction, then freeze him until the next time. I don't need a list of random words to do that."

"But Senator Pierce, you saw the tapes. They erased the sound so we couldn't hear them, but you can clearly see the words taking effect. They're what makes his training kick in and remember everything necessary. They send him into sort of a hypnotic trance, if you will. Quiet his mind. Our scans show increased brain activity."

Pierce waves a hand. "It won't be a problem." He stops in front of the soldier, eyes sparkling with pride.

"You have done well, soldier."
The soldier stares ahead, waiting for a command.

Pierce sighs. "Not much of a conversationalist, huh? All right, get him prepped for cryo."

Technicians move forward to grab him and he stiffens, heart rate accelerating. He doesn't...everything is wrong, this is wrong, where is - *soft voice and gentle hands, good morning волчонок*- 

He lashes out with a metal arm, throwing technicians across the room. A snarl rips from his throat, behind the mask, and his eyes dart around wildly, chest heaving. Guns click as guards aim them at him, Pierce's face caught off guard and nervous as one hand quickly pulls the device to his collar out of his pocket. He raises his hands, speaking in a soothing voice.

"Easy. Stand down, soldier."

The soldier growls, body trembling with tension. He doesn't-he doesn't know where he is, this is wrong, who are these people, why can't he *remember*, his head hurts, he just wants everything to *stop*-

"I said, stand down, soldier," Pierce repeats. "Or there will be consequences."

He snarls and lunges forward before shocks bring him crashing to the floor. He whines, hands scrabbling at his collar but he can't get it off, it's wired into his spine and why won't it *stop* he's so confused and he wants it to *stop*, no - *you do not have wants* -

The shocks finally stop, leaving him panting on the floor, breaths loud under the mask. Pierce steps forward, gripping him by the hair and raising his head until his crazed eyes land on Pierce's.

"You will not attack your handler," Pierce says. "Under any circumstances. This is lesson one."

He lets his head drop to the floor, and guards swoop in to grab him and haul him upwards. He goes limp in their grasp, the fight going out of him and leaving him confused and scared. They drag him away, down a long hallway and into a room with a small cage in the center. Rough hands strip him naked, Pierce observing from nearby with device held at the ready.

"Shift," he commands, and presses the button that releases the inhibition on his collar. The soldier shifts, relieved that he will not be punished severely. The worst torture is always in human form.

Hands muzzle him again, the wolf unresisting. They push him towards the small cage, not large enough for him to turn around or even move in. He goes in, uncomfortably cramped and anxiety starting to quicken again. The door shuts behind him, pressing against his haunches. He whines, feeling trapped.

Pierce comes up to the cage, crouching down in front of him. "This is lesson one," he repeats, before walking away.

Guards surround the cage, withdrawing long black sticks that crackle with electricity. Fear swoops in his gut before the first one is shoved through the bars, and his world turns to pain.

***

He stands in the cage, muscles trembling and breaths shallow. He doesn't know how long he's been standing here, how long it's been since they stopped shoving cattle prods through the bars. He cannot lie down. There is no room, and every time he tries his collar sends more pain flaring through his body. The muzzle is tight around his face, his jaws clamped together and fast breaths
pulled through his nose. He whines with every other exhalation, his body throbbing with pain and his muscles aching from standing so long.

Finally footsteps sound, and the door in front of him opens, revealing Pierce. He reaches in and grabs the wolf by the scruff, dragging him out. The wolf collapses at his feet, whining softly.

"Have you learned your lesson?" Pierce asks.

He whimpers, crawling closer to bump his nose against Pierce's shin. Pierce crouches down, placing a hand on his head. He pushes into the touch, body relaxing. Pierce begins to pet him hesitantly, growing more sure as the wolf melts into the touch.

Pierce chuckles. "See? I don't need their little red book. You just need a firm hand."

***

They don't let him eat in wolf form. Pierce makes him shift back to human before he is hosed off and given an IV of something as they prep him for cryo. His brain is quiet once more, numbed by the punishment and steadied by the recognition of Pierce as his handler. He cooperates with the techs, not resisting as their ministrations bump the two-pronged burn marks that litter his body. Finally they lead him to cryo, and he goes into the ice willingly.

***

He breathes steadily as the metal releases his face, eyes flicking around to land on Pierce. Pierce smiles, warm and benevolent.

"Good morning, soldier."

He does not expect a reply.

***

Lesson two is delivered with the cage again. He does not forget lesson two. You will obey all commands. Pierce pats his head afterwards, and tells him good boy. He almost expects to hear it in another language, but he doesn't know why.

***

He does not get food. He does not remember eating. There is an IV. He does not know what is in the IV. He does not ask. They do not tell him.

***

Lesson three is delivered with the cage again. He does not forget lesson three. You are not human. Pierce pats his head afterwards, and tells him good boy. He thinks of a soft voice and gentle hands, someone calling him волчонок.

***

He does not speak. He does not remember speaking. He is never expected to speak. He is not human.

***

There are more lessons, all delivered with the cage. He does not forget them.
He lines up the shot, red hair flashing in his vision as the woman covers his target. He breathes and fires, shooting straight through her stomach and dispatching his target behind her. She falls to the ground, hand pressed to the wound. He leaves her. She is not his target.

There is a new guard whose eyes glitter maliciously whenever he looks at the soldier. He takes joy in inflicting pain, hitting the wolf with batons and cattle prods and kicking him with steel-toed boots. The wolf snarls but can do nothing, jaw clamped tightly shut by the muzzle.

He does not know which is worse, the wolf or the soldier. There are beatings and shocks as the wolf, but there are also rare moments when Pierce praises him and strokes his head. There are missions and the chair and cryo as the soldier, but there is less pain. He does not know why he cares which is worse. He doesn't know what worse means. He doesn't have wants, or cares. He is not human. He deserves the pain. A metal finger taps, tap tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap tap. He thinks it is time for a wipe.

The guards jeer, surrounding the wolf on all sides. He snarls, body trembling and ears pinned back. A heavy boot connects with his side and he whirls.  "Here, doggy! Here boy!" someone taunts. The muzzle cuts into his face, saliva dripping through an opening and onto the ground. His eyes are crazed with pain and fear and his sides heave.  "Come on, come on," someone says. There's a whistle. "Good doggy."

Someone laughs. "Pathetic, isn't it? The great Winter Soldier, nothing but a helpless dog."

One of the guards removes the mask so he can shift. He lunges, sinking his teeth into the guard's hand. He cannot attack his handler, but he's never explicitly been told not to attack the guards. He wrenches, tearing the man's hand off as he screams. Shocks bring him to his knees.

They make a new muzzle, one that changes when he shifts. It is tighter on the soldier than before, clamping his jaw shut. He cannot speak with it on. He doesn't think to speak with it on. He does not remember how to speak.

It never comes off, except for the chair and to shave his face. They always make sure he is strapped down each time.

The wolf snarls at everyone but Pierce. Pierce does not correct this. As the soldier, he is calm and obedient. He lets them place their hands on him, knowing the consequences if he lashes out. The worst torture is always in wolf form. He is not human.
Pierce likes to show him off to new recruits, striding around the room with the wolf muzzled and silent at his side. He remembers this from...Karpov. Karpov used to do the same, would make the wolf heel and intimidate the new agents with his presence. They are scared of him, he thinks.

"Wait," one says. "A white wolf - isn't there that legend about a white wolf during the war? I thought he was Captain America's."

Pierce sets a hand on the wolf's head. "The wolf was acquired by Hydra after the war. We only use the soldier for missions, in case anyone makes the connection. It would be too conspicuous. This information does not leave this room, understood? Or you will find yourself his next target."

The green agent gulps, nods. "Yes sir."

Pierce is older, wrinkles marring his handsome face and grey starting to creep into his roots. His eyes are the same, blue and piercing.

He waits in the van, surrounded by the guards. There is distant gunfire, and the squealing and crashing of cars. A voice crackles through the radio.

"We've lost him. He's headed towards you. Send in the Asset."

One guard - malicious eyes, dark hair - turns to him. "You're up." He hands the soldier a gun with an explosive. The soldier walks out into the street, watching the black car approach. He raises the gun and fires, the explosive sticking to the underside of the car and upending it to skid along the pavement as the soldier smoothly moves out of it's way. He stalks towards the upside down car, ripping the door off with a metal hand. He peers inside, but the target is gone.

Pierce holds up a piece of clothing to the mask, letting the soldier sniff.

"Find him, and eliminate him."

He tracks the man to an apartment and settles on the roof opposite, aiming his rifle. Another man enters, barely visible in the dim light through the window. He is talking to someone - the target, he presumes. He judges the target's position behind the wall using the other man's sight lines as they talk, and fires once, twice, three times. He sees the target collapse forward and confirms it is the target. The other man drags him away before giving chase. The soldier runs, jumping across rooftops, but the man is fast. He catches up to him on an open roof, flinging something - a shield, red white and blue, handy, huh - and the soldier catches it in a metal hand, something pricking at him. He stares back at the man - blonde hair and blue eyes - before flinging the shield back, the movement somehow natural. He vanishes into the night without engaging. The man is not his mission, he tells himself.

He sits silently in Pierce's house, gun on the table in front of him. He is to surrender all weapons.
to his handler. Pierce enters the kitchen, stilling when he sees the soldier. A voice sounds, a woman. The housekeeper.

"I'm going to go, Mr. Pierce. You need anything before I leave?"

"No, uh...it's fine, Renata, you can go home."

"Okay. Night-night."

"Good night." There's the sound of the woman leaving and Pierce goes to the fridge, withdrawing a carton of milk. "Want some milk?" he asks lightly. The soldier doesn't respond. He is not supposed to. He cannot. "The timetable has moved," Pierce says more seriously. Our window is limited. Two targets, Level Six." He pours himself a small amount of milk before coming over to the table and sitting down across from the soldier, completely at ease. "They already cost me Zola." Round glasses and a round face, beady eyes glinting with excitement- "I want confirmed death in twenty-four hours."

Suddenly there's a sound, the woman coming back. "Sorry, Mr. Pierce, I..." she notices the soldier and her eyes widen. "I forgot my phone."

Pierce sighs. "Oh Renata, I wish you would have knocked." He picks up the gun from the table, firing at the woman. She falls backwards, sprawled on the floor as blood pools around her. The soldier does not blink.

Pierce sighs, setting down the gun and pulling out his phone. He raises it to his ear, eyes flicking to the soldier. "It's Pierce. I need a cleanup at my address. Yes. Yes. Good to know. Okay, thank you." He puts the phone back in his pocket, leaning forwards as he studies the soldier. Finally he speaks. "You will stay here tonight. We will find the targets tomorrow." He stands up, coming around the table to the soldier and beckoning him to stand up with a finger. The soldier complies, and Pierce starts to remove his tac gear with steady fingers. When the soldier is naked except for the muzzle and collar Pierce withdraws the device to his collar, pressing a button. "Shift," he orders.

The soldier complies, muzzle clicking softly as the interlocking parts move with the shift. Pierce lays a hand on his head before moving through the house, the wolf walking silently at his heels. Pierce enters a bedroom, climbing into the bed. He points to the floor next to it, and the wolf lays down obediently.

"You may sleep," Pierce says.

The wolf closes his eyes and falls into a dreamless sleep.

***

Metal fingers claw through the pavement, bringing him to a stop. He stands, staring down the car. The eyes of the targets are wide and fearful.

***

A bullet cracks against his goggles, the soldier's back hitting the low wall with a thud. He brings up a hand slowly, pulling off the goggles. The he whirls and fires wildly at the woman - red hair, red blood - frustration sparking in his mind.

***
The woman wraps her legs around him, bringing a wire up to garrote him. He blocks it, throwing her into a car. He picks up his gun again but she throws something and the metal arm goes limp, electricity sparking through it. He wrenches it off with a flesh hand, heedless of the pain. He is used to shocks. With a vicious rotation of the metal shoulder he sets off again, cold anger creeping up his spine.

***

He shoots the woman through the shoulder, hunting her down. But the man, the target - _blonde hair and blue eyes_ - is there, and his fist rings against the shield. The fight is unlike any he's ever experienced before - _not that he can remember_ - and his frustration grows as the target matches him blow for blow. He wrenches the shield away and there's a strange moment of _deja vu_ as he holds the shield, the grip familiar in his hand. He throws it away quickly, frustrated at his errant mind. He pulls out a knife, flipping it with practiced skill as he swipes at the man with deadly force. But every blow is blocked and helpless frustration builds as he _shoves_ the target away desperately. He pays for his moment of weakness as the target lands a hit, kicking him back into a car. The target rushes forwards, kneeling him in the chest, and the soldier feels a rib snap. He fights back desperately, ruthlessly, wrapping a metal hand around the target's throat and bringing him closer as he studies him in aggravated confusion. _Blonde hair and blue eyes_

He throws him away, metal arm whirring as it smashes into the pavement where the target's head was a second before. They match blows and he withdraws another knife, tearing through the side of a van. The target throws him backwards over his shoulder, the soldier struggling to his feet with a torn knee and broken ribs. When he turns the man has the shield again and he laughs out desperately, without skill. He cannot fail. The shield cuts into the metal arm, separating the panels, before he's hit in the face and the man grabs him by the chin, flinging him over his shoulder. He somersaults, the mask ripped away.

He stands, turning back to the man and the man straightens, his expression stunned and disbelieving as he stares at the soldier. The man's scent invades the soldier's nose, so familiar it makes him pause.

"Bucky?"

The soldier blinks, brow furrowing in confusion before he raises his gun, pointing it at the man. Something hits him in the back - the man with the wings - and he's knocked to the ground, rolling over and over. He scrambles to his feet, looking back at the man. Something prods at him - _blond hair and blue eyes_ - and he hesitates, mind jumbled and confused as his eyes dart to the side. _He cannot fail_. Finally he raises the gun, but something is fired at him and he turns, the car next to him exploding. He escapes, a headache pressing at his temples.

***

He wanders for a while, confused and unsettled. He has failed his mission. He doesn't know what to do. He doesn't know where the agents are, where Pierce is. They were supposed to pick him up in the van, but he doesn't know where that is now. He blends into the shadows, avoiding prying eyes. Eventually there's the sound of tires pulling up, and agents move in on his location. Their guns are raised at him, expressions nervous, but he doesn't resist. He climbs into the van, sitting down docilely.

They make it back to base, escorting him in. The guards' hands are tight around their guns, and he realizes he's missing his muzzle. He does not resist. They lead him to the chair and technicians hurry forwards, stripping off his shirt with hands that shake slightly. Diagnostics flash up on screens, showing his broken ribs and torn knee, but the technicians ignore them. They know the
injuries will heal. They insert an IV into his flesh hand, taping it down.

The technicians work on the metal arm, starting with the round burn left by the woman's device. He sits still and silent, staring blankly into the distance. A metal finger twitches softly against the arm of the chair. Taptap tap, tap tap, tap tap, tap tap tap, taptap tap tap, tap tap, tap tap tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap tap.

They've moved to the upper arm, where the man had wedged the shield. The sparks as they weld burn the skin of his stump underneath. His head pounds, images flashing before his eyes. A face, round glasses and beady eyes, a bowtie - Sergeant Barnes - a train, cold wind whipping at his face, a man, blonde hair and blue eyes, arm outstretched - Bucky, no! - falling, cold and pain, men dragging him through the snow, the stump of his left arm leaving a bloody trail - the procedure has already started - white coats, needles, a saw cutting through his arm - stop, I'm awake! - two hands, metal and flesh, a metal hand around the doctor's throat - you are to be the new fist of Hydra - a man, soft voice and gentle hands, a white room - make it stop make it stop make it stop - his teeth around someone's throat, a metal finger - taptap tap, tap tap, tap tap, tap tap, tap tap tap, taptap tap, tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap - his hand shaking as he points a gun - put him on ice - his reflection in the window as ice creeps up his body.

He lashes out with a snarl, throwing the technicians across the room. Guns click as the guards aim at him, fingers on triggers. He breathes heavily, fists clenched, body trembling slightly. His head throbs and whirls, a confusing onslaught of emotion threatening to consume him. His breaths slow as he retreats back into his mind, the outside world fading from awareness.

A hand strikes his face, his head snapping to the side. He blinks, coming back to awareness as his brow furrows. Pierce is in front of him, leaning down to peer into his eyes. The soldier opens his mouth, struggling to-to-

"The-" he says, and he can speak, he has words, but he doesn't remember how to speak, can't make the muscles work and they won't come, he can't make the sounds, can't speak; and his throat is hoarse and mind muddled and throbbing and he knows this, he knows how to speak but it's so hard, why can't he remember-

He tries again, speech barely audible and fragmented. "The m-man, on-on the-the-b-bridge." He looks up at Pierce, desperately searching for an answer, for reassurance. "Who-who-w-was h-he?"

A brief look of shock and fear crosses Pierce's face. The soldier never speaks. The soldier is not allowed to speak. Pierce's expression smooths out into one of calmness. "You met him earlier this week on another assignment," he replies easily.

That is not-that is not right, he-he- "I-I knew h-him," he murmurs. He knows this.

Pierce pulls up a stool, sitting down and facing the soldier. The soldier feels a sort of resigned desperation in his chest, some sense that Pierce is not going to answer his question, is going to soothe and speak and lie to the soldier. He-he lied to him, but Pierce is his handler, is everything, and the soldier is so confused but something is wrong this is wrong he doesn't-he doesn't-

"Your work has been a gift to mankind," Pierce says. "You shaped the century. And I need you to do it one more time. Society's at a tipping point between order and chaos, and tomorrow morning we're going to give it a push. But, if you don't do your part, I can't do mine. And Hydra can't give the world the freedom it deserves."
It is—it is not enough. He doesn't care, doesn't care about any of it. He's not supposed to care. He just—he just wants to know about the man, wants to know why there's flashes in his head, why everything feels so wrong. A metal finger taps against the arm erratically. Taptaptap, tap tap, taptap, tap tap tap, taptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptap, tap tap, taptap, tap tap tap tap tap, taptaptaptaptap, tap tap, tap tap tap, taptaptap, tap tap tap, taptaptap-

He tilts his head slightly, frustrated and confused. "But I knew him," he says softly, no stuttering or hesitation. He knows this in the bottom of his soul, knows it better than he knows anything else. It is the only thing he knows.

Pierce sighs before getting up, and the soldier knows he will be punished, will be punished for speaking and questioning and acting like he is human. He is not human.

"Prep him," Pierce says, and he knows what this means. This means a small cage and pain, harsh words and cruel hands and metal wire cutting into his sides.

"We don't have the muzzle," one of the techs murmurs. "It's too dangerous. And he's been out of cryofreeze too long. His brain is healing."

"Then wipe him, and start over."

The soldier feels inexplicable dread and anguish in the pit of his stomach. He doesn't—he doesn't want to be wiped, but he doesn't have wants, he's not human; but this is wrong, he remembered and they're taking it from him - blonde hair and blue eyes, a hand reaching out - and he doesn't want—he doesn't want-no—he wants to go home but where is home - blonde hair and blue eyes, slim shoulders, hey Buck-

The techs push him back into the chair and he goes, conditioning winning out but a slow, defiant rage kindling in his chest. He opens his mouth for the bite guard, locking eyes with Pierce as hatred rears its head. Cuffs snap around his arms and his breathing picks up, heart starting to race in fear. Metal descends over his head and he thinks no, no, stop, please, no, please don't take this from me, no, I knew him, I knew him, please, STEVE -

***

He pants, the electricity fading and the metal clamps releasing his head. It lolls limply, the soldier's body trembling with exhaustion and pain. Everything is blank and quiet. He is no one, and nothing. He does not remember what happened before this, except pain. He had-he had done something wrong, and there was pain. Remember you are not human.

There are hands on his head, and something is put over his face, clamping his jaw shut. A mask. A muzzle. Voices swirl around him, the soldier's eyes blinking heavily.

"-attach it here and here-"

"-last mission, doesn't matter after this-"

"-put down anyway-

"-decrease chance of recognition-"

"-inject the paralytic, just a small dose so he can breathe-

A needle is slid into his arm and gradually his body grows heavy, hands holding his head steady against the headrest and pressing the muzzle tightly against his face. Something is brought up to it,
glimping silver in the light - a screw - and positioned over his cheekbone. A long metal instrument shaped like an elongated T is inserted into the end of it, and the soldier watches blearily as the technician begins to twist it, his brain still hazy and distant. Panic sets in as the screw pierces his flesh, pain searing through his cheekbone. His eyes widen and he tries to thrash but his body is weakened by the dose of the paralytic and he's still cuffed down to the chair.

"Hold him still," someone barks.

More hands hold him down, keeping his head still as he whines deep in his throat. The screw bites into bone, deep pulsing aches spreading through his face. When it's flush with the mask they move to the other side, repeating the process. Two more screws go on either side of his jaw, locking it in place. He breathes through his nose harshly, chest heaving and fists clenched.

Finally the technicians are done and they release him, standing back to inspect their work. Footsteps sound and Pierce strides into the room, the soldier's gaze flicking to his.

Pierce addresses the technicians as he scrutinizes the mask. "It's secure?" They nod, and Pierce smiles. "Good. Have him mission ready in..." He checks his watch. "Eight hours. We should all get some rest." He approaches the soldier, reaching out to brush a strand of hair out of his eyes. The soldier closes his eyes and leans into the touch, mind overwhelmed with pain and confusion but Pierce a reassuring constant. A metal finger clicks against the chair. Taptap, tap tap, tap tap, tap tap tap, taptapotap, tap tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap tap...

Chapter End Notes

Check out despite the threatening sky and shuddering earth (they remained) (71532 words) by praximeter where the basis of the story is that the Winter Soldier's mask is permanently attached to his face. It's really good, I promise, and just got completed!
Chapter 12

Beautiful and elegant is this beast
Often found within the forests off to the east
His eyes so dark like pools of rain
I wonder if he will show himself again
Power behind his paws, determination within his eyes
His fur so long and wild, the ultimate prize
I love him so much, I really do quite like him
But I fear the closer we get, his future becomes more dim
For I envy his gift, I want his spirit so bad!
It's all I crave, even if it was the only I could have.
I'd trade him my life it it were an option
But life doesn't work like an auction
So I'd have to steal it to have it, despite my love
Once I take it, he'll return to the heavens above.
My greed is speaking loud and clear.
So loud that he must be able to hear.
Yet there he sits with his glowing eyes
As though he does not care in whose hands his body lies.
So with a rifle I take aim.
And take his life, his body mine to claim.
I'm sorry dear wolf, I feel much shame.
For I do not wish to soil your name.
In honor for your courage and giving me your life.
I will not bring towards your body a jagged knife.
Pride is not the feeling I receive
Anger in guilt is what it is, I believe.
Dear wolf, I say this to you as a friend
I will never kill another ever again......

Silver Tongued Shadow

How was it?

It was okay. She's next to Dad.

I was gonna ask...

I know what you're gonna say, Buck, I just...

We can put the couch cushions on the floor like when we were kids. It'll be fun. All you gotta do is shine my shoes, maybe take out the trash.

I can get by on my own, Buck.

The thing is, you don't have to. I'm with ya to the end of the line, pal.

The memory fades as Steve stares out over the bridge, heart aching. Bucky is alive.
and he didn't go after him. He had known that Bucky could survive the fall, but had taken the word of the Russian general who told him Bucky was dead. He feels a surge of anger. General Lukin must have lied to his face, must have found Bucky and captured him and then looked Steve straight in the eye and told him I'm sorry for your loss. He wishes the man were alive so he could give him everything he deserves, so he could shake him and ask why? Why did you do it?

Sam's footsteps shake him from his thoughts. "He's gonna be there, you know," Sam says.

"I know."

"Look, whoever he used to be-the guy he is now...I don't think he's the kind you save, he's the kind you stop."

"I don't know if I can do that," Steve says honestly.

"He might not give you a choice. He doesn't know you."

Steve turns to look at Sam. "He will."

***

They walk towards the Triskelion, Steve's old uniform just the same as he had remembered. Somewhere deep inside he hopes that it will somehow reach Bucky, will spark something in those dead eyes. He looked right at me, and he didn't even know me. He doesn't know what they did to him to make him this way, but he knows he won't stop until he finds out and brings Bucky back.

***

He's leaning on the command station, speaking into the microphone. "Attention, all SHIELD agents. This is Steve Rogers. You've heard a lot about me over the last few days; some of you were even ordered to hunt me down. But I think it's time you know the truth. SHIELD is not what we thought it was. It's been taken over by HYDRA. Alexander Pierce is their leader. The STRIKE and Insight crew are HYDRA as well. I don't know how many more, but I know they're in the building. They could be standing right next to you. They almost have what they want: absolute control. They shot Nick Fury and it won't end there. If you launch those Helicarriers today, HYDRA will be able to kill anyone that stands in their way, unless we stop them. I know I'm asking a lot, but the price of freedom is high, it always has been, and it's a price I'm willing to pay. And if I'm the only one, then so be it. But I'm willing to bet I'm not."

Sam steps forwards. "Did you write that down first, or was it off the top of your head?"

***

Steve and Sam make their way towards the Helicarriers, Hill's voice in their ears.

"They're initiating launch."

They pick up into a run.

"Hey Cap, how do we know the good guys from the bad guys?" Sam shouts.

"If they're shooting at you, they're bad."

***

"Alpha locked," Steve says.
"Bravo locked," Sam pants.

"Two down, one to go," Maria says.

Sam drops him on the deck of the Helicarrier. "You know, you're a lot heavier than you look."

"I had a big breakfast," Steve quips.

Suddenly something rams into him, throwing him off the edge. Bucky. He hears Sam engage, the sounds of gunfire before Sam goes hurtling over the edge and out of sight.

"Cap? Cap, come in. Are you okay?"

He sighs in relief. "Yeah, I'm here! I'm still on the Helicarrier." He pulls himself back up. "Where are you?"

"I'm grounded. The suit's down. Sorry, Cap."

"Don't worry, I got it." He sees a shape above him, watching him from the Helicarrier.

He jogs onto the bridge, slowing to a stop as he sees Bucky standing on the other side, silent and still. His eyes are dead above the mask, no trace of recognition or... anything, really. It's like there's no one in there.

"People are gonna die, Buck," he says desperately. "I can't let that happen." Bucky's eyes are cold and flat. Steve draws a breath. "Please don't make me do this." There's no change in Bucky's expression, what little he can see, and Steve steels himself before flinging his shield.

Bucky erupts into motion, a metal arm coming up to deflect the shield and a gun drawn from somewhere. He fires as they whirl, managing to clip Steve in the side before Steve throws him backwards with the shield. He hears a snarl and Bucky comes at him again, withdrawing a knife. What is it with him and knives? an unhelpful voice in Steve's brain wonders.

He matches him blow for blow, Bucky's strikes quick and controlled. He manages to fend him off long enough to remove the chip from the targeting system before Bucky's metal arm - how did he get a metal arm? - clangs against his shield and they lock back into battle. He lands a punch to Bucky's face over the mask and Bucky launches forward with a muffled scream, throwing them over the railing and onto a projection below. The chip falls from Steve's hand, sliding down the curved surface.

They exchange blows and Bucky's metal arm whirs before striking Steve and sending him flying, and he grabs the chip as he slides past it. Bucky slides after him, grabbing his arms as the chip flies out of his hand and into the fishbowl of the Helicarrier below. Steve strikes Bucky in the face, stunning him, before kicking him off the projection.

He drops down, running towards the chip. His shield strikes his shoulder hard and he falls, reaching to grab it before Bucky shoots at him again. The bullets run out and Steve flings the shield as Bucky approaches, but Bucky bats it away with his metal hand, withdrawing yet another knife and attacking Steve. Where are these coming from?
Bucky manages to sink the knife into Steve's shoulder, white-hot pain spreading through the wound. He head-butts Bucky, shoving him away and wrenching the knife out of his shoulder. Bucky crawls towards the chip, grabbing it with his right hand. Steve wraps a hand around his throat and lifts him up, feeling something underneath his hand... *a collar*. Shoving that disturbing thought away he flips him to the floor, pressing a hand against Bucky's face as he bends his right arm backwards, the chip still clutched in his hand.

"Drop it!" he yells. Bucky swats at him with his metal arm, eyes narrowed in pain. "Drop it!" Steve repeats. Bucky stubbornly clings to the chip.

*I'm sorry Bucky*, he thinks, before breaking Bucky's arm. There's a strangled scream that pierces his soul, but still Bucky doesn't let go of the chip and Steve falls onto his back, putting Bucky in a chokehold. Bucky's metal hand scrabbles at his arm and he lets him grab his left hand and wrench it away, quickly pinning the metal arm beneath his leg with his right arm still around Bucky's neck. He can hear Bucky choking, eyes wide and pained. Finally his struggles cease and his eyes flutter shut, the chip slipping from his hand. Steve rolls his limp body off of him, grabbing the chip and running towards the targeting system.

"One minute," Hill's voice says in his ear.

He grabs a railing, flipping himself onto the projection and running forwards. He's halfway towards the center column when a shot rips through his left thigh, sending him to the ground. He looks back, seeing Bucky staggering on his feet with a gun trained on Steve. The clock is ticking. He forces himself up, climbing the center column. Another shot punches through his right shoulder and he almost falls, clinging on with one hand. Finally he reaches the central walkway, leaning heavily on the railing as he makes his way to the targeting system.

"Thirty seconds, Cap!"

He limps closer, withdrawing the chip from his belt. "Stand by." He reaches to put it in-

*BANG*. The shot rips through his abdomen and he crashes to the ground, trembling with shock. He looks down shakily, seeing blood spreading over the stripes of his abdomen, white turning to red.

The clock is still ticking. Millions of lives depend on him. He forces himself up, reaching desperately to click the chip in. It beeps, the colors stabilizing, and he sighs.

"Charlie locked."

"Okay Cap, get outta there."

He slumps against the system, knowing he's not getting out of here. "Fire now."

"But Steve-"

"Do it!" He wrenches himself up. "Do it now."

There's a moment of silence before the Helicarriers begin to fire. Steve stumbles towards the railing as everything shakes around him. Pieces fall and he hears a haunting, strangled cry from down below, looking to see Bucky pinned beneath a girder.

*Bucky*. He's not leaving without him.

He makes his way down, Bucky struggling futilely under the beam. His eyes are wide and terrified and horrible choked off whines emit from his throat, like a wounded animal caught in a trap. Steve
finds his shield and grips the beam, hauling upwards with all his might, heedless of his injuries. Bucky crawls out from beneath it and he lets it fall, both of them panting on the floor.

Steve pushes himself to his feet. "You know me."

There's a pause before Bucky's metal fist smashes into his shield with a muffled yell, sending Steve crashing to the ground. He pushes himself up, Bucky panting across from him.

"Bucky," he gasps out. Bucky's eyes snap to his, pained and confused, and he feels hope. "You've known me your whole life." Bucky's eyes dart to the side before he lashes out again, striking Steve across the face with a cry. Steve suddenly wonders if the mask keeps his jaw closed, if it prevents him from speaking. His yells have all been muffled, as if through clenched teeth, and Steve can hear him breathing harshly through the mask.

He gets up again, not giving up. "Your name is James..Buchanan..Barnes."

Bucky screams again and hits the shield, sending Steve to the ground. He pulls his cowl off as he staggers to his feet, meeting Bucky's eyes. "I'm not gonna fight you." He lets the shield fall through an opening in the floor. He picked it up for Bucky, but he'll give it up in a heartbeat if it means Bucky comes back to him. He takes a breath. "I love you."

Bucky exhalles before his eyes narrow in pained anger and he lunges forward with a snarl, catching Steve around the middle and pinning him to the floor. His metal fist winds up and cracks against Steve's cheekbone over and over, Steve's head snapping back with the force of the blows. Finally he pauses, breaths heaving and fist raised, flesh hand braced against Steve's chest. The wind ruffles Bucky's hair, sweeping it over his face.

Steve meets his crazed eyes with the last of his strength, resigned and steadfast. "You're gonna have to kill me, Buck," he says. "Cause I'm with you, to the end of the line."

Bucky stares at Steve, breathing heavily as his eyes widen in horror and he blinks, arm lowering as his eyes shine with...recognition-

Something crashes through the floor and Steve falls away, sinking into darkness.

***

Steve wakes slowly, soft music greeting his ears. He cracks open his eyes to see white hospital walls, and when he turns his head he sees Sam sitting at his bedside, reading a book. He doesn't know whether to feel disappointed or relieved.

"On your left," he murmurs, closing his eyes again and letting sleep pull him under.

***

When he wakes again he feels stronger, and can tell his wounds are quickly healing. Sam is still by his bedside, though he looks to have showered and changed. He looks over as Steve shifts and grins, eyes warm.

"Hey, look who's awake."

"How long?" Steve croaks. Sam moves to get a glass of water, helping him drink.

"A day since the Helicarriers. It's morning."

Steve nods slightly. "How'd I get here?"
Sam hesitates. "Look, I don't want you to get your hopes up..."

Steve's heart quickens. "What?"

"Someone...pulled you outta the river. We found you on the bank, footsteps leading away. Now, we don't know for sure what happened..."

"It was him. It was Bucky," Steve says firmly.

Sam looks skeptical. "Man, he tried to kill you."

"He saved me."

"Steve, he shot you three times, stabbed you and oh, nearly beat your face in. That looks very murdery to me."

Steve shakes his head. "I got through to him, I know it. There was a moment where I swear he recognized me, and he lowered his arm. He must have pulled me out."

Sam sighs. "Even if he did..."

"I have to find him," Steve interrupts.

Sam raises his hands. "Okay, okay. We'll look for your boy. Just...be careful. At least wait until you don't look like swiss cheese."

Steve scowls but nods. "Fine."

***

He gets out of the hospital the next day, to Sam's chagrin. Sam rolls his eyes heavenward as Steve limps out, throwing up his hands in exasperation. Steve knows the look from Bucky-

Bucky. He has to find him. He knows Bucky pulled him out of the river, knows it in his soul. Bucky is in there somewhere, and Steve will bring him back if it's the last thing he does.

He stops by his apartment to collect a few things and then crashes at Sam's house, his own apartment riddled with bullet holes and a prime target for any remaining Hydra agents. Sam sits him down on his couch and looks him in the eye.

"Okay, start from the beginning."

And Steve does. He talks about Bucky, and growing up together, and then the war and Zola and the wolf. Sam is a good listener, and even though he just met him a week ago he finds himself telling him things he's never told anyone else. He tenses and looks over when he reveals that he and Bucky were together but Sam just nods like this doesn't surprise him. The wolf, however, does.

"A wolf? Like a real-life, fucking werewolf or some shit?"

"He's not a werewolf. He's...well, actually I don't really know. He can just...transform into a wolf."

Sam's eyes suddenly widen with incredulity. "Wait, hold on. Are you telling me that the whole White Wolf conspiracy thing is actually true?"

"Er, yes? Sort of? A lot of it is exaggerated though."
Sam sighs and shakes his head. "When did my life become so weird?"

Steve chuckles. "The day you met me."

***

He calls Nat and asks for any information she can get on the Winter Soldier. If anyone can do it, it's her. She sounds calm and collected for someone who just dumped their entire dark past on the internet and is now being grilled by the Committee. Steve thinks she deserves...well, whatever she wants after this. Guns maybe? He still hasn't figured her out yet, though he thinks he's starting to. He's learned more about her in a few days than he has in a year, and he likes the person that he's finding underneath the sly smiles and cool demeanor.

***

The FBI and CIA are having a field day trying to clean up the mess of Shield and Hydra. More secret Hydra agents are being uncovered and arrested each day, the public in an uproar over the data dump. There is no information on the Winter Soldier anywhere in the files, the only evidence shaky camera phone videos of the incident on the bridge. All the agencies are quiet on this front, and there's only a little speculation on a Hydra agent with a metal arm before the whole thing fades from public memory in favor of larger issues.

He knows Maria Hill has started working for Stark, who called Steve the day he got out of the hospital and yelled for ten minutes about not calling him. Steve had protested that he was recovering from heart surgery and had retired from Iron Man, not to mention dealing with Pepper's condition, to which Tony had promptly hung up on him. Steve thinks he'll try calling Tony in a couple days once he's cooled down. He really could use his resources, and he can't ignore Zola's implication that Tony's parents had been killed by Hydra.

***

He calls Tony. The phone rings for two trills before cutting off, Stark's voice meeting Steve's ear.

"You better be calling to apologize, Cap."

"I'm sorry, Tony. I should have reached out to you."

There's a pause, as if Tony is taken aback by his apology. Steve hears him clear his throat. "Well, good. Right. Okay."

"Listen...Tony, there's something I have to tell you."

"Fire away."

Steve takes a breath. "I don't know for sure but..." He decides to just spit it out. "I think Hydra killed your parents."

There's a moment of silence on the other end. "Oh," Tony says. "Well, that makes sense, I guess."

"Are you...are you okay?" He winces. Stupid question.

"Uh, sure. I mean, I guess it's kind of better, in a way. Looks like dear old Dad wasn't driving drunk after all." There's a pause.

Steve clears his throat. "Right."
"Well, listen, uh, thanks...for telling me. And the apology. Although that was definitely warranted." Tony's voice turns light again, hiding his emotions. "If you ever wanna take me up on my offer to move into the tower....I hear your apartment in DC's kaput. Just saying. You'd have a whole floor. Also, I'd love to take a look at those wings on your new buddy. Exo-Falcon project, right? I designed those, by the way, but I think they could do with some improvements-

"I'd love to, Tony," Steve interjects.

"But seriously-wait what? You mean you'll do it?"

Steve suddenly realizes that he really does. "Yeah, Tony," he says. "I'll do it."

"Wow. Right, okay. That's great. When can you move in? I mean, we'll have to get it set up, Pepper forbade me from decorating, but I can have it ready literally anytime, just say the word."

Steve hesitates. He hates to leave DC in case Bucky is still here, but he knows Stark's resources will be helpful in tracking him down. He also doesn't want to drag Sam away from his home. "It depends," he says. "There's...loose ends to tie up here. I'll let you know when. Maybe a couple weeks."

"That works. In the meantime, you need anything to help wipe out those Nazi scum..." Anger creeps into his voice, and Steve knows he's not as okay with his parents' murder as he said.

Steve takes a breath. "Actually, Tony, there is something I need your help with."

"Your wish is my command."

"It's about Bucky. Bucky Barnes."

***

Tony-after spending a half hour vacillating between disbelief and manic excitement over the fact that Bucky is alive, the metal arm, and the wolf-agrees to help and promises to let Steve know if Jarvis finds anything. Steve suspects he's hacking into all the security cameras in DC as they speak but really doesn't have any objections. He hangs up feeling relieved and grateful. He's starting to feel like Tony might actually be becoming a friend.

***

He and Sam stand at Fury's grave, waiting for him. It's been a week since the incident. Fury finally appears, in a hoodie and sunglasses, the distinctive eyepatch missing.

"So, you've experienced this kind of thing before?" he remarks, staring at his grave.

"You get used to it," Steve replies.

"We've been data-mining HYDRA's files. Looks like a lot of rats didn't go down with the ship. I'm headed to Europe tonight, wanted to ask if you'd come."

"There's something I gotta do first." Find Bucky.


Sam glances at Steve. "I'm more of a soldier than a spy."

Fury nods. "All right, then." He shakes Sam's hand and then Steve's. "If anybody asks for me, tell
"You should be honored. That's about as close as he gets to saying thank you," Nat's voice comes from behind them, making them turn. Steve starts to walk towards her.

"Not going with him?"

Natasha smirks slightly. "No."

"Not staying here?"

"Nah. I blew all my covers, I gotta go figure out a new one."

"That might take a while."

"I'm counting on it," she replies, eyes warm as she looks at him. "That thing you asked for..." she holds out a file, Russian lettering on the front. "I called in a few favors from Kiev." Steve looks down at the file, feeling a mixture of dread and anticipation. "Will you do me a favor?" Natasha continues. He looks up. "Call that nurse?"

Steve smiles slightly. "She's not a nurse." He knows he won't call her.

"And you're not a Shield agent."

He looks down. "What was her name again?"

"Sharon. She's nice."

They look at each other a moment before Natasha leans forward, brushing a kiss to Steve's cheek. It's tender, a silent thank you. She studies him a moment longer before turning to leave. "Be careful, Steve." She pauses, looking back and nodding to the file. "You might not want to pull on that thread."

He opens the file, seeing a large photo of Bucky in a cryogenic chamber inside the cover. Clipped to the bottom is a small photograph, Bucky in his army uniform with hat cocked to the side. Sam comes up behind him, looking over his shoulder and sighing.

"You're going after him."

"You don't have to come with me."

"I know." Sam pauses. "When do we start?"
Beyond Comprehension.
Brow furrowing.
Thoughts arousing.
Deep thoughts,
Because of what.
They had said.

"There is more to this,
Open you eyes."

What could they mean?
My world is different..
I have to be perceptive.

It has been a long time,
Since the wolf has been awakened.
Since she has perceived,
Her last memory.

To open my eyes,
To feel the situation.

I must open my eyes.
Perceive once more.

Forevermore,
Awaken the Wolf.
Perception has returned..

_Open my Eyes, Awaken the Wolf_ by Dark Jewel

He limps away from the man__-blonde hair and blue eyes, I'm with you to the end of the line_--on the bank, head aching and body lit up with pain. His face__-hold him still__-hurts the worst, deep throbbing aches in his cheeks and jaw, breaths drawn harshly through clenched teeth and tongue thick and heavy in his mouth. The man__-Captain America-St__-_ his strikes to his face had been excruciating, and the pain is all-consuming, his throat raw and dry and everything hurting. It _hurts_, and there's so many thoughts and confusion and his head hurts and he doesn't know what to do; he failed, he failed his mission but it was _wrong_, and he knows the man__-_St-Ste_-- and he hurt him but he _knows_ him and it's wrong, everything hurts, he wants it to _stop_--

His arm is broken, he thinks, as he continues his assessment. He holds it to his chest, the limb weak and useless. He can feel deep bruises blossoming on his thighs and more than one cracked rib from when the beam had fallen on him, pinning him down. He's soaking wet, hair dripping down the back of his neck and feet squishing in his boots. He limps forward, not knowing where he is going
but needing to get away; he can't face the man—Ste—but he can't go back to Hydra because...because...

Because of the man. Because the man knew him, because he knew the man. He doesn't—he doesn't know why, he doesn't know anything—why can't he remember—but he hurt the man and it was wrong, he's supposed to protect, something tells him, he knows this in his soul. He's supposed to protect the man—Stev—and he failed, but he failed his mission and his mission was to kill the man and he's so confused. Pierce's voice and the man's overlap in his head and he doesn't know who to listen to; Pierce is Pierce is his handler but who is the man? Why does he make the soldier want to obey, want to protect him? Maybe...maybe...

The soldier stops, enlightenment striking. Maybe the man was his handler. Maybe-maybe Pierce had stolen him, had taken his memory of his true handler. Maybe that was why the man had insisted he had known him, had said...I love you. And he'd called him—he'd called him Bucky. A...nickname, endearment, like, like волчонок - soft voice and gentle hands - but then he'd said—he'd said, your name is James Buchanan Barnes, and that doesn't fit, he doesn't—he doesn't have a name, he isn't human-

His head throbs and his thoughts swirl away in a maelstrom of uncertainty, exhaustion and pain making everything fade except for putting one foot in front of the other. He can't think about anything right now. He needs to get away, to find somewhere...safe. There's no one in the immediate vicinity and the burning wreckage of the Helicarriers is all around, the air thick with smoke. He's still on the furthest point of the island that houses the Triskelion, the only viable escape route to swim across the river to one of the other shores. He had barely managed to drag the man to shore, using his legs because of his broken arm, and he doesn't think he'll be able to swim all the way across this way. The wolf could, though, with three working legs, but his collar...suddenly he realizes that the inhibition is off. There's no distinctive tightness in his chest like when the shift is inhibited, no slightly static charge that raises the hairs on the back of his neck. He doesn't remember it being turned off, but it must have happened at some point during the fight. He wonders why it was turned off, why Pierce would press the button, but doesn't know or really care. He can shift, and that's what's important.

He tries to peel off his wet tac gear with the metal hand, unused to dealing with his own clothes. They often dressed and undressed him. It's hard with one hand, the wet fabric doing little to help the situation. Finally he resorts to ripping it off with the metal hand, until it lays in wet scraps around him and he is naked except for the mask and collar. He shifts, fresh pain shooting through his face as the mask moves with the shift, screws pulling at tender flesh and bone. The screws are in the same places, in the orbital bones beneath his eyes that make up his cheekbones and in the sides of his jaw, now elongated. The muzzle is tight and restrictive, cutting into his soft nose and clamping his jaw shut much the same as it had in the soldier's form. He breathes through a combination of air pulled through his nose and clenched teeth, broken ribs protesting with each breath. His right foreleg is broken up high as it was before and he holds it up, limping on three legs, the back two still bruised and tender.

He enters the water again, setting off towards the nearest shore and using three legs to propel him forward. He swims wide, trying to avoid as much of the wreckage as possible, but there's still pieces of metal floating in the water and fires burning all around. By the time he makes it to shore he is barely keeping his head above water and his back legs are trembling with exhaustion. He pulls himself onto the bank, sparsely dotted with a stand of trees that conceal him from the road beyond. There are mercifully no cars, part of the road blocked by the wreckage further down. He limps forward, crossing the road and continuing on. There are enough small clumps of trees between the never-ending lines of roadway that he's able to hide and dash across the pavement when it's clear. Luckily, there seems to be so much confusion and fleeing the area that there are
few people, and they don't notice his quick form. He keeps going, coming upon field upon field littered with rows of white gravestones, seemingly endless and stark. Finally he makes it to buildings again, crossing a large highway and entering a residential neighborhood with quiet streets and green lawns. His strength is fading fast, every step agony and the world blurring before his eyes. There's few people around, all out or glued to their television screens, and he skulks along shrubs and bushes in an attempt to conceal himself.

Someone comes out of a small garage in the back of a house, pulling the door shut. It bounces but doesn't latch, the woman not noticing as she vanishes back inside the house. The wolf creeps forward, slipping through the garage door. There's an old car inside, various tools and shelves filled with odds and ends lining the walls. The wolf stumbles to the far corner, hidden from the door by the car, and collapses ungracefully on the cement floor. His fur is still damp, his body riddled with pain and mind numb. He curls up as best he can, and though he tries to keep his eyes open he eventually sinks into an exhausted sleep.

***

He jerks awake to the sound of a door creaking open, his heart rate quickening as he struggles to remember where he is, everything dark around him. The events of before rush back, realization settling in as he hears footsteps sound across the garage floor. A light flicks on. He struggles to his feet, metal paw scraping loudly against the cement, and the footsteps stop.

"Don't be a raccoon, don't be a raccoon," a soft voice murmurs. "Darn things..."

He hears a step and moves to inch around the car in order to stay out of sight, but he steps straight onto his right foreleg and an involuntary yelp escapes as pain shoots up the broken leg. There's movement, and the door closes with a click before footsteps move around the car again. He hobbles backwards, whining softly in pain and fear. He's trapped, and he knows it.

"Oh no, a dog?" the voice says. "Poor thing. It's okay," she says in a soothing tone.

A figure emerges from around the car, a young woman with brown hair wearing sweatpants and a t-shirt reading UVA, hair tied in a messy bun. The wolf presses into the corner, growling softly as the woman approaches, hands raised. Her eyes widen as she takes him in, gaze trailing from his muzzle to the metal leg and back up.

"A-a wolf," she says dumbly. "A fucking wolf, with a metal leg. I must be dreaming." The wolf growls again, shifting to keep his weight off his injured leg. The woman just stands there, gaping. She raises a hand and slaps her cheek softly, blinking.

"Nope, still real. What the fuck. Well, there's apparently been secret Nazis in Shield all along so I guess this isn't too strange. Comparably." She raises an eyebrow, studying him. "Still fucking weird though. What the hell am I supposed to do with a cyborg wolf? I'm guessing you came from the whole thing over the Potomac, huh?"

The wolf stops growling, watching her with wary eyes. She doesn't seem threatening but then, none of the technicians ever did either. And she has no reason not to hurt him, or turn him over. He's not human.

She puts a hand on her hip and scratches her head with the other. "Seriously, what the fuck am I supposed to do?" she mutters to herself. "Call animal control?" She chuckles. "Yeah, right. Hi, I have a cyborg wolf that's probably some sort of Hydra fuckery. Anyone want to adopt him?" She scrubs a hand over her face. "911? No, they won't know what to do, and they must be so
overwhelmed right now. Damn, I wish I had some sort of direct line to the Avengers or something. I mean, Shield's full of Nazi's, probably the government too. Probably can't trust anyone but Captain America right now." She snorts.

The wolf whines at the name Captain America, head pounding again. The woman sighs, squinting at him. She takes in his right paw, lifted off the ground, and her face smooths in concern.

"You're injured, poor thing. And the muzzle..." She cocks her head. "Maybe you were some f*cked-up Hydra experiment and you escaped when everything went down?" She bites her lip. "What if I call the authorities and they just put you down? You don't deserve that. I bet you never asked for this, huh?" Her expression is sympathetic.

The wolf whines again. The woman takes a hesitant step forward, hand outstretched. "Hey there, buddy. Easy now. Can you have me take a look at that leg?" The wolf presses back into the corner, watching her with wide eyes but not moving. She approaches slowly, crouching down when she's close. "Kinda grateful for that muzzle right now, to be honest. You're a little scary, buddy. Not feeling getting bit." She holds out a hand for him to sniff, eyes kind and compassionate. He stretches forward, tentatively sniffing her hand. She smells like...coffee, and...paper, and...cat? He doesn't even know how he knows these smells, but they're somehow familiar and calming. He bumps his nose against her hand, the woman's face relaxing into a smile. She carefully reaches up, stroking a hand over his head, and he hobbles closer.

"Aww, you're a sweetheart, aren't you? You're just a big ol' puppy. Why would anyone want to hurt you?" She frowns. "Fucking Nazis." The wolf presses closer, desperate for the contact. She trails her hands down his chest, eyes drawn to the metal leg. She whispers. "Damn, that is some high-tech shit. I know a dozen vets who would kill for that kind of prosthetic. You got lucky, bud." Her eyes darken. "Or maybe not. Hydra experiments and all that." She sighs. "Focus, Grace. Injured leg."

She runs a careful hand down, probing for breaks. The wolf yelps and jerks the leg away when she reaches the break, whining softly. He tries to stay still, knowing he's supposed to. The woman strokes his head, speaking in soothing tones. "I'm sorry, it's okay. I know it hurts. I can't really x-ray you, but I think you got a broken leg, buddy." You think? some small sarcastic voice says in the wolf's head, startling him. She stands up. "Okay, I'm gonna go get some wrap to at least stabilize that, and maybe some food and water. Just stay put, buddy. I'll be right back." She turns away, slipping through the garage door and closing it behind her.

The wolf waits, obeying the command to stay put. Eventually the woman returns, wrap in one hand and a bowl of water in the other. She sets the bowl down, the wolf swallowing as he realizes his thirst. She approaches again, crouching down with the wrap. "Okay, just stay still. I'm gonna wrap this..." She holds his leg gently with one hand and starts wrapping, starting below the shoulder and ending halfway down. It's snug but not tight, and he holds still as instructed during the process. She secures it with careful fingers, leaning back to survey her work. She nods. "Alright. Not bad. You probably need a cast but it's the best I can do for now until I figure out what to do. Now, if I take this muzzle off, you promise not to bite me?" She reaches towards the muzzle and the wolf wrenches his head away, backing up until his haunches hit the garage wall. He whines, panting with fear. The mask, pressed to his face. Screws biting into flesh. 'Hold him still'...

The woman stares at him owlishly, taken off guard. She raises her hands placatingly. "Sorry buddy, I didn't mean to startle you. It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you." She stretches out a hand, still crouched on the floor. "Come on. It's okay, I just want to take it off so you can drink." The pose is familiar from his handler - Pierce - and the wolf creeps forwards again, stopping in front of her. She pets his head, studying the muzzle curiously. "Where does this attach...oh." Her eyes go wide and her hand stills on his head. "Oh no. No no no. This is..." She swallows. "Oh god. They really-they really just...what the f*ck. What the absolute fuck. That is...beyond cruel." She scrubs a hand
over her face. "I gotta call somebody. We gotta get this off you. I mean, how do you eat? Or drink? Nope. Nope, this is so wrong on so many levels." She sighs. "Alright, I'm gonna-I'm gonna try and call Stark Tower. Maybe someone there will know what to do. You just...wait here. I'll be back." She stands up, rushing out of the garage. The door swings shut but doesn't latch.

He can't stay. He knows that. He's stayed too long already, has already made himself vulnerable. He can't let anyone find him, and if she calls someone they'll come for him. He needs to move. He eyes the bowl left on the floor, trying to remember how to drink. He knows he needs water, somehow, but he doesn't have memories of drinking. There was only the IV. He limps over, sticking his muzzle into the dish and trying to suck it up through his mouth. He manages a tiny amount before he needs to breathe, lifting his nose out of the water. Then he sticks it back in, trying again. With much tilting of his head and sucking through his teeth he manages a fair amount, hearing the woman's faint voice in her house.

"Yes, a wolf! With a cybernetic leg. No, this isn't a prank! Listen-"

He slips out through the cracked garage door, limping off into the darkness.
He keeps going under cover of darkness, limping forward blindly. He doesn't know where he's going. He doesn't know where he is. He had never needed to know these things for missions. They
simply dropped him in, told him the immediate surroundings and mission parameters, and picked him back up. He's never had to navigate alone, doesn't even know what city he's in. He only knows it's America judging by the accents, but he doesn't even know how he knows this. There are no thoughts in his mind except to get away get away and so he keeps moving, dawn gradually creeping up as the hours go past. He finds a thick shrubbery next to a fence to hide behind, well hidden in the back of a house and away from the road. He lays there all day, drifting off for hours at a time and body still thrumming with pain. His face hurts with a bone-deep ache and his head throbs in time to his pulse, his broken leg gradually healing but still painful and weak. The wrap helps to stabilize it somewhat and keeps the swelling down, and the small amount of water he managed to get down took the edge off his thirst.

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When night falls he keeps moving again, limping through the seemingly never-ending residential neighborhoods. It's slow going, every inch of him hurting and shaking with exhaustion. His mind goes blank as he hobbles forwards, ignoring the pain. When morning comes he finds another spot to hide and curls up, sleeping in short bursts throughout the day.

***

Night falls and he staggers to his feet, throat dry with thirst and his stomach pinching uncomfortably.

He's been going for hours when he hears a van coming up the road behind him and he ducks off behind a nearby tree. The van slows to a stop and the wolf peers from behind the tree as he sees men in black with guns climb out of the van. His heart rate picks up as panic sets in but he remains frozen behind the tree, staying still and quiet. They found him. One peers at a handheld device before gesturing in his direction and suddenly he realizes they must have put a tracker in him. Why didn't he think of this before?

"Because you were not supposed to," a voice says.

The men raise their guns, circling in on his location and he bursts into action, taking off at a limping run. There's a soft shush and something embeds in his thigh, and the wolf stumbles as his muscles become uncoordinated. He pushes on, desperate. The men are silent as they follow, nothing to wake the people sleeping peacefully in their homes. They gain steadily, the wolf slow with exhaustion and injury. Another dart hits his side and he slows to a staggered walk, head spinning. Agents rush in, grabbing him as he struggles weakly. They haul him to the van, shoving him inside and closing the door before they take off. He lays panting on the floor by their feet, whining with every exhale.

"What the fuck was he doing all the way out here?" one agent asks after a few minutes.

"No clue. Probably just picked a direction and ran, the stupid dog."

"Well, at least he didn't actually go down with the Helicarriers. We'll need him more than ever if we're going to rebuild what we lost."

"I know. So annoying, though. What's the point of having the Asset if he keeps fucking up and going crazy?"

"I don't know, but Pierce managed to use him successfully."

"Well Pierce is dead. We don't have a handler for him yet, and without a handler he's useless."

"We'll figure it out. At least we got him before anyone else did. He's pretty helpless like this."
"Pathetic is what I call it."

The wolf lays on the floor, jostling with the movement of the van. *Pierce is dead.* His handler is dead. He feels nothing. *The Captain is your true handler,* something tells him. He couldn't kill Captain America, felt horror at the thought of him dying, but feels nothing for Pierce. This must mean that the Captain was right. Hydra took him and made him fight against his true handler. He feels a sudden rage at the thought. They turned him against his one true purpose, made him kill for them when all along it was *wrong,* they were *lying* to him, they made him everything he must have fought against and he hurt the Captain, he hurt *Steve-*

He growls low in his throat, anger prickling along his skin. He'll-he'll kill them, he'll rip their throats out-

Someone kicks him hard in the side, making him yelp as his broken rips protest. There's laughter from above him and he snarls again.

"Fucking rabid dog, is what he is."

Someone kicks him again. "Growl all you want. You're going back to base, and we're gonna fry all this outta your pretty little head."

"Wait, is that really how it works?"

"Yeah, you guys have never worked with the asset, I forgot. I've been a guard for a few years. They got this chair thing and they basically fry his brain with electricity until it burns out all of his memories, or something. I don't know exactly how it works, but after a week without it he starts getting all erratic and we either do it again or put him on ice and do it when he wakes up."

"Damn. So, what, he was like a person before this? That why they gotta erase the memories?"

"He's not a person," the guard says sharply. "He's not human. Don't ever forget that."

Something snaps inside the wolf. He surges upwards, shifting to the soldier and wrapping his metal hand around the guard's throat.
He crushes it, moving with lightning quickness and striking out with the metal arm. Another one goes down with a crushed skull and he kicks out the knee on the third, whirling to punch the metal fist straight into a fourth's ribcage, crushing it. The van screeches to a stop, panicked voices coming from the front. He snaps the fifth guard's neck before kicking out the back of the van and rolling onto the pavement. He's on a bridge, and he only takes a moment to think before diving over the edge and into the water.

The force of the impact makes pain ricochet through his body and he can barely manage to claw to the surface. He kicks out with his feet, heading away from where he can see the wreckage of the Helicarrier faintly upriver, the lights of construction crews illuminating the scene. He's back where he started, only slightly downriver from the Triskelion. He shifts, paddling away down the river in the darkness. He swims for a few minutes before he shifts course and clambers up onto the bank, on the opposite side from before. He drinks from the river to slake his thirst, sucking water up
through the muzzle and choking as he gasps for breath. Then he moves on blindly, crossing a small trail and green grass meeting his paws. After a few minutes he comes to another channel and crosses, coming ashore in a small marina. He ventures down one of the docks, jumping into a medium-sized boat and curling up in the cabin. He shivers in the cool night air, fur dripping wet and injuries throbbing, tranquilizer still flooding through his system. His head aches, and his face - hold him still -

He shivers, trying to find a comfortable position. He needs-he needs Steve. He needs someone to tell him what to do, to pet his head and reassure him that it will be okay. He-he's confused, and lost, and he doesn't remember what to do or where to go but he can't go back to Hydra and he feels like his whole world is crumbling before his eyes and he just wants everything to stop. He almost wishes for the chair, so it would take away these swirling thoughts and give him back that comfortable blankness, the security of not having to make his own decisions or fend for himself. But that-that was wrong, Hydra took away his memories of Steve and that was wrong but he can't do this, he can't-he can't-

Rage and fear and all-consuming desolation battle for dominance, his head pounding. Everything hurts, and he curls tighter against the cabin, feeling small and so alone. He needs - soft voice and gentle hands - someone to take care of him, to stroke his head and whisper soft words. He remembers the woman in the garage with her gentle hands and soothing voice, and he yearns for a gentle touch so bad it hurts, like an ache in his chest. He feels anchor-less, a wolf without a master, except he does, he has Steve-

He needs to get to Steve. Steve will tell him what to do, although he will certainly punish the wolf for hurting him. That is alright, as long as the wolf no longer has to be alone; as long as he gives orders, and the world finally makes sense again. The wolf cannot - does not want to think. Steve will take it away, will take care of him and tell him what to do, and the wolf won't be left confused and lost. He exhales, feeling calmer. He must find Steve, somehow.

***

He wakes to light coming in the cabin, the boat rocking softly in the water. Every inch of him hurts and his stomach pinches uncomfortably, head stuffed with cotton wool. He blinks blearily, the marina quiet and still. Eventually he nods off again, the rocking of the boat lulling him into sleep. He wakes every few hours throughout the day, straining his senses for approaching people, but all is calm.

When darkness falls he stumbles from his hiding place, setting off into the city. He doesn't know how to find Steve, only knows the name and the sense of familiarity that tugs at him. He knows his scent, too, familiar and comforting, but with so many smells around it would be almost impossible to track him. Helpless frustration builds, despair threatening to overtake him. He pushes it down, making his mind blank of everything but the mission. He has a mission: find Steve. It settles and focuses him, quieting his fragmented mind. Mission objective: find Steve. Mission incomplete. Course of action:???

A memory pushes at him, throwing the shield back to the man on a roof. It was...a previous mission, he thinks. He dispatched someone else, but the man was there, he wasn't his mission...

He makes his way further into the city, trying to orient himself. He knows this. He remembers tracking the target to an apartment, somewhere not too far from the heart of the city. Anticipation quickens in his gut. He knows where he's going, at least, has a mission and a way to carry it out. He will find Steve soon.

***
It takes hours to carefully wind his way through the streets, avoiding people and cars and cameras. By the time dawn approaches he's still a ways away from the apartment, so he decides to go the rest of the way the next night. He hides in a small alley, staying awake the whole day on high alert as people pass by his hiding spot. A stray dog comes sniffing around but he growls and it leaves him alone, scampering off. His mouth is dry with thirst, his face throbbing with the pain of the muzzle. His thick fur makes him hot in the spring air and he longs to pant, head going fuzzy with exhaustion and heat. His stomach hurts with distressing pangs and the compulsion to do something, but he doesn't know what's wrong.

When darkness finally falls he continues on, slipping through the busy streets. It takes hours to reach the apartment but the buildings become more and more familiar as he goes, triggering memories. He ignores the renewed pain in his head, limping forwards. His leg is healing but still not functioning to a high degree and the pads of his paws are raw from the hot pavement, the metal one clinking against it with every step.

When he gets to the apartment it is empty and quiet, yellow tape across the door and all the lights off. He shoves at the door with his shoulder, and it swings open unexpectedly. He creeps forward cautiously, ready for an ambush, but his senses tell him there's no one here, hasn't been for a couple days. Disappointment swirls in his gut, a crushing sense of hopelessness. How is he supposed to find Steve now?

He can smell him all around in the apartment, familiar and soothing - soap and sweat and graphite - and he explores in the dark, nose twitching under the mask as he breathes in Steve's scent. He follows it to where it's strongest, in the bedroom, clambering up onto the bed and curling up. The pillow is soft under his face, relieving the pain from the muzzle, and the mattress is heaven on his aching body. He finds his eyelids drooping as exhaustion comes over him and soon slips into sleep, surrounded by Steve's scent.

***

He awakes to raging thirst, his throat raw and head fuzzy. He falls off the bed, staggering into the hallway. Water. He needs water. He reaches the kitchen, illuminated by light streaming through the blinds, and stares at the sink. Water. He can't reach it like this. He shifts into the soldier, stumbling forwards and bracing himself against the counter. He turns on the sink from muscle memory, leaning forward and sticking his head under the tap. The water flows over and through the ventilation holes of the mask and into his mouth, the soldier sucking swallows through his teeth. Something makes him stop after a few swallows, a memory - only a few sips, don't want this coming back up - flashing through his head. His hand on a frail back as he holds a glass of water, blonde hair and blue eyes-

He shakes his head to clear it, immediately regretting it when it sends pain pulsing through his face. He slumps to the ground, leaning his head back against the cabinets. A metal finger taps against the tile. Taptap tap, tap tap, tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap...

He blinks to find himself still on the floor, the light in the kitchen different. He's lost time, he thinks. He struggles to his feet again, drinking more water from the tap before going back to the bedroom. He curls up naked on the bed, the sheets soft against his skin. Another flash of memory - legs tangled together under sheets, hot breath on his neck, a voice, God, Bucky-

He presses metal fingers to his temple, a headache pulsing behind his eyes and something clawing at his stomach.

***
He explores, the apartment frustratingly bare of any personal effects. It looks like Steve had been here recently, maybe just before he arrived, and taken all of his things with him. All that's left is furniture and bland decorations, no sense of who the former occupant was. The soldier desperately wants to know who Steve is, to remember why he knows him, but all he has is a name, a face, and a familiar smell. It's not enough. Frustrated and exhausted, he drinks more water and returns to the bed, curling up and sinking into sleep.

***

He cracks open his eyes, looking around blearily at the dimly lit room, sunlight shafting through the blinds. His stomach hurts with an insistent ache and he shivers, burrowing into the bed for warmth. His head pounds and there's something...something he needs, but he can't put his finger on it. Something...food. It comes in a flash, memory sparking of the wolf eating from a bowl. Food. How had he forgotten food?

He can't eat with the muzzle even if he knew where to get food. Somehow, he knows this is bad, that he needs food, but he's too tired to think any further. His limbs feel leaden and shaky and fatigue grips him tight, the soldier unable to summon the energy to get out of the bed. He lays there all day, drifting in and out of wakefulness. In the evening he manages to stagger to the kitchen and drink before collapsing again on the bed and passing out.

***

When he wakes the hunger pangs have dulled to a low ache but he feels as if there's a fog over everything, making the world muted and grey. He drags himself out of bed and drinks before shifting into the wolf to stop the shivers that wrack him, his long fur helping to keep him warmer. His leg doesn't seem to be any more healed, he notes absently. He thinks this should bother him, but he doesn't give it much thought. He spends the day exploring the apartment again as the wolf in case there is anything he missed as the soldier, but finds nothing except clothes with Steve's scent in the wardrobe. Working on vague sense-memory of clothes he shifts to the soldier and pulls on soft fleece pants and a long-sleeved shirt, immediately feeling warmer.

He loses more time when he passes the couch on a routine check of the apartment, a memory hitting of lying on a couch watching as someone - blonde hair and blue eyes - drew in a sketchbook. He blinks to find it evening and curls back up on the bed, everything numb and disconnected.

***

He should be doing something, he knows. He should be looking for Steve, but he doesn't know where to start. This is the only clue he has, and he can only hope that maybe, maybe Steve will come back here. He needs Steve. Every day without him, without order and structure and someone taking care of him makes a hole grow in his chest, a hopeless desperation that begs for someone to find him. Please, Steve, he thinks. Please find me.

He drinks from the faucet and crumples to the floor, leaning against the cabinets. A metal finger taps on the floor. Taptaptap, tap tap, taaptap, tap tap tap, taaptaptaptap, taaptaptaptapt, tap tap, taaptap, tap tap tap tap tap, taaptaptap, tap tap, tap tap tap, taaptap.

***

He wakes in the middle of the night, early morning, to sounds outside the apartment. He stiffens, sitting up and cocking his head to hear. Heavy footsteps outside the door. The smell of gunpowder and sweat. Whispered voices, commands. They've found him.
He slides out of bed silently, blood rushing to his head and making him sway for a moment before he regains his bearings. He creeps down the hallway, aiming for the broken window in the living room. He's halfway across when the door bursts open, agents in tac gear swarming in with guns raised. He runs, launching himself out the window as a bullet clips his side. He latches onto the brick of the building opposite with the metal hand and drags down the side of the building, jumping to the street below. His side stings and glass cuts his bare feet but he ignores it, taking off at a run. A van screeches in his path, making the soldier skid to a stop and run the other way. Another van cuts off his exit and he whirls, panic setting in. Agents surround him, guns raised, and he freezes.

"Stand down, soldier," someone says. The soldier growls low in his throat, preparing for a fight. He springs into motion, lunging at the nearest agent. They want him alive, he knows, so they won't all shoot him. He goes to strike the agent-

A shock brings him crashing down to the pavement. He gasps, hands coming up to clutch at his collar as he writhes in pain. Hands grab him, pulling his arms behind his back and cuffing him, his right arm throbbing in protest. They drag him towards a van and throw him in, the agents climbing in after and the van taking off. The collar is still sending low waves of pain through his body, keeping him incapacitated. He whines, face pressed against the floor and throbbing with every jolt of the van.

"Asset secure. We're heading to you. Over," one of the agents says into a radio.

"Roger that. Everything is ready to go. Over," crackles back.

The agents ignore him the whole ride, the van silent except for the soldier's harsh breathing. His eyes start to glaze with the pain, limbs trembling and breathing shallow and fast. Fear consumes him, desperation clawing at his chest. He can't go back. He can't go back. No. No. No. No-

The van stops and the agents haul him up, dragging him out and towards...towards the bank. He struggles but to no avail, weak and restrained, and he's dragged into the bank and down to the lower levels, where he knows what awaits him. They bring him into the room with the chair, the sight making panic flare in his chest and his breathing ratchet up even more. No no no no no-

They shove him to his knees, the shock increasing, and uncuff him. The world spins with pain, blurring before his eyes as he sways on his knees. He's pulled up again, towards the chair, and he begins to thrash in earnest, digging his bloody heels into the cement floor. He lashes out, hitting someone, voices swirling around him as they try to wrestle him forwards. He finds another's throat and crushes it with his metal arm, the voices growing panicked and his collar continuing to send low-grade shocks through his system but not enough to down him.

"The collar! Use it!"

"I'm trying! We don't have the original device, I can't make it go any more! We're just tapping in here!"

"Try harder! Restrain him!"

More hands grab him, pinning the metal arm and dragging him towards the chair. He screams and thrashes wildly in blind panic. Instinct takes over and he shifts, clothes shredding and the wolf slipping away from the hands and stumbling across the room, leaving bloody paw prints in his wake. He presses into the corner, snarling at the men who approach. His breaths come so fast he can hardly breathe and his vision blurs, no thoughts in his mind except for no no no no no no no-
There's a loud sound, like a door breaking down, and suddenly the room is thrown into even more chaos. He presses back as shots ring out, figures blurring before his eyes and falling to the floor. His collar shuts off abruptly. There's shouts, and thuds, and then everything goes silent.

Figures approach and he growls, his whole body shaking with pain and fear and confusion. He doesn't-he doesn't know what's going on, it hurts, everything hurts, he just wants this to stop, he doesn't-he doesn't want the chair, he can't-he can't-

There's a low voice speaking as the two figures stop a few feet away, calm and soothing.

"Bucky, it's okay, we're not going to hurt you. It's okay. You're safe now." He-he knows that voice.
It's...familiar, and calming, it's-

The figure crouches down, stretching out a hand, and he knows this. Handler. He blinks, growl cutting off abruptly, and Steve's face swims before his eyes - blonde hair and blue eyes - and everything is right. Steve came for him. His handler came for him, and everything is right.

"Bucky?" Steve says.

He limps forward, pushing his head into Steve's hand. Handler.
Chapter 14

You howl like a wolf
Yet I hear the bleeting of a lamb.

Wolf by LiviKawa

When Steve had gotten the call from Tony that he'd found a Hydra base he'd thought he knew what to expect. He certainly had never expected this. He'd heard a scream as he and Sam had made their way down here, and when they'd crashed through the barred door they had found a horrifying sight. Agents all around, shouting, one dead on the floor and Bucky, trapped in the corner as agents advanced, an imposing chair in the center surrounded by machinery, making dread coil in his gut. Bucky was in wolf form, and the sight had made nausea rise in his throat. Blood and dirt smeared the white fur and his eyes were wild and terrified above a muzzle, growling emanating from his throat and ears pinned back. He was barely standing, right foreleg obviously still broken—

He freezes, afraid to move as Bucky pushes into his hand. Does this—does this mean Bucky remembers him? Slowly he moves his hand, stroking the top of Bucky's head in soothing motions, and Bucky's eyes close, a sigh releasing from his chest. Up close Steve can see the jagged horizontal edge that marks the new end of his right ear, and he swallows as a million different scenarios rush through his mind. He looks at the muzzle and doesn't see where it attaches, it seems to just fit over his nose—

"Steve." Sam's voice interrupts his thoughts and Bucky's eyes open again, glazed but calm. "We should get out of here," Sam says quietly.

Steve nods, slowly standing up but keeping his hand on Bucky's head. "Okay. Ready to get outta here, pal?"

Bucky just leans against Steve's leg, body trembling against him. Steve thinks of the long corridors that lead here and wonders if Bucky can make it. He shares a look with Sam, who jerks his head significantly at Bucky. Steve looks down, contemplating his options. He doesn't want to hurt Bucky or touch him without his consent but Bucky seems too weak and out of it to walk out of here and with the addition of the muzzle is about as dangerous as a kitten. He's going to have to carry him.

He crouches down, meeting Bucky's glazed eyes. "Hey pal, I'm going to carry you outta here. That alright?"

Bucky doesn't even look like he hears him and his eyes drift away from Steve's slowly. Steve sighs before standing up and leaning down, wrapping his arms carefully around Bucky and hoisting him up into his arms. He doesn't struggle, his body limp in Steve's, and he feels way too light, ribs prominent under Steve's hands. Steve turns, following Sam out of the vault and to the corridors
above. Sam stops by the small security booth up top, looking at Steve.

"We should take all the tapes. I'm guessing you don't want the government finding them, and we might need them." He gestures with his head to Bucky in Steve's arms.

Steve nods, dreading what they'll find on those tapes. "Yeah, take everything and make sure it's clean. I'll take Bucky to the car."

He keeps moving, leaving Sam behind as he makes his way to where they had parked Sam's new rental car. He gently places Bucky in the backseat, a breathy whine emitting from his throat that makes Steve's heart clench. He goes to close the door but Bucky whines again, eyes wide and pleading as he stares at Steve. Steve's resolve crumbles and he slides into the seat next to Bucky, Bucky immediately scooting closer to lay his head on his lap. Steve strokes his head, rage building at what Hydra had done to Bucky. He has only read a page or so of the file Natasha gave him, having to translate the Russian, and it didn't tell him much. Just vague notes on Case No. 17 and an attempt to figure out Bucky's ability to turn into a wolf.

In a few minutes Sam comes jogging up, a hard drive clutched in his hand along with several VHS tapes. He shoots a look at Steve and Bucky in the back seat and clambers into the drivers seat, placing the equipment on the passenger seat and starting the car. He pulls out his phone, dialing the FBI hotline and handing it back to Steve as they pull away.

"FBI hotline, how may we help you?"

"This is Steve Rogers. I'd like to report a Hydra base at 1362..."
They pull into the driveway, Bucky still laying on Steve's lap with his eyes closed. Sam jogs around the car, opening the door for Steve.

"Hey Buck, we're here. Let's get you inside," he says, trying to gently scoot out from under Bucky. Bucky's head raises blearily and Steve takes the opportunity to get out of the car, reaching back in to collect Bucky in his arms again. They walk to the house, Sam holding the door open for Steve and leading them to the bathroom, where Steve sets Bucky down on the tile.

"Y'all are not getting blood all over my house," Sam says firmly.

There's blood all over his uniform from Bucky but he doesn't know how much of it is his. Either
way, Bucky is obviously injured and weak, but neither of them are veterinarians.

He crouches down next to Bucky, his eyes immediately snapping to Steve's. "Buck, can you shift? We can't help you like this."

Bucky blinks at him before he closes his eyes and shifts, a human Bucky suddenly before Steve on his hands and knees. He's shaking, but it's Bucky and though Steve knows the wolf it is like he couldn't quite believe it was Bucky until now. Bucky's eyes are wide and blue above the mask, hair hanging in his face in limp strands. There's a black collar around his neck, flush with his skin and looking mechanical and strange, no visible clasp. He smells like wet dog and sweat and the metal shoulder is cold under Steve's hand as he reaches out to steady him as he sways. He catches sight of twisted scar tissue where the arm meets flesh and feels sick but pushes it down. Bucky needs him to be strong.

Sam is suddenly there, Steve not having realized he had left. He holds out a pair of boxers and sweatpants, setting down a first aid kit on the counter.

"Might want to get him cleaned up first," Sam murmurs. "Can't see his injuries under all that blood and grime, and I worry about infection."

Steve nods, setting down the clothes on the floor and placing both hands on Bucky's shoulders, mindful of his broken arm.

"We need to get you cleaned up, okay? You wanna take a shower?" Bucky doesn't respond, and again Steve wonders if he can speak under the mask. He reaches forwards to take it off, along with the collar. "I'm gonna take these off first."

Bucky jerks back suddenly, eyes going wide with panic. Steve freezes as Bucky scrabbles backwards, back hitting the cabinet and breaths loud and harsh in the silence. His eyes dart around wildly, unseeing, as he draws his knees up and mismatched hands come up to his face. Fingertips rest on the mask but do not press and his eyes squeeze shut as if in pain, chest heaving with exertion. Steve can now see the bruises mottling his chest and torso in various stages of healing and glimpses a ragged bullet wound along his side, bleeding sluggishly. His feet are bloody as well, leaving trails on the floor.

"It's alright. I'm sorry, Buck. I didn't mean to startle you," Steve tries to say soothingly. Bucky squeezes his eyes closed again as he whines softly, and Steve almost wants to cry. "I'm sorry Buck," he repeats. "I just want to take them off. I didn't mean to scare you. I'm not going to hurt you."

Bucky just whines again but his eyes flick to Steve, dilated with pain. Steve sees him swallow heavily beneath the mask and a metal hand slowly taps the air above four spots on his face, once above each cheekbone and on each side of his jaw before moving to tap behind his neck on the collar.

Steve frowns, confused. "I don't-I don't understand, Buck. What does that mean?"

"Steve." Sam's voice is filled with something that makes Steve look back at him. Sam swallows, eyes trained on Bucky. "Steve, I think...I don't think they can come off."

突然 it hits him and his head whips back around to stare at Bucky in horror. *Four taps, one*
over each major bone in his face and on his spine, over the collar. He remembers looking at the muzzle on the wolf, wondering how it stayed on, where it attached...

Now that he's looking for it he sees small screws flush with the mask exactly where Bucky pointed. They-screwed it to his face. And the collar, they must have wired it into his spine. The reasons why are too horrible to contemplate. He feels sick, horror and rage competing in his head. How long-how long had Bucky been living with this? Without being able to talk, or eat, or move his jaw. The mask must have been after the bridge, when Bucky's mask came off. They must have wanted to prevent that from happening again so-they-screwed it to his face. And the collar, they must have wired it into his spine. The reasons why are too horrible to contemplate. He feels sick, horror and rage competing in his head. How long-how long had Bucky been living with this? Without being able to talk, or eat, or move his jaw. The mask must have been after the bridge, when Bucky's mask came off. They must have wanted to prevent that from happening again so-so they-they-

Bucky is still looking at him with fearful eyes and it takes all of his strength to swallow down his inner turmoil. He can't fall apart. He can't think about this. Bucky needs him. He is-he is just like another wounded soldier on the battlefield, and Steve has to toughen up and focus on treating the injuries he can, not freeze and sink into a spiral of horror. It was Bucky who taught him this, during the war. For Bucky's sake, he needs to do this.

He takes a deep breath. "Okay. Okay. We're not going to touch the mask or...or collar right now. We're gonna treat all the injuries we can, and then we'll figure it out later. Okay?" Bucky blinks, and he takes that as a yes. He takes another breath, still looking at Bucky. "Good. Good. Okay. Sam, can you turn on the shower?"

He hears Sam move across the bathroom and the sound of water running. Bucky's eyes flick over briefly before returning to Steve, fear fading and what looks like deep-seated exhaustion taking over.

"Can I come closer?" Steve asks. "I wanna get you up so we can get you cleaned up."

Again Bucky gives no visible response, eyelids fluttering with exhaustion. Steve doesn't want to do anything without asking him but at this point they just need to get Bucky treated and Bucky doesn't seem cognizant enough to really decide anything. He hates the fact that they're taking his choice away but what choice does Steve have?

He moves forwards slowly, getting an arm around Bucky's back and throwing the metal arm over his shoulders. He hauls him up, Bucky giving no resistance. They stumble towards the shower, Bucky's feet leaving bloody footprints on the tile. He gets them in, his clothes soaking through as he maneuvers them into the shower. He steps back, bracing Bucky with a hand to his metal shoulder as he sways. He takes the shower head from the dock, telegraphing his movements as he gently begins to clean off the blood and grime. The spray is light and warm, and Bucky blinks heavily as Steve shifts around him. He's naked, but it doesn't seem to bother him and Steve knows every inch of his body, is used to seeing Bucky naked. It's disconcerting, the way Bucky is like a lifeless puppet, but Steve pushes it to the back of his mind. He can't think about that now.

Sure enough, there's a long cut from a bullet along Bucky's left side and he cleans it as best he can, Bucky not even flinching as blood runs in watery rivulets down his side. The broken arm appears to be set right but simply hasn't healed all the way, probably because Bucky hasn't eaten in...who knows how long. He's far too skinny, ribs sticking out slightly and making his bruised chest even more grotesque. Steve thinks some of his ribs might be cracked as well, but none are out of place. He's careful to keep the spray away from the mask as he washes Bucky's hair, which smells like river water. The collar seems even more horrifying up close. The metal arm seems fine in the water, and Steve figures if Bucky swam in the river and it's still working than it must be okay. He cleans dirt and blood out of the plates of the arm, watching the reddish brown water swirl away down the drain. He doesn't bother with soap, only wanting to rinse away all the grime. Finally he sits Bucky down on the edge of the tub, lifting his feet to see the damage. There's bits of glass...
embedded in his feet and Steve rinses out as much as he can for now.

He shuts the water off, Sam handing him a towel from around the corner. He dries Bucky as gently as he can before stepping out and grabbing the clothes. He has to help Bucky into the boxers and pants, Bucky unable or unwilling to do it himself. Then he manages to sit him down on the toilet seat, Sam emerging from around the corner and opening up the first aid kit.

"The wound on his side should be addressed first," Steve says clinically, putting himself in battlefield mindset. "Then he's got glass in his feet, and a broken arm and possibly cracked ribs."

Sam nods, assessing Bucky with trained eyes. Steve has never been more grateful that Sam is a pararescue, and knows emergency medicine. Sam withdraws a needle and thread along with a small vial of Lidocaine and a syringe, setting them on the counter. He approaches Bucky, crouching down next to the toilet so he's looking up at him. Nonthreatening.

"I need to stitch up that wound on your side. You good with that?"

Bucky's gaze drifts to Steve, not acknowledging Sam. He seems to be waiting for Steve's opinion, which is somehow very disconcerting, though he can't put his finger on why.

"It's okay, Buck," he says. "Sam wants to help you. He's a friend."

Bucky's gaze drifts to Sam and he blinks slowly. Figuring that's all the response they're going to get, Steve nods at Sam. Sam retrieves the vial and a syringe, hesitating and looking at Steve.

"You said you guys had similar metabolisms?" Steve nods and Sam bites his lip, looking thoughtful. "You know how much you need?"

Steve shrugs. "When in doubt, just double whatever a normal person is."

Sam nods. "Alright. We're winging it then. Bucky, can you tap your finger on your leg if it hurts?" Bucky blinks, and then taps his finger. Sam smiles slightly, though it looks more like a grimace. "I know, probably everything hurts right now. Alright, you're going to feel a little pinch, and then it should go numb. Ready?"

He takes the syringe, filled to the top with Lidocaine, and positions it over Bucky's side next to the wound. With a smooth motion he injects it, Bucky not even flinching. He withdraws it, setting it on the counter.

"Alright, the hard part's done. It should be starting to get numb." He presses a finger gently against his side. "Tap if you can feel this." Bucky's finger is still, and Sam sighs in relief. "Okay, good. Now if it starts to hurt at any point while I'm stitching it up you just tap, okay?"

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Steve nods, going down on one knee next to Bucky and propping his leg on his knee. Sam fills the syringe and hovers over Bucky's foot.

"Alright, I'm gonna do this in a couple places since these are spread out. You'll feel just a few pinches and then it'll go numb. This is the first one."

He injects the first syringe to no response from Bucky. Steve swallows. A needle in your foot isn't exactly comfortable, and yet Bucky shows no signs of reacting or even feeling it, though Steve knows he must.

"Alright, now for the second."

Once his foot is numbed with no tap from Bucky Sam withdraws tweezers, beginning to dig the pieces of glass out. They clink into the basin next to him, bloody and horrifyingly large. Once all the pieces are out Sam bandages Bucky's foot, wrapping layers of gauze around it. Then he moves to the other foot, repeating the process. The basin steadily fills with pieces of glass. When Bucky's feet are bandaged Sam moves to the arm.

"Alright, we don't have an x-ray here but I think you just got a clean break. I've got a sling from my shoulder surgery, would you be okay wearing that?"

Bucky blinks.

"Uh, tap once for yes and twice for no," Steve says, Bucky's silence eerie and disconcerting.

Bucky's brow furrows as his eyes search Steve's. Finally he taps a tentative finger once on his thigh, watching Steve as if to gauge his reaction. It's...disturbing, somehow, and Steve has the thought that Bucky is just saying whatever he thinks Steve wants him to say. There's not much they can do about it now, though, and he really needs to wear a sling. Steve jerks his head at Sam and Sam hurries off to retrieve it, coming back a few moments later with the sling and a pair of fuzzy socks.

"Alright, I think it would be too hard and painful to try and put a shirt on you, but these should help cushion your feet and we've got blankets if you're cold. You want me to put them on, or Steve?"

Bucky's eyes flick to Steve, and Sam hands him the sling and socks. Steve moves forwards, sliding the strap over his head carefully and maneuvering his arm into the sling. His arm now is tight against his chest, the bruises underneath still visible. Steve crouches down, taking Bucky's feet and carefully sliding the big fluffy socks over the bandages. It's incongruous, somehow, the fuzzy grey socks on his feet contrasted with the horrifying black mask and metal arm. It's like putting a bow on an injured tiger.

Sam stands back with his hands on his hips, nodding. "Alright, that's the best we can do for now." He lowers his voice as Steve comes to stand next to him. "We need to get him to Stark tower. That mask and collar have to come off, but it's gonna take surgery. And he can't eat with the mask on, so he's just slowly starving. Dehydrated, too, I'd guess, though he must have gotten water at some point in the last nine days or he'd be dead. Besides, we don't know what kinda shit they did to him we don't know about. This is...beyond my capabilities."

Steve nods. "Yeah. Let me call Tony. You coming with?"

"Hell yeah. I didn't come this far just to leave you now. I'll start getting some things together."

"Sounds good." Steve hesitates. "I don't want to leave him here alone. Let's at least get him somewhere more comfortable."
"Good idea. Now that he's not bleeding everywhere, you can put him on the couch."

Steve moves forward, catching Bucky's attention. "Hey Buck, let's get you somewhere more comfortable, okay?"

He leans down and slides an arm under Bucky's metal arm, hauling him up. They shuffle to the living room, Bucky almost dead weight on Steve's shoulders. He deposits Bucky on the couch, on impulse grabbing the blanket from the back and draping it over Bucky's shoulders. He looks...small. Vulnerable. Nothing like the terrifying assassin that had faced him on the bridge. His eyes droop with exhaustion, every blink growing longer.

Steve moves to the edge of the room, keeping his eyes on him as he pulls out his phone and dials Tony's number. It rings three times before he picks up.
"Hey, what's up Cap?"

Steve swallows. "We found him. He...he needs medical attention. We're coming to you."

"Okay, good. I'll have the med bay set up and Bruce ready. What do you need?"

Steve pinches the bridge of his nose, trying to keep his composure. He can't crack now. "I-I don't know," he says, and his voice is shaky. "We treated his injuries the best we could, but...they, uh, they-the mask, it's-it's attached to his face, with-with screws and he can't talk, or-or eat, or maybe even drink, and there's-there's a collar, and I think-I think it's wired into his spine, and he's-he's in bad shape and I don't-I don't know what to do-

He cuts off, breathing raggedly as tears prick his eyes. Goddamnit. He wasn't going to fall apart.

There's silence on the other end for a long moment. "That's-" Tony finally says. "That's....Jesus. Just..." He swallows audibly. "We'll be ready. You guys driving?"

Steve clears his throat. "Yeah. He seems okay with the car."

"Is he...violent? I need to know if Bruce needs to keep his distance."

Steve shakes his head, looking over at where Bucky appears to be asleep on the couch. "No. The opposite. He just...goes along with everything. It might just be exhaustion, but he does seem to know me. I don't know. He's not very...with it right now."

"Right. Okay. That's...right. Is it okay if I bring in a couple other doctors on this? Bruce is more of a scientist than a medical doctor."

"Yeah. I trust your judgement."

"Wow Cap, I think that's the first time I've ever heard you say that," Tony's voice is back to teasing and light, and Steve actually appreciates it. "I'm flattered. I'm gonna cherish those words forever."

Steve rolls his eyes. "Yeah, yeah. But seriously, thank you Tony. I couldn't do this without you."

There's a pause, and Tony clears his throat. "Well, right, obviously. I'm amazing."

Steve smiles despite himself. "I'll see you in a few hours."

"Copy that. Stark out."

The call cuts off, just in time for Sam to emerge from the hallway with a duffel bag. He glances over at Bucky, taking in his sleeping form.

"I'm all set. I'll keep watch if you wanna get your stuff."

Steve nods, heading down the hallway to the guest room he's been staying in. His things are already half-packed since he's only been here about a week. He shoves a few stray items in and picks them up, heading back out.

"We're good to go." He hands his bag to Sam. "You load these and I'll get Bucky."

Sam nods, setting out the door. Steve approaches Bucky cautiously, not wanting to startle him out of sleep.

"Hey Buck," he says, to no response. He tentatively reaches out a hand, shaking Bucky's leg
slightly before quickly stepping back. Bucky's eyes crack open, roving around blearily before they land on Steve. Steve approaches, crouching next to the couch.

"We're gonna take you somewhere that they can help you," he says softly. "We just gotta make it to the car."

Bucky blinks sleepily at him, eyes unfocused and struggling to stay open. Steve gently puts his arms around him, blanket and all, carrying him bridal-style out the door and to the car. Bucky rests his head on Steve's shoulder, eyes closing. He sets him down in the backseat of the car, Bucky's head flopping back against the headrest. An idea sparks and he runs back into the house, trusting that Bucky can't and won't move. He grabs two pillows from his bed, running back out to see Bucky exactly where he left him. He puts the pillows against the far door, reaching in and maneuvering Bucky so he sits lengthwise across the seats, back leaning against the pillows and legs stretched out in front of him. He makes a small sound before his eyes close again, sinking into sleep as he snuggles into the blanket. Sam is in the driver's seat and Steve jumps in the passenger side, the car starting. They pull away, heading towards New York and, hopefully, salvation.
He is—he is in a car. Soft-soft fabric around him, voices speaking, hushed, the rumble of the car under him. Everything—everything hurts, but it is better, Steve is here, he's helping him, he's—Hey Buck—

There is no punishment, yet, and Steve is—is nice, he is gentle and he doesn't—he doesn't hurt the soldier—yet—and there is the other man, the man with wings—he hurt the man, but there is no punishment, the man—the man helps him—tap if it hurts—and it's confusing but Steve is here and everything is right because Steve is right and he came for the soldier and he doesn't remember but he knows Steve, and his hands are gentle and he speaks—his voice is soft—soft voice and gentle hands—

The voices are still murmuring, and he hears the rustling of paper.

"What is this, it says...'mission report, November 22, 1963. Dallas, Texas. First mission a success. Target eliminated and soldier returned to cryogenic stasis."

"Wait, November 22, 1963? Dallas? Are you saying your buddy back there killed JFK?"

"It was Hydra, not him."

"Still. That's..."

"Let me translate the next one... 'mission report, April 4, 1968. Memphis, Tennessee. Target eliminated and soldier returned to cryogenic stasis."

"Martin Luther King, Jr.! You're telling me he killed fucking MLK? What the fuck. Are all the conspiracy theories true?"

There's a sigh. "I certainly hope not. Okay, this just looks like a huge list of mission reports all the way until...1991."

"When the Soviet Union collapsed. Makes sense. That's all in Russian. I'm guessing the American branch of Hydra had him next."

Steve's voice is dark and angry. "Pierce."

"Yeah, kinda wish that evil fucker was alive so I could punch him in the face."

"Me too, Sam. Me too."

The voices swirl away as the soldier sinks back into sleep.
There's a hand on his leg, shaking it, a voice speaking softly. He cracks open his eyes, Steve's face resolving in the frame of the door. He's in the car, but it's not moving, and Steve-Steve is saying something...

"Hey Buck, we're here. Can you get out?"

Get out. He's in the car. He has to get out. Steve is there. Steve is his handler. He has to move. His limbs feel heavy, his throat dry and painful and his head throbbing in time with his face. There is—there is a blanket around him, he does not remember ever seeing a blanket but he knows what it is, it is soft, it is nice, and he's so tired but Steve-Steve is still speaking and where is he? He's—there's something he's supposed to do. Get out. He's supposed to get out of the car.

He tries to move but he's so tired, and weak, but Steve said to get out and he has to get out so he struggles, sitting up as his head spins and the world goes blurry. Steve is—Steve's hand is on his leg, still, and he's speaking, low and even.

"Alright, I'm gonna carry you, okay?"

Okay. Okay. Okay. What is okay. Why is he asking the soldier. It is his decision but he keeps asking the soldier—is this okay—and sound good—and the soldier does not know how to respond, cannot, is not allowed to, he's not supposed to speak, he can't, there's a mask—pain, hands holding him down, hold him still—and he blinks to find he is not in the car, he is in Steve's arms, they are walking—somewhere and he can't remember what happened but Steve is holding him and that's good, Steve is good—

There are people, voices swirling around him. Who are the people, where are they, what is going on—but he can't ask questions, he's not supposed to, he can't—

He is being laid on something soft, the sounds of footsteps and anxious voices around him. Steve lets go and panic rises, no, where is he going, don't leave him alone, Steve, please, no—

Someone touches him and he tries to lash out, to struggle. No, no no no no no where is Steve, Steve, he doesn't want—he doesn't want the chair, no, is this—is this his punishment but he thought—

A warm hand touches his shoulder. "Buck, it's okay. You're safe. I'm right here."

He relaxes, breathing slowing. Steve. Handler. Steve is here. He didn't leave him. His vision clears slightly and he sees Steve's blurred form—blonde hair and blue eyes—leaning over him, and a hand strokes through his hair. He sighs, turning his head into the touch.

"They're gonna put an IV in, okay? You're just going to feel a small pinch."

Okay. Okay. Okay. Everything is okay. Steve is here. He feels something in his arm, a pinch, like Steve said and there's an IV in his arm, he knows this from before and he doesn't want to go back but Steve is here and Steve took him away from Hydra, from the chair—

Steve says something, and there's another pinch on his hand. Steve continues stroking his hair as the soldier blinks blearily up at bright lights and a white ceiling. There is a feeling spreading through him, warm and heavy, and the pain starts to recede. Nothing—nothing hurts, he is floating, and Steve's hand strokes his hair and he feels good, everything is good and right and his eyes flutter closed as darkness swallows him up.
He is—he is lying on something soft. There is something over him—a blanket—and he feels floaty and all the pain is far away but he can still feel—he can feel the mask on his face and the collar—the collar is around his neck it has always been there, it is part of him, but the mask is not, and it hurts with a distant ache and he wants it off. doesn't want—he doesn't—

There is a warm hand wrapped around his, a familiar scent meeting his nose. Steve. He can hear his breathing, deep and even, and it relaxes him. He blinks open his eyes, a white ceiling and wall swimming into view. He remembers—he remembers fragments, like through a dream—he has never dreamed, he doesn't know how he knows this—of Steve carrying him and then—a small pinch— and no pain and darkness. Steve is still here, has not left him. He turns his head laboriously, a faint ache pulsing through his face, and sees Steve sitting in a chair by the side of the...bed, he's in a bed, but it's tilted up so he's almost sitting and Steve is..asleep, he's asleep by the bed, head tipped to his chest and hand still around the soldier's. The soldier watches him, tracing the somehow familiar lines of his face but something is off, he thinks Steve should be smaller but that can't be right but the face is so familiar, blonde hair and blue eyes and a soft mouth—a soft mouth how does he know this-

His hand reflexively tightens on Steve's and Steve grunts, coming awake. He blinks and his eyes land on the soldier, lighting up with...happiness?

"Buck," he breathes. "You're awake."

Yes, he's awake, he's awake and Steve is here and nothing else matters but he doesn't know where he is and he doesn't know why he's in the soft bed with the soft blanket and why Steve calls him Buck—

"How are you feeling?" Steve asks, and he can't answer, he's not supposed to, he can't and it's—it's a dumb question, Steve, God- "Sorry," Steve winces. "Dumb question." Yes, yes it is Steve, dumb, it's-it's-stupid punk-"Does anything hurt? Tap once for yes, twice for no."

It doesn't, but it does, his head is aching and his face-his face—

He taps once. Yes.

Steve looks troubled. "Okay, where? Uh, is it your arm?"

Two taps. No.

"Your, uh, your face?"

One tap. Yes.

"Okay. We're gonna-we're gonna get it off soon, I promise. Tony and Bruce and the doctors are working on it. Okay?"


Steve smiles. "Does anything else hurt?"

One tap. Yes.

"Okay. Your feet?"
Steve frowns. "Did we miss something?"

He squeezes his eyes shut, wishing-wishing he could-he could somehow communicate but he's not supposed to but Steve wants him to-

"Your head?" Steve guesses.

His eyes fly open and he taps. Yes.

"Oh. I'm sorry, Buck. I'll tell Bruce about that."

Okay. Okay. Okay. He taps. But there is another pattern, more taps, with the metal hand this time-Taptaptap, tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap tap, taptaptaptaptap, tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap tap tap, taptaptap, tap tap, tap tap tap, taptap....

It's silent against the soft bed, unnoticed by Steve. Taptaptap, tap tap, tap tap, taptaptaptaptap, taptaptaptaptap, tap tap, tap tap tap, taptaptap, tap tap, tap tap tap, taptaptap, tap tap, tap tap tap, taptap....

The door across from him opens and someone steps through, white lab coat and glasses and there's a beeping, somewhere, fast and loud-

Steve's hand touches his shoulder and he relaxes. "It's okay. This is Bruce. He's a friend." The beeping abruptly slows and then stops. Steve's hand is warm on his shoulder and he wishes-he wants him to leave it there but he withdraws his hand and it's cold and he wants Steve to touch him, wants his gentle hands through his hair-

The man in the lab coat-Bruce-is approaching, looking...nervous. They're always nervous around him, the technicians and doctors and people with white coats and needles-his hand wrapped around the doctor's throat-

"Hi," the man is saying, the man-Bruce-is saying and he blinks back to reality, head pounding. "My name is Bruce Banner. I'm here to help you. I'd like to start with assessing how you're feeling."

"I already did that," Steve interjects. "He says his face and head hurt, but nothing else."

Bruce blinks. "Oh. Thank you. That's good to know." He addresses the soldier. "Is it okay if I examine you? Nothing invasive, I swear. You can make me stop at any point."

Make them stop? He can't-he can't make him stop. That-that's not right. He can't-and why-why is he asking the soldier? *Is it okay?* Okay. Okay. Okay. It's not-it's not up to him, why are people *asking* him-

He looks over at Steve, waiting for his response. It is-it is his decision, he owns the soldier, he is his handler but he is also Steve, blonde hair and blue eyes-*Hey Buck*-and he's so confused but
Steve will tell him what to do, will make it right-

But Steve just looks back at him sadly. "It's your choice, Buck."

What. What. His choice-what does that mean- no, Steve, he's supposed to tell him what to do, why is he-why is he doing this, is this-is this punishment? What-what is he supposed to do what does Steve want him to do no Steve tell me what to do, Steve, Steve-

The beeping starts up again and his breaths are loud through the mask, his vision tunneling. A metal finger taps against the bed-taptaptap, tap tap, taptap, tap tap tap, taptaptaptaptap, taptaptaptaptap, tap tap, taptap, tap tap tap tap tap, taptaptaptaptap, tap tap tap, tap tap, taptap, tap tap tap tap tap, taptaptap, tap tap, taptap, tap tap tap tap tap, taptaptap, tap tap, taptap, tap tap-

"Buck, it's okay. You're okay-" but Steve's voice can't calm him this time, he doesn't know what Steve wants from him and he's so confused why Steve why what do you want-Taptaptap, tap tap, taptap, tap tap tap, taptaptaptaptap, taptaptaptaptap, tap tap, taptap, tap tap tap tap tap, taptaptap, tap tap, tap tap tap, taptap-

"Is that-are you trying to say something?" Bruce's voice echoes in his ears. "You-you're tapping-"

No. No. He's not-he's not supposed to speak. He's not supposed to he's not-he can't, he can't-

He hears an inhale from his right. "Buck. That's-that's Morse code. You-your service number-" his voice sounds choked up.

What. What. Service number? He doesn't-he doesn't know what that means. It is-it is a pattern, it's a pattern, taptaptap, tap tap, taptap, tap tap tap, taptaptaptaptap, taptaptaptaptap, tap tap, taptap, tap tap tap tap tap, taptaptaptaptap, tap tap, tap tap, taptap, taptap, tap tap tap, taptaptap, tap tap, tap tap tap, taptap-

Steve's hand is on his shoulder again yes good Steve please he needs-he needs Steve, he doesn't know what's going on, there's a beeping louder and louder and faster and faster and he can't breathe-he can't breathe-your service number-It's-it's the pattern, 3...2...5...5...7...0...3...8... but he doesn't know what that means it's just a pattern but he thinks of white walls and a metal hand on a white floor-make it stop make it stop-and the tapping, loud in the silence-taptaptap, tap tap, taptap, tap tap tap, taptaptaptaptap, taptaptaptaptap, tap tap, taptap, tap tap tap tap tap, taptaptap, tap tap, tap tap tap, taptap-

"-breathe, Bucky. I just need you to breathe. It's okay. You're safe. I'm right here." I'm here valchonak, it's okay...

A hand touches his head and he slumps, breathing slowing. Handler. Steve. Soft voice and gentle hands. The beeping slows and then stops. The metal hand stills on the bed. He is-he is not here. He is in his head, where it's safe and quiet and there is no pain or confusion or people asking questions he can't answer. Everything is distant and muted, the only thing that's real the hand stroking through his hair. Handler. Steve. Soft voice and gentle hands.

There are voices swirling around them but he pays them no mind, eyes staring ahead unseeing. The hand lifts from his head and he whines, panicking again. The hand returns and he relaxes, a sigh escaping. He drifts off into the peacefulness of his own mind, the world fading from his senses.

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He blinks back into reality to find Steve still by the bed, one hand on his head as he talks to someone on the other side of the bed. The soldier turns his head to see, startling Steve, who stops
mid-sentence and looks over at him.

"Bucky," he says.

That is-that is the soldier, that is what Steve calls him-hey Buck-and he blinks, turning his head to see the man-Sam, Steve called him-sitting on the other side. Sam gives him a small smile, eyes kind.

"Hey man. You remember me? It's Sam."

He taps a finger on the bed. *Once for yes.* He remembers-he remembers Sam, needle and medical supplies but no pain-*just a pinch*-and asking, always asking-*okay*-and before that, wings, kicking him off-kicking him off-

Sam is speaking. "-s good. You back with us?"

With them, with them, where did he go, is he back, he remembers-he remembers questions and panic and Steve why and a hand through his hair and then numbness-

He taps once. Yes. He is-he is back.

"Good. You kinda went away for a while, but that's okay."


"We didn't do anything to you," Steve says, and he turns his head to see him. "Bruce left. We thought maybe you'd feel more comfortable with Sam."

Comfortable. Comfortable. He is-he is comfortable. The bed is soft and it hurts less but why do they care, why do they want him to be comfortable-

"Is it okay if I examine you?" Sam asks, and there is the question, it's the question again, why-

He locks eyes with Steve, pleading. Please. Please. Tell him what to do.

Steve's face looks pained. "Will you let Sam examine you?" he repeats, and this is better, slightly, he will let Sam examine him, of course, maybe he won't be punished for answering, he thinks Steve wants Sam to examine him, wants an answer-

He taps once. *Yes.*

Steve exhales, still looking pained. "Okay. Okay. I'll-I'll be right here. If you want Sam to stop, just tap twice."

He doesn't-he doesn't have wants, they won't stop but okay, okay, okay, don't question, sink into blankness-

"Alright, I'm going to check your side, okay?" Sam's voice pierces through the fog.

Okay. Okay. Okay. He turns his head slightly to see Sam, the movement making pain throb through his face. Sam peels off the bandage, examining the stitches below. He nods, turning to grab a new bandage from a small cart, and there's machines all around, screens and wires and tools but he stays still-*hold him still*-and Sam redresses the wound with efficient hands.

"Okay, now for the arm." He comes around the side of the bed, Steve standing up and retreating. No, no, Steve, come back but he has to stay still, can't move-
"Can you lift your arm for me?"

Orders, kind of, *can you* but still orders and he complies, raising his right arm with the IV's and it's hard, it's so weak and it shakes but he manages to hold it up and it's better, it's better than before-

Sam gently grasps his wrist and elbow, holding his arm aloft and straight so the IV doesn't pinch. "Okay, now I'm going to rotate it, test your range of motion."

He lets Sam move his arm, watching with detached blankness. Finally Sam sets his arm down, nodding.

"Now that you've got some nutrients and fluids in you this seems to be healing nicely. Let's check on those feet now."

He moves to the end of the bed, peeling away the blanket from his feet and taking off the fuzzy socks and bandages. He peers at them, nodding.

"Also looks good. I'm just gonna redo the bandages." He takes another roll of bandages, wrapping the soldier's feet until they're thick and white. He puts the fuzzy socks back on, and the soldier feels...good. He...likes the fuzzy socks. Sam drapes the blanket back over them and moves to his head, taking out a small cylindrical device.

"You said your head hurt so I'm just gonna check your eyes to make sure you don't have a concussion." He holds up the device. "This is just a light. Look straight ahead and you'll just see some light in your vision. Okay?"

Okay. Okay. Okay. He remembers this, light in eyes and cold, so cold and voices swirling-

He stares ahead as instructed and Sam clicks the light on, passing it in front of his eyes. "Alright, looks good," he murmurs, clicking off the light. "Does your head still hurt?"

He taps once. *Yes."

Sam frowns. "Well, no concussion but I'm guessing you have some sort of brain damage because of, well-the files say they wiped your memories somehow. We'll need to take a scan." The soldier doesn't really understand what he's talking about but he stays quiet. Sam pauses. "You don't have to answer but...I want to see how much you remember. Obviously something, hence why Steve's alive right now, but..." He meets the soldier's gaze. "I'm gonna ask this straight up. Do you remember Steve?"

The soldier furrows his brow, mouth tugging down under the mask painfully. He...does, he *knows* Steve, but he doesn't *remember."

He taps once, then twice.

"Yes...no," Sam says. "Yes and no? You remember some things?"

He taps twice, and then once.

"No, but yes." Sam frowns. "Is it like, you know Steve but you don't specifically know why? There's no actual memories?"

His eyes widen. Yes. Yes. Yes. That's it-that's it. He taps once.

"Okay. That's okay. You don't have to remember. That's real good to know. We're the good guys,
okay. We're here to help you. That's all you need to remember right now."

Good. Good guys. Yes. Steve is good. Help. They are...helping him? But why, why, why, why can't he remember-

Steve is suddenly there, hand warm on the soldier's shoulder. "It's okay, Buck," he says. "You don't have to remember right now. I'm here for you no matter what."

Steve is-he's-I'm with you till the end of the line-and he doesn't remember but he should but Steve said it was okay and he's here-Steve, don't leave me- and he is confused and suddenly so so tired and Sam asks if he's still in pain and he answers yes, yes it hurts and Sam pushes a button by his bed and he is floating and darkness swallows him up again.
You rest your arm on the statue, 
slender neck and stone white
Spiders begin to crawl behind my eyes, 
emerge hot and shining
and my breath leaves me, I just-
When you look at me with an echo
I break
down.
I read your words, but
never hear them leaving your lips
Like toads that have fallen in oil,
slick and shining, writhing
they become still and forgotten.
I stumble over their corpses
denying them until they turn to dust.
I pick up the scent of blood,
the drum of a beating heart and
ignore everything I know.
Run to the sound.

An anger like a pack of wolves
numbed down with ice,
a bloody nose, and scars that ache.
I forget the anger, forget the ache
because there is something in the distance
like thick trees covered in snow,
a silent contentment that envelops everything,
naked like a beating heart exposed,
every time a feeling like
carnage and fireflies,
the glitter of stars in the gore,
I can almost taste it.

This wolf, yellow eyed and filled with fury
will drag you from your reckless wandering,
your hunger
as your statue crumbles in the thunder,
and cover you
as the snow falls in the thick trees.

*Wolf* by Rebecca Hattaway

As soon as Bucky is asleep Steve's phone buzzes and he pulls it out, seeing a text from Tony. He
hears Sam's phone buzz as well and they both read the text before looking back up at each other.

*Come to lab.*

Sam seems to read Steve's mind. "It's okay. He'll be out for a while. Jarvis will let us know if he wakes up."

Steve casts one last glance back at Bucky's sleeping form before following Sam out of the room. He feels drained, only having slept for snatches after they first got here and Bucky was unconscious. And the eerie silence, the way Bucky panicked when Bruce came in and how his eyes are perpetually wide and scared all make Steve's heart clench in agony. And Bucky...Bucky doesn't even remember him. Not really. It's almost disconcerting how Bucky's eyes always flick to Steve's, and how he only calms when Steve touches him. He's put it down to Bucky remembering him innately and feeling safe with him but there's something...not right about it. He can't put his finger on it.

He and Sam reach Tony's lab, Tony and Bruce wearing grave expressions. Steve's heart stops. Something is wrong.

"What is it?" he asks.

Bruce fiddles with his glasses. "We started looking at the security footage you brought, and...we found when they put the mask on." He swallows. "And some other stuff. It's...very disturbing."

"Show me," Steve says.

Sam puts a hand on his shoulder. "Steve, you don't need to see this."

"Yes I do." It's his responsibility. He owes it to Bucky to figure out what they did to him so he can fix it. And he deserves it, for leaving Bucky in that ravine. He deserves to have to see everything he subjected Bucky to.


An image flickers on the screen, the video feed paused. It's Bucky, in the horrifying-looking chair, slouched with no mask as technicians work on his arm. Steve can see his face finally, eyes staring ahead and expression blank.

"This is right after your fight on the causeway," Tony says. "His memory apparently comes back, and so they have to wipe it again. Play video."

Technicians work on his arm, Bucky's breathing even and shallow and his body stock still. A metal finger twitches softly against the arm of the chair, in a pattern that's like a punch to Steve's gut. *Taptaptap, tap tap, tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap tap tap, taptaptap, tap tap tap tap, tap tap tap tap* -

Suddenly Bucky twitches, just a small jerk of his head. His hands tap even faster against the arm of the chair. The technicians keep working, oblivious. There's a moment of stillness and then Bucky erupts, lashing out and throwing the technician across the room as a feral snarl rips from his throat, teeth bared. The guards surrounding him whirl around, guns raised and trained on Bucky as he sits with fists clenched, breaths heaving and eyes wild. Eventually his breaths grow slower and his eyes take on a glassy stare, hands in his lap and shoulders hunched. There's a sound and the barred door swings open, Pierce stepping through. Steve's hands clench into fists. Pierce raises his hands, the guards standing down, and puts his glasses in his pocket as he approaches Bucky.
"Soldier."

There's no response from Bucky, eyes glazed and unseeing.

"Soldier," Pierce repeats. "You will look at me when spoken to."

Still no response. Pierce bends down to peer at Bucky before backhanding him across the face, the air rushing out of Steve's lungs and anger boiling over. Pierce leans down again, attempting to meet Bucky's eyes as his head comes around, expression confused. He opens his mouth, seeming to struggle for a moment.

"The-" he says, and Steve sees Pierce's eyes widen. There's a long pause as Bucky struggles to speak. When he does it's fragmented and slurred, as if he doesn't know how.

"The m-man, on-on the-the-b-bridge." He looks up at Pierce, eyes wide and desperate. "Who-who-w-w-was h-he?"

A brief look of shock and fear crosses Pierce's face before his expression smooths out into one of calmness. "You met him earlier this week on another assignment," he replies easily.


Bucky remembered.

Pierce pulls up a stool, sitting down and facing Bucky. Bucky looks confused and then hopelessly resigned, as if he knows what Pierce will say.

"Your work has been a gift to mankind," Pierce says. "You shaped the century. And I need you to do it one more time. Society's at a tipping point between order and chaos, and tomorrow morning we're going to give it a push. But, if you don't do your part, I can't do mine. And Hydra can't give the world the freedom it deserves."

Bucky's metal finger taps against the arm erratically. Tap tap tap, tap tap, tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap tap tap tap tap tap tap, tap tap, tap tap, tap tap, tap tap, tap tap, tap tap tap tap tap tap tap tap tap tap tap tap tap tap tap, tap tap-

He tilts his head slightly, expression frustrated. "But I knew him," he says softly, no stuttering or hesitation. Like he knows this for a fact, and it makes Steve's heart clench. Bucky knew him.

Pierce sighs before getting up, expression annoyed as he turns to the technicians.


"We don't have the muzzle," one of the techs murmurs. "It's too dangerous. And he's been out of cryofreeze too long. His brain is healing."

"Then wipe him, and start over."

Bucky's expression is...crushed, and pained. The techs push him back into the chair and he goes limply, opening up his mouth for the bite guard and locking eyes with Pierce with...defiance. Defiance, and anger. Cuffs snap around Bucky's arms and his breathing picks up, chest heaving and eyes wide and terrified. A metal halo descends over his head and he's almost shaking, eyes squeezing shut for a moment and fists clenched, and then it clamps around Bucky's head and the screams start.

Steve watches, horrified, numb with shock and rage. He remembered Steve, and then they-
they tortured him. They wiped his memory, took away his small amount of clarity. The screams go on and on and on and on-

The video cuts off, silence filling the room. Tony clears his throat.

"We don't-we don't need to see this. Skip to the next section."

The video speeds up, seemingly going on forever, and then stops just as the metal clamps release from Bucky's head. Bucky pants, head lolling limply and eyes glazed. He's trembling, bare chest shining with sweat. Technicians move forwards, holding his head still and pushing the mask against his face. One points to the places where Steve knows the screws are now.

"We can attach it here and here, it should be enough to keep it on."

"Yeah, and it's his last mission, it really doesn't matter after this. He's going to be put down anyway after we get the Helicarriers launched."

"And if he goes down in the field then this will help decrease the chance of recognition. Rogers already recognized him but soon he'll be gone along with anyone he told."

"Alright, he's coming back around-inject the paralytic, just a small dose so he can breathe."

Someone slides a needle into Bucky's arm and Steve watches as his limbs go slack, head pressed against the headrest by technicians holding the mask to his face. Someone brings a screw up to a small hole in the mask over Bucky's cheekbone, holding it steady. Someone else takes a long T-shaped instrument and inserts it into the end of the screw, beginning to twist. Horror fills Steve but Bucky just lays there, eyes unfocused.

He can tell when the screw makes contact with Bucky's face as Bucky's eyes widen and he suddenly thrashes, movements uncoordinated and sluggish because of the paralytic and his arms still cuffed to the chair.

"Hold him still," the technician with the drill says.

The others hold him down, keeping his head still. Bucky starts to whine, a horrible drawn-out sound that pierces Steve's soul. His eyes are wide with fear and pain, darting around wildly as he struggles. Steve feels sick.

They finish one screw and move to the other side, repeating the process as Bucky trembles and breathes harshly. His fists are clenched, the right one shaking and he squeezes his eyes shut as more horrible whines emit from his throat. Steve legitimately thinks he's going to be sick. He watches with numb horror as they finish, stepping back to inspect their work. They don't even look affected by what they've just done. Bucky's head lays limply against the headrest, eyes glazed with pain and with a faraway look that Steve recognizes from when he checked out earlier.

Footsteps sound and Pierce walks into the room, Bucky's eyes flicking to him in a way that makes a horrible suspicion claw at his gut. Pierce addresses the technicians as he scrutinizes Bucky, utterly unfazed.

"It's secure?" he asks. The technicians nod, and Pierce smiles. He fucking smiles. "Good. Have him mission ready in..." He checks his watch. "Eight hours. We should all get some rest."

He approaches Bucky, reaching out to brush a strand of hair out of his eyes and cup a hand to his temple. Steve feels like someone just dropped a lead stone into his stomach as Bucky leans into the touch, closing his eyes. His metal finger clicks against the chair, tapping out his service number.
Pierce strokes a hand through his hair and Steve whirls around, finding the nearest garbage can before he loses everything in his stomach. He hears the video stop and straightens up, wiping his mouth with a shaking hand. Tony, Bruce, and Sam are standing still, expressions horrified and stunned. Steve points to the paused video screen, where Pierce is stroking Bucky's hair.

"I-I've been doing that. I-I thought-I-"

"It's not your fault, Steve," Sam says quietly. "None of us knew."

"But he must-does he-does he think I'm Pierce?"

"Steve, no, of course not. He says he remembers you, man. We don't know what he's thinking."

"I need to know," Steve says. "I need to know."

"Jarvis has been watching the med bay," Tony says. "We'll see-we'll see if it matches anything in the tapes."

Steve takes a breath. "Yeah. Yeah. I need to know. Jarvis?"

"While I cannot be 100% certain, Captain Rogers, my analysis of your interactions seems to match many recorded in the tapes. It appears that the General who first found Sergeant Barnes attempted to encourage a form of Stockholm Syndrome even before the memory-wiping procedure was implemented. Most notably, he used sensory and sleep deprivation to effect this."

A video replaces the previous one on the screen, grainy and lower quality than the modern ones. White lettering across the bottom reads Day 9. 9 days without sleep, Steve thinks. It's a small padded white room, Bucky sitting against the far wall in tactical pants but no shirt, the metal arm on display. A metal finger taps against the floor, his serial number, over and over. His hair brushes the tops of his ears, probably a few months of growth, Steve guesses. He can barely see the jagged edge of his right ear, and wonders when that happened. The collar is around his throat, thick and menacing. There are dark shadows under Bucky's eyes and his right hand trembles slightly, legs stretched out in front of him. He's mumbling, barely intelligible through the fuzzy audio.

"Keep it together, Barnes. You sawed your own fucking arm off, you can handle a little sleep deprivation." He-he sawed his own arm off. Steve doesn't want to think about that. Bucky chuckles with a manic air, eyes slightly crazed before he scrunches them closed and thumps his head back against the wall softly. Suddenly his whole body jerks and his eyes fly open as his hands come up to the collar. They're-they're shocking him, Steve realizes with horror. Bucky's body slumps, breaths harsh.

"I'm not sleeping!" he screams. "Go to hell!"

There's another shock, longer this time, leaving Bucky panting. His eyes are glazed and have a crazed tint to them, his right hand shaking even more and metal hand tapping erratically against the floor. "Fucking...Russian...bastards...goddamn..." he slurs between breaths. His eyes are unfocused again and his whole body has started to tremble. "You'll....sorry...Steve will come...for me..." Suddenly his face screws up and he thumps his head against the wall again. "No...no....Steve is dead...you...goddamn...goddamn idiot...Barnes...keep it-keep it together...you're-you're going insane you're....you're talking to yourself you-you can't-you can't...Steve is- Steve is dead and it's-it's your goddamned fault you were-you were supposed to protect him...why-why didn't you...it was...it was supposed to be you-it was-it was supposed to be you, not him....Ave Maria, gratia plena, why-why did you take him and not me?" He's crying, small hitching breaths between slurred words, and Steve feels his heart break. "He wasn't-he wasn't supposed to die, it was supposed to be
me, it was-I want to die, why won't you let me die...I know...I know what they're turning me into, I-I....I know how this ends....please, just-just let me die...I want to see Steve...I want-I want to go home...

His voice trails off as his eyes slip closed before another shock forces them open, eyes darting around wildly. The Bucky of before is gone, and now his eyes glint with heartrending insanity.

"Not sleeping...not-not sleeping," he slurs. "Not-" he breaks off, giggling hysterically. "You can't-you can't sleep, Barnes, it's-it's not allowed-" he punctuates this with his right hand, still giggling manically. "Not allowed-good boy, just-just stay awake, it will end, when will it end, when, when, it's-it doesn't end." His expression grows angry and he hits a metal fist against the floor. "It doesn't-it doesn't end just-just make it stop, I want it to stop, I just want to sleep-" He's crying again, breaths hitching and body shaking. "Why won't-why won't you let me sleep I just want to sleep-" He brings his hands up to his head, fists pressing against his temples. A shock wrenches them away with a cry. "I'm not-I'm not sleeping I'm not I'm not I'm not..." His mumblings grow quieter and then stop as he stares ahead blearily, eyes unfocused. His head droops and his eyelids flutter and Steve sees the shock go through him but Bucky's eyes stay closed. There's another shock, barely dragging his eyes open before they close again. At the bottom of the screen white lettering appears, reading sound on. Bucky's eyes fly open and he claps his hands over his ears, expression contorted in pain. Steve doesn't hear anything before he realizes that it must be a dog whistle, one only Bucky can hear. On screen Bucky grits his teeth, eyes squeezing shut in pain and head falling back against the wall. There's something like a hitched sob and he begins to mumble, growing louder and louder. 

"Make it stop make it stop make it stop make it stop!" He screams, sobbing. "P-please, make it stop make it stop-" Steve feels tears running down his face. Bucky keeps begging, getting quieter and quieter as his eyes open and his hands slip from his head. Eventually he stops completely, gaze blank and unfocused. Checked out. After a minute the screen reads sound off but Bucky doesn't move, staring ahead blankly. A door opens under the camera and someone steps in, going to crouch down next to Bucky. When he turns slightly Steve sees his face, and recognizes him as General Lukin. He feels rage, hot and vicious, remembering Lukin putting Bucky's dog tags in his hand and saying I'm sorry for your loss. Lukin reaches out to stroke Bucky's hair, speaking softly. 

"It's okay valchonak, I'm here," he says. "It's alright." Bucky leans into Lukin's touch, making nausea rise in Steve's throat again. Lukin gently tugs Bucky up, leading him from the room. Bucky stumbles, supported by Lukin, eyes fluttering and obviously not cognizant. The video feed switches to another room, someone kneeling on the floor with hands tied behind their back, guards around the edges. After a moment Lukin and Bucky appear through the doorway, Lukin leading Bucky right in front of the man on the floor. A guard hands Lukin a gun and he presses it into Bucky's hand, making him look down. His hand is shaking around the gun and Steve sees him squint at the bound man in muddled confusion. 

"Kill him," Lukin says. Bucky just stands there swaying, looking confused and exhausted. Lukin grabs his wrist, raising his arm and pointing the gun at the man. With his other hand he strokes Bucky's temple, Bucky blinking and leaning into it. "Just pull the trigger," Lukin says in a soft syrupy voice. "Be a good boy, and pull the trigger. Then you can sleep." Steve feels horrified and sick. This is-this is...

Bucky blinks slowly and his finger curls towards the trigger. Steve feels dread before Bucky pauses, brow furrowing. He opens his mouth, voice hoarse.

"I-no-" he rasps out weakly. "I-"
Lukin is still touching him, is pressed close to Bucky and speaking in that soothing voice. "All you have to do is pull the trigger. Then all of this will go away. You want to sleep, don't you valchonak?" Bucky nods slowly but frowns. "You don't want to make me take you back to the room, do you?" Lukin presses.

Bucky visibly shudders and bites his lip. "N-no, b-but, b-but-" He pauses. "I don't-no-"

Lukin's voice has an edge. "You will pull the trigger, or there will be consequences."

Tears spill from Bucky's eyes and he screws up his face, biting his lip. His hand shakes even worse as he looks at the bound man. "No," he chokes out. "No, no-I won't, no, no-" He's sobbing, body shaking and tears streaming down his face.

Lukin's expression contorts into one of anger and he grabs the gun from Bucky's grasp, pistol-whipping him across the face. Bucky cries out, collapsing to the ground.

"You worthless dog," Lukin snarls, kicking Bucky in the ribs and making him wheeze. "What do I have to do to get you to comply?" Bucky curls tighter on the ground, small choked off whines escaping from his lips. Lukin sighs, running a hand through his hair and composing himself. "Dr. Zola was right. More...advanced techniques may be necessary. Don't worry, he will be here in person soon." He crouches down next to Bucky, running a hand through his hair. Bucky doesn't resist. Lukin's voice is back to being soft. "Eventually, valchonak, you will comply."

The video feed cuts off and Jarvis speaks. "As you can see, General Lukin was fairly unsuccessful in making Sergeant Barnes kill for him, though he did manage to create a positive association with himself that persisted after Sergeant Barnes' memory was wiped. He used physical contact and rewards such as food to encourage this positive association, and except for utilizing the collar never directly tortured Sergeant Barnes. This, combined with incessant rhetoric and inducing altered states of mind through processes such as the sleep deprivation all combined to create the perfect recipe for Stockholm Syndrome. While Sergeant Barnes never did kill anyone with his memories intact he did display compliance with most other orders and retained this state and knowledge even after his memory was wiped. It seems the wipes only remove long-term memories but leave much semantic knowledge, such as recognizing General Lukin and having a positive association."

A new video comes up onto the screen, Bucky in the dreaded chair with the metal clamped around his face. "This is after they successfully managed to wipe Sergeant Barnes' memory for the first time, though it took a few tries." A few tries, Steve thinks with horror. The video plays, Bucky's screams abruptly cutting off but the metal still around his face, inactive. Lukin stands in front of him, reading from a red book. Steve sees his mouth move but suddenly the sound cuts out until he finishes.

Bucky breathes, muscles trembling and expression blank. Lukin snaps the book closed, looking at him.

"What is your name?"

"I don't have a name," Bucky rasps, and Steve's heart clenches.

"Khoroshiy mal'chik," Lukin says. "Who do you belong to?"

Bucky frowns beneath the clamps. "H-hydra."

"Khoroshiy mal'chik," Lukin repeats. "Who else?"
Bucky's eyes search. "You. I-I belong to you."

"Otlichno, valchonak," Lukin says. The clamps release Bucky's face, returning to hang above him. Bucky blinks, raising his head and looking around. His gaze lands on Lukin. "Do you know who I am?" Lukin asks.

Bucky pauses, eyes wandering searchingly. "Lukin," he finally says.

"Correct. What do you remember?"

"I-" Bucky pauses, brow furrowing in confusion. "There was..a cell. Pain. Cold."

Lukin nods. "You are a wolf. Hydra owns you. I am your master. We have made you into a perfect weapon, and you will bring great change to the world. Remember, valchonak, order comes through pain."

Bucky looks to be thinking this over. Finally he squints up at Lukin. "Why-why can't I remember?"

"There is nothing to remember," Lukin responds. "We created you. But you were malfunctioning. You see and hear things that aren't real, valchonak. We had to fix you. The chair makes those go away, but it can also make you confused. That is okay. You do not need to think about it, valchonak. You are a dog, and dogs only obey."

Steve feels hot rage. Lukin is standing there, lying to Bucky, who doesn't have any memories to refute him. He's-he's telling him he's not even human, that he's property, and Bucky just accepts it. It's-it's horrifying. It's inhuman.

Bucky frowns but Lukin moves forward, placing a hand on his cheek. Bucky leans into it, closing his eyes. It's so familiar, a pattern long established.

"All you have to do is follow orders," Lukin says softly. "If you do, you will be rewarded. If you fail, you will be punished. Do you understand?"

Bucky nods against Lukin's hand, just a blank canvas for Lukin to shape to his will. He'd probably believe Lukin if he told him the sky was purple, and it makes Steve's blood boil to see Lukin take advantage of his vulnerable state.

"Come, valchonak," Lukin says, stepping back. "Shift, then you can eat and rest. Tomorrow we will resume training."

Bucky nods, but Steve sees his metal finger tap out a familiar pattern. 32557038. He doesn't seem to realize he's doing it, probably doesn't remember what it means but it's ingrained so deep they couldn't wipe it out. They took everything from Bucky, and he doesn't even realize.

The video stops. Steve takes a breath, seeing the other faces in the room haggard with horror and shock.

"Keep going," he says to Jarvis.

Sam turns to him. "Steve, you don't have to do this."

Steve shakes his head. "No. No, we need to know everything. We can't help Bucky otherwise. I'm not going into that room again and interacting with him until I know exactly what they did to him. I already messed up in the worst way. I won't let that happen again."
Sam looks understanding. "Alright."

Steve nods. "Jarvis—one question before we continue."

"Yes, Captain Rogers?"

"What does valchonak mean?"

"Valchonak translates roughly to 'little wolf' or 'wolf cub.' It's a diminutive, a term of endearment."

Steve swallows, nothing left in his stomach to throw up but feeling nauseous all the same.

"Man, that's fucked up," Sam says.

Steve can only nod. "Okay, what's next?"

"Well, it appears that the wipes don't last long, which is good news for his recovery. Around a week or so Sergeant Barnes appears to recover some memories and often lashes out against his captors." A new video feed flashes up. "This is the first time this happens, around a week after they successfully managed to wipe his memories." The video plays, Bucky standing in a room as a prisoner is brought in. The man is small, blonde hair streaked with blood and blue eyes wide and scared. Steve is horrifyingly reminded of his smaller self.

"Kill him," Lukin orders, handing a gun to Bucky.

Bucky takes the gun and aims it between the prisoner's eyes but then hesitates. Steve sees Lukin's face tighten with apprehension.

"Kill him," he repeats.

Bucky's hand shakes and his eyes widen as he stares at the prisoner. He drops the gun, backing away. "No-no, no-"

Suddenly his body tenses and he drops to his knees, hands clutching at the collar around his neck. He's being shocked, Steve thinks.

"Why are you disobeying, valchonak?" Lukin questions.

Bucky's face screws up. "No," he says, childlike. "No-I-I don't want to-I won't-"

"You do not have wants," Lukin says, and isn't that a horrifying concept. He's made Bucky believe he literally doesn't have wants.


Lukin sighs in frustration, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Otvedite yego k stulu."

"Take him to the chair," Jarvis translates.

"No-no-" Bucky says, his whole body shaking. Guards come forward to grab him and he screams, thrashing in their grip. Steve sees Lukin press a button on a small device and Bucky goes limp as they drag him out of the room. Shocks. The camera jumps and he reappears in the room with the chair, the guards shoving him into it. He surges forward in an attempt to escape but the cuffs latch
around his arms, pinning him down. His chest is heaving and his eyes dart around wildly as he strains against them, body trembling. His metal finger taps out his service number erratically on the arm of the chair before the chair whirs and the metal clamps down around his face, Bucky starting to scream.

The feed cuts off, silence pervading the room. Tony clears his throat. "Please tell me that guy died horribly. Like, burned alive, or skin peeled off."

"Indeed," Jarvis says, almost sounding...pleased? He's a computer, but sometimes Steve thinks he might be more human than anyone thinks. "General Lukin was in fact killed by Sergeant Barnes himself. It seems the Stockholm Syndrome wasn't deep enough to assure his safety." Is Steve imagining it, or does he sound bitter? Another video comes up on the screen, less grainy. "1980, to be exact," Jarvis says. "It's unclear what triggered it."

The video plays, showing Bucky in wolf form snarling at guards who surround him. There's a cage behind him, door open, and a muzzle lying on the ground. Bucky's teeth are bared, mismatched ears pinned back against his head and eyes dangerous and wild. His body trembles slightly. The collar around his neck is emanating blue light faintly from a small ring set into it, and the metal arm is now his left foreleg. The engineering would be incredible if it wasn't so horrible.

"Wow," Steve hears Tony whisper. He remembers that no one else has actually seen Bucky in wolf form except him and Sam.

The guards look nervous, clutching batons and whispering among themselves in Russian. Jarvis translates, words appearing on the screen.

"What do we do?" one says. "I've never seen him like this."

"You've heard the stories," another one says. "I'm not going near him."

"I don't even know what happened. We just tried to muzzle him, like always." Like always, Steve thinks with anger. They kept him muzzled, like always.

"Beats me," another says. "Sometimes he just goes crazy. Too long between wipes."

Footsteps sound and Lukin comes up behind the guards and steps forwards, raising his hands. Steve is forcibly reminded of Pierce doing the same thing.

"It's okay, valchonak. I'm here. I can make all of this stop." Lukin edges forward, expression calm and confident. Bucky stays still, panting, eyes fixed on Lukin. Lukin crouches down in front of him, extending a hand, just like Steve did in that vault. Bucky sniffs it before moving closer and bumping his nose against the hand, exactly like what he'd done in the vault. Steve feels sick. Bucky thinks-Bucky thinks he's his handler. He must. "There we go," Lukin is saying. "Good boy." He strokes Bucky's head, running a hand over his ragged ear and scratching. Bucky presses into his touch and Steve wishes he could take everything back, wishes that bank vault never happened. "I know you're confused," Lukin murmurs. "Don't worry, I'm going to make all of this go away. It's time for another wipe, yes?"

Steve sees Bucky stiffen slightly, though Lukin doesn't seem to notice. Bucky's eyes dart to the side, and Steve can see the wheels turning. Lukin looks completely calm, assured in the fact that Bucky is completely under his control. Bucky's eyes shift back to Lukin and Steve sees the moment they darken dangerously. Bucky lunges forwards, sinking his teeth into Lukin's throat and ripping it out. Blood drips from his white muzzle and Lukin's hand finds his throat as blood spills down. His eyes are wide and stunned as they find Bucky's, and Bucky stares back before he crumples to
the floor, dead.

There's a moment of silence and then the room erupts into chaos, the guards screaming as Bucky attacks, more bodies falling to the floor and blood spattering the walls. One crawls towards Lukin's body, reaching into his pocket and retrieving the small device. He presses it with a bloody finger, Bucky falling to the floor across the room with a yelp. The remaining guards pin him down, retrieving the muzzle and forcing it over his bloody mouth. Bucky snarls and struggles but shocks keep him immobile and once the muzzle is on he's helpless. The guards wrestle him into the cage, slamming the door as Bucky lunges. The room around him is carnage, Lukin's body in the center. A pool of blood steadily grows around his lifeless form.

The video stops. Tony whistles. "Damn. He got what was coming to him. Also, your wolf buddy is terrifying."

Sam taps his chin. "This-this is good. Even after all that, he still fought back. I mean, his brain should've been mush, and Stockholm Syndrome's a bitch. We can only hope he's still in there. After all, there's about thirty years between then and now. Jarvis, what happened after this?"

"After this, he was transferred to the control of Colonel Vasily Karpov," Jarvis says. "He blamed Lukin's arrogance and, quote, 'coddling' of Sergeant Barnes for his untimely death. Karpov discontinued the affection and relied on strict punishments and rules. Sergeant Barnes worked under him until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, when he was transferred to Alexander Pierce. The Russians were resentful of this and so did not give the Americans the trigger words always spoken directly after the wipes to presumably activate the Winter Soldier. As you saw before, the sound from the tapes was cut out in those spots, although Pierce did study the tapes extensively for how to handle Sergeant Barnes most effectively. He ultimately decided to return to General Lukin's methods, though he was much more cautious and did not take any chances. After an incident exchanging the muzzle for the mask in which he bit someone's hand off scientists created a muzzle that could change with Sergeant Barnes' shifts, so that the incident with Lukin would not be repeated. It was left on at all times except for the wipes, and they made sure he was cuffed before taking it off. Pierce almost encouraged Sergeant Barnes' hatred and attacking of everyone but him, presumably to make himself the only one who could control him. He also changed the form of punishments. General Lukin attempted to only torture Sergeant Barnes when in human form and make his wolf form preferable, but Director Pierce reversed this and carried out extensive torture on Sergeant Barnes while in wolf form, creating a preference for human form and using this to encourage him to complete missions. Also, while Sergeant Barnes was fed only in wolf form before, Pierce switched to IV nutrition and made Sergeant Barnes entirely dependent on him. There was a strong emphasis on Sergeant Barnes as not human, and while under Karpov Sergeant Barnes was only allowed to speak when asked a direct question Pierce did not want him to speak at all. It appears that the first tape played, after the causeway fight, was the first time Sergeant Barnes had spoken since 1991."

There's a stunned silence. Two decades, Steve thinks. He hadn't spoken for two decades. It was probably only a year at most for Bucky, but still. To be stripped of all forms of communication, to be a mindless automaton of someone else's wishes....

"I'll say it again," Sam says. "I wish Pierce was still alive so I could kill him slowly."

Steve clenches his hands into fists. "Agreed. Jarvis, show me what Pierce did."

Video flashes on the screen. "This is immediately after Sergeant Barnes' first mission under Pierce. As noted before, the lack of the trigger words seem to increase Sergeant Barnes' volatility and resistance, which caused Pierce to enact stricter measures of control."
Bucky is sitting in the chair, masked, his metal finger tapping out his service number. He looks tightly wound, like a coil about to snap. Footsteps sound and Pierce walks in, a self-satisfied smile on his face as he talks to the technician beside him.

"He performed perfectly. The Russians thought I couldn't handle him, but just look at our success. It's simple, really. Just wipe him and point him in the right direction, then freeze him until the next time. I don't need a list of random words to do that."

"But Senator Pierce, you saw the tapes," the technician responds. "They erased the sound so we couldn't hear them, but you can clearly see the words taking effect. They're what makes his training kick in and remember everything necessary. They send him into sort of a hypnotic trance, if you will. Quiet his mind. Our scans show increased brain activity-"

Pierce waves a hand. "It won't be a problem." He stops in front of Bucky, eyes sparkling with pride.

"You have done well, soldier."

Bucky stares ahead blankly.

Pierce sighs. "Not much of a conversationalist, huh? All right, get him prepped for cryo."

Technicians move forward to grab Bucky and he stiffens, eyes flashing. He lashes out with a metal arm, throwing technicians across the room. A snarl rips from his throat behind the mask and his eyes dart around wildly, chest heaving. Guns click as guards aim them at him, Pierce's face caught off guard and nervous as one hand quickly pulls out a small device similar to the one Lukin had. He raises his hands, speaking in a soothing voice.

"Easy. Stand down, soldier."

Bucky growls, body trembling with tension and eyes dark.

"I said, stand down, soldier," Pierce repeats. "Or there will be consequences."

Bucky snarls and lunges forward before crashing to the floor as Pierce presses a button on the device, shocking him. Bucky whines, hands scrabbling at his collar ineffectively.

Pierce releases the button, leaving Bucky panting on the floor, breaths loud under the mask. He steps forward, gripping Bucky by the hair and raising his head until his crazed eyes land on Pierce's.

"You will not attack your handler," Pierce says. "Under any circumstances. This is lesson one."

He lets Bucky's head drop to the floor, and guards swoop in to grab him and haul him upwards. He goes limp in their grasp, the anger fading from his eyes and replaced by fear and confusion. They drag him away, the camera changing. They're now in a room with a small cage in the center, grim and foreboding. The guards strip him naked with rough hands, Bucky unresisting and limp. Pierce watches him with device held at the ready as they take off the mask.

"Shift," he commands, and presses the button on the device. The blue light on Bucky's collar shuts off and he shifts, the wolf taking his place. The guards muzzle him and push him towards the small cage, shoving him inside. He evidently can't move or turn around once inside and he whines once the door closes on his haunches. Pierce comes up to the cage, crouching down in front of him.

"This is lesson one," he repeats, before walking away. Guards surround the cage, withdrawing
cattle prods that crackle with electricity. Steve feels horror as the first one is shoved through the bars, Bucky unable to escape as his eyes go wide with panic.

The video stops and fast forwards. "I do not believe this is critical to see," Jarvis says, and Steve agrees. He doesn't know how much more he can take.

The video picks up with the guards on the edges of the room, Bucky standing trembling in the cage and soft whines audible with every pant. Pierce steps forward from the corner and opens the front of the cage, reaching in and dragging Bucky out by the scruff. Bucky collapses at his feet, whining softly. There are two-pronged burn marks littering his body and staining his white fur red.

"Have you learned your lesson?" Pierce asks.

Bucky whimpers, crawling closer to bump his nose against Pierce's shin. Pierce crouches down, placing a hand on his head. Bucky pushes into the touch, body relaxing. Pierce begins to pet him hesitantly, growing more sure as Bucky melts into the touch.

Pierce chuckles. "See? I don't need their little red book. You just need a firm hand."

The video stops and Steve feels horror swoop in his gut. He's sure, now. Bucky thinks he is his handler. How can he not? Every interaction has been exactly like the ones in the video. Something in him had recognized Steve and in his vulnerable state he'd imprinted on him like a baby duckling, unable to conceive of anything else but Steve being his handler. It's why he keeps looking to Steve whenever anyone asks him a question, why he'd freaked out when Steve said it's your choice, why he immediately calms whenever Steve touches him and why he was so fucking compliant back at Sam's house. He has just substituted Steve for Pierce, and Steve wants to throw up again.

Sam's hand is on his shoulder. "I think we've seen everything we need to know," he says softly. "Come on, man. Don't do this to yourself."

Bruce finally speaks up. "Yes. Tony and I just need to see how the collar and arm are attached, but you don't have to see that."

Steve scrubs a hand over his face. "No. No. I'm okay. I want to know."

Tony hesitates, looking at him with concern, before turning back to the screen. "Jarvis, start with the collar."

"Very well, sir. The current collar was designed with what appears to be an inhibition mechanism to prevent Sergeant Barnes from shifting between forms. When the ring of blue light comes on, the inhibition is on. Furthermore, the collar is equipped with shock prongs embedded on the inside, and controlled by a handheld device. While it was originally just attached normally, after Sergeant Barnes attempted to remove it often they surgically wired it into his spine. This allowed the collar to not only send pain signals through his body but to expand and contract with his shifts more smoothly."

A video comes up on screen, Bucky face down on a table as doctors cut open the back of his neck. Small wires from the back of the collar are wrapped around his spinal cord and sensors implanted before they start to sew him back up. Jarvis' voice cuts in, Tony and Bruce taking notes.

"Fortunately, Sergeant Barnes was asleep for this operation and seems to ignore the fact afterwards, perhaps repressing the knowledge. The arm, however, is another story. It appears that Sergeant Barnes was paralyzed but kept awake for the operation, and the arm is more permanently

The screen changes, showing Bucky strapped down to a table with collar evidently activated judging by the blue light. His left arm is just a stump, ending halfway down his bicep, and his hair is growing out over his two intact ears but still fairly short. A doctor injects him with something—the paralytic—and his body goes limp but his eyes stay open, obviously awake. He's intubated, with a tube down his throat to keep him breathing, before the doctors start the surgery. Steve watches in horror as they cut him open, exposing his clavicle bone as Bucky's eyes widen and flick around wildly. He must—he must be able to feel it, must be in excruciating pain, but he can't move, can't do anything except watch and Steve can't think of any worse torture. The doctors take strange rolls of mesh-like metal material, wrapping it around his clavicle and conversing in Russian as they secure it in place with small pins. When the left clavicle is done they do the right one before moving to the first four ribs on each side. Steve watches as Bucky's eyes glaze over and become distant, obviously checking out of reality. The doctors turn him to his side, putting more mesh on his spine and implanting sensors and electrodes throughout. They sew it up and turn him back on his back, implanting more sensors and electrodes along the stump of his arm and shoulder. Then they bring over the first pieces of the arm, metal plates lined with the mesh on the underside. Steve watches as they cut open Bucky's arm and shoulder, attaching synthetic tissue to hold the arm in place. They take a blowtorch to the mesh, heating it up before pressing it to Bucky's shoulder. They cut Bucky's skin along the edge, folding the edge of the metal one. One of the doctors closest turns, coming closer to lean over and inspect the arm. Bucky's face goes dark and he reaches up with the metal hand, latching onto the doctor's throat and squeezing. Lukin steps forward into the camera's view and presses a button on the device, Bucky arching off the table as his hands go to the collar. He whines, a plaintive, desperate sound, and the shocks stop. Bucky lays there panting, harsh, ragged sobs torn from his throat. Lukin comes over to lean over him.

"Ah, valchonak, why are you upset?" he asks. Why do you think? Steve thinks. Sick fuck. Lukin reaches out a hand, brushing a strand of hair from Bucky's forehead, and it's worse because Steve knows he has all his memories, this is Bucky and he's not even resisting. "It was a gift," Lukin chides. "We have given you a new arm, a home, food and water, a purpose. That is more than you deserve. You are nothing but a dog, yet we treat you with respect. No one else would accept you. They would lock you away, shun you, think you monstrous."

And there it is, Lukin's twisted attempt to give Bucky Stockholm Syndrome. It's insidious, and horrifyingly effective. Bucky is exhausted and in pain, and too weak to refute Lukin. It would seem as if Lukin rescues him from torture each time, and the insistence that everything is for Bucky's own good and more than he deserves is a twisted sort of logic. Lukin continues to stroke Bucky's hair, the gentle touch probably comforting to Bucky in his pain and confusion.

"But not me, valchonak," Lukin continues. "I accept you. I do not make you hide who you are. I am the only one you can trust, the only one who will be there for you." Steve has never hated Lukin more. "Now, tell me," Lukin says. "Why did you strangle the doctor?" His voice is soft and
soothing, as if he really wants to know and help Bucky. Bucky's mouth opens.

"It-it hurts," he rasps, childlike. "It hurt. I-I was awake-" he breaks off, voice choked.

Lukin keeps stroking Bucky's hair. "You know you burn through sedatives," he says calmly, as if this is a perfectly acceptable reason for subjecting Bucky to this. "We could not afford to waste them on you. It is just pain, valchonak. Order comes through pain, you know this. You have been given a great gift, one you do not deserve. You have no right to complain."

**You have no right to complain.** Seriously? He captured and tortured Bucky, and then had the gall to say he had no right to complain? And that this is a gift?

Bucky swallows, brow creasing. "But I didn't-I didn't want it," he stammers, beginning to become agitated. "No-I don't-you can't-I-"

Lukin's voice sharpens. "You do not have wants, valchonak. You are a dog. You follow orders, nothing more."

Bucky's eyes fill with anger and his breathing picks up. "N-no. No-I'm a person. I'm an American soldier. You-you're holding me prisoner. You-no-I'll never-I'll never serve you. Never." He jerks his head away from Lukin's hand, breaths ratcheting up and eyes becoming panicked. "I don't want-no-get it out! Get it out-no no no-" His right hand jerks across his chest, scrabbling at the seam of the metal arm. He digs his fingers into the deep cut and tears, scoring bloody gouges into his shoulder before Lukin stands back and presses the button and he screams, fingers still embedded in his skin. The shocks stop and doctors surge forwards, wrenching his fingers away and strapping him down to the table, arms cuffed. He thrashes, eyes landing on Lukin.

"I'll rip your throat out!" he screams, and Steve feels grim satisfaction that Bucky eventually followed through on that promise.

One of the doctors speaks in frantic Russian, Jarvis translating. "General Lukin, stress to his body will undo all of our careful work."

Lukin waves a hand. "Fine. Do what you need to. Punishment will come later."

Another doctor moves forward, stabbing a needle into Bucky's thigh. Bucky's struggles grow weaker as the paralytic takes hold, face anguished.

"N-no," he chokes out. "N-" his voice cuts off, body falling limp.

The video stops. Steve takes a deep breath, trying to push down the wave of emotions that threaten to drown him. He has to be strong for Bucky. He swallows. "Is that it?"

"That is everything I feel is necessary to know right now," Jarvis replies. "It is apparent that you interactions with Sergeant Barnes closely resemble those in the tapes, suggesting that he views you as a handler."

Steve knew it, but hearing Jarvis say it is like a punch in the gut. "What am I supposed to do?" he says softly. "What am I supposed to do?"

Sam squeezes his shoulder. "Right now, you're gonna get some rest and food while Tony and Bruce do their science thing. We'll figure it out."

Tony nods, voice uncharacteristically gentle. "We should be good to go ahead and take the mask and collar off in a day or so. Mask is easy, just screws, but the collar will be tricky because it's
wired into his spine. The arm isn't coming off, we know that, but it doesn't seem to be causing any problems. There's nothing else you need to be here for."

Steve nods heavily. "Right." His voice is hoarse. "Right. Okay." He lets Sam guide him away gently, mind shutting down with the weight of everything he's just seen. He barely registers as Sam takes him to his floor and sits him down on the couch, pressing a cup of tea into his hand. He looks up, meeting Sam's eyes.

"What am I supposed to do?" he repeats, voice breaking.

Sam sighs, sitting down next to him and wrapping an arm around his shoulders. "I don't know, but we'll figure it out. I promise. We'll figure it out."

Steve leans his head on Sam's shoulder, tears slipping down his face and a hole opening up inside him.
Stare into the eyes of the wolf.
    Which do you see,
The predator or the lamb?
    Which do you love?
    Which do you fear?
They are the same, but they fight for space in the flicker of the iris,
    the flash of the teeth,
    the curve of the brow.
    Which will win out? Neither. Both.
Is it a fight if you can't win or lose?
If twin souls, displayed against an infinite canvas,
    never run out of room
but never quite fill up as much as the other?
    Which do you hate?
    Which do you ignore?
I dare you to stare and not be intrigued.
    It may be possible to look and not see,
But we are drawn to wars and dances alike.
    You know, you
can tell which is which
    When you squint
    Clench your jaw
    There's a difference
A purpose behind each half.
    The wolf you can find
Out of the goodness of the lamb
    The lamb you can find
From the hatred of the wolf
    Or is it switched?
When one soul is tied to another
    The colors start to blend
And the mix is not reversible
    So I ask again,
    Which do you love?
    Which do you fear?
Love the lamb. Fear the wolf.
    Fear the lamb. Love the wolf.

Make your choice.

Wolves are Lambs are Wolves by Sam Dunlap
He opens his eyes and he is still in the room, still on the bed and he hears breathing and turns his head but it is just...Sam-gentle hands and steady voice, this okay?-and Steve isn't here, where is Steve he said he wouldn't leave him he's-he's-I'm with you till the end of the line-

"Hey man," Sam says. He looks-he looks tired and he looks at the soldier with-with-something in his gaze and it's-it's sad but what does that mean why is he sad did the soldier do something wrong where is Steve-

"-ything hurt?" Sam is asking and yes it hurts, one tap for yes, always, the face, the head, it hurts, everything hurts-"Your face?" Sam says and he taps again, once for yes. "Your head?" Yes. "Anything else?" No, he is-he is functional, it is the head and the face that hurt, that won't stop-make it stop-and he taps twice, no, and Sam gives him a small smile. "Okay." Okay. Okay. Okay. It is okay. It is not. Where is-where is Steve-

He looks around, trying to find him. He is-he is not here, and the soldier is....frustrated. He wants-he wants Steve, he wants to know where he is but he can't speak, doesn't know how, he can't, he can't and his finger taps, taptaptap, tap tap, taptap, tap tap tap, taptaptaptaptap, taptaptaptaptap, tap tap, taptap, tap tap tap tap tap, taptaptap, tap tap, tap tap tap, taptap-

"Are you looking for Steve?" Sam asks and yes, he wants Steve, where is he, one tap for yes and he looks back at Sam, waiting for an explanation. Sam swallows, looking...uncomfortable? No, that's not it, he thinks. It is something...deeper. "Steve's not here right now," Sam says, and he knows that, he's not-he's not stupid he knows Steve isn't here right now but he wants to know why. Sam leans forward. "Do you-do you think Steve is your handler?"

Of course Steve is his handler. Why-why is he asking this but yes, one tap for yes and Sam's face falls but why, what did he do wrong is he going to be punished what is going on why are people asking him questions-

Sam takes a deep breath. "Steve-Steve isn't your handler."

What. What. No. No. He's-he's lying, why would he say that why-unless he's Hydra, he doesn't want the soldier to follow Steve, he's trying-he's trying to take him back again and no, he doesn't want to, he won't, no no no no-

He lunges forward, wrapping the metal hand around Sam's throat. Sam chokes, eyes going wide and the soldier...doesn't want to hurt him, Sam is...nice, and he's gentle hands and a steady voice and he was with Steve and Steve is his handler but why is he telling him he's not, he's so confused and his head throbs and he wants it to stop-

He doesn't squeeze, keeping his hand firm but loose around Sam's throat as he breathes harshly. There's footsteps as people rush in the room but Sam waves a hand jerkily and they retreat, leaving them alone. He's shaking, head pounding with confusion and Sam meets his eyes, not resisting as he rasps through the pressure on his throat.

"Steve isn't your handler, he's your...your friend. You guys grew up together. I'm not lying, I promise."

The soldier searches Sam's eyes but he isn't, he isn't lying and it must be true but it can't be true, the soldier isn't-the soldier isn't human, he doesn't have friends, he was-he was created by Hydra but that can't be true because he knows Steve and Steve isn't Hydra so he must have come from somewhere but how, and where, and why, and it's-it's too much, he doesn't know, it's too confusing but Sam-Sam is good and he doesn't-he doesn't want to hurt him-
He releases Sam, falling back against the bed and pressing the metal hand to his head. He hears Sam take in deep, rasping breaths, his own harsh and shallow as he squeezes his eyes shut against the turmoil in his head. They both sit there in silence for a moment, trying to breathe. Finally Sam speaks.

"I'm sorry I had to spring that on you, but you needed to know. We didn't know that's what you were thinking before, and so we thought you were making your own decisions. We fucked up, I'll admit that. Listen—" he leans forward "—you don't have a handler. You're your own person, and you don't have to do what anyone else tells you to. Including Steve. Okay?"

Okay? No, no, no. Not okay. He's not—he's not a person. He can't—he can't make his own decisions. It's wrong, he's not allowed, he can't—he needs someone to tell him what to do, he doesn't know what to do—

He shakes his head violently, making pain flare through the mask. No.

Sam sighs. "I know it's gonna take a while to understand that. It's okay. Just—we're not going to do anything without your say-so. You're gonna have to start making your own choices, even if they're super small. And Steve...Steve isn't your handler, man. We're all just people."

We're all just people. It's...comforting, somehow. They are not—they are not Hydra, or guards, or doctors. They are just people. Good people. He opens his eyes, lowering his hand and glancing over at Sam. Sam looks calm and steady, unfazed by everything that just happened. His throat is starting to bruise slightly, small dark splotches for every one of the soldier's fingers, even though he hadn't gripped that hard. The soldier feels...bad, about that. He thinks it was wrong to do that to Sam, who is good and kind and doesn't punish the soldier, who says okay? and doesn't get upset when it's not. He frowns, reaching up his right hand to tap his own throat. Sorry, he thinks, the word coming to him. Sorry.

Sam smiles. "It's all good. If you really wanted to hurt me, I'd be dead." The soldier frowns at that. He—he did, didn't he? And before, on the Helicarrier. He wanted to hurt him. Or did he?

He raises both his hands, bringing them together and flapping like wings. Sam's eyes widen and he grins suddenly. "Yeah, you did try to kill me then. But I'm here, safe and sound. It's all good. Besides, I know you didn't want to. It wasn't your choice."

You will not have a choice. He—he didn't, he thinks, he never had a choice but did he want to? He doesn't have wants, that's what they said but he does, he wants Steve and he doesn't want Hydra and if he has wants, then—then maybe, maybe he's a person? And he—he has a name—James Buchanan Barnes, Bucky—that Steve gave him, Steve knew him but he wasn't his handler he was—he was his...friend? No. That seems—that seems wrong, but closer to the truth than before. He's—he's missing something, something just out of reach in his mind but he thinks, I'm Bucky and it feels right, just like Steve feels right and he thinks okay. Okay Sam, okay.

He taps his finger twice on the bed. No. No, he didn't want to. He didn't have a choice.

"No what?" Sam asks. "No, you didn't want to?"

He taps once. Yes.

"That's good man, real good that you know that. I'm glad. You don't have to do anything you don't want ever again, okay?"

Steve comes in, cautious and unsure, dark shadows under his eyes as he sits down next to Sam, and he is-he is not his handler, he is Steve, but the soldier doesn't really know the difference and he just knows he wants Steve.

"Hey Buck," he says with a brittle smile. He does not touch the soldier.

_Hey_, the soldier thinks. _Hey hey hey, hey pal_-and he wishes, he wishes he could _speak_ but he can't and Steve is staring down at him with that pained expression he knows-he knows, but how does he know and he taps once, _hey_, a response _you will respond when spoken to_

Steve smiles, and it's less pained, and that is good, he wants to make Steve smile and Steve is speaking, he needs to listen-

"-them off tomorrow. Tony vetted the surgeon, and you'll be asleep the whole time." Steve face goes pained again. No, no Steve don't look sad, he needs to fix it somehow but he doesn't know how he's bad-he's bad at being a person but he has to try, what does Steve do when he's upset, he-

He reaches out, grabbing Steve's hand. Steve jumps slightly in shock, eyes flicking down to their hands. The soldier-no, _Bucky_-sets their hands down on the bed, Steve's eyes flicking back up to his face.

"Buck, are you, are you sure you want to do that? You don't have to."

Of course-of course he doesn't _have_ to. What. _What_. Dumb-dumb punk. He _wants_ to. He thinks, there is something, something he did...He rolls his eyes, the movement feeling natural. He sees Steve's face light up and thinks _yes, yes_, he did it, he made Steve happy-

There's a bark of laughter from Steve. "Yeah, yeah, I know. I'm an idiot." But he sounds overjoyed. He squeezes the sol-Bucky's hand, eyes sparkling with moisture. "I missed you, Buck," he says, voice rough.

He-he missed Steve too, he thinks, though he can't remember. He squeezes Steve's hand back, his mouth twitching up under the mask. _Hey pal._

"Do you want to know how we first met?" Steve asks and _yes, yes_ he wants to know, needs to know and he taps, _yes_, please, and Steve smiles before starting. "Well, I was five years old and getting beat up in an alley..."

Steve talks, and talks, and the soldier-called-Bucky listens, and thinks. Steve says he was-he was a person, before, with a name and a family and a-and a _life_ and that doesn't make sense, it's too much but then Steve talks about the war and this, this makes sense. He was a soldier, he _is_ a soldier, this is right, he was right, he was Steve's soldier and he fought for him just like he thought except Steve doesn't call himself his handler but that is almost what it is, he doesn't know what else to call it but he was Steve's, he knows this, and he was a soldier, and this at least makes sense. Even before the war, he thinks, he was Steve's. He has always been a soldier, even without a war, a one-man army marching to the beat of Steve's heart, which now is strong and steady but used to be weak and irregular and the soldier thinks that the old-the old Bucky Barnes would have burned the world down to keep Steve safe and he doesn't know how he knows this but it pulses like a heartbeat, soft and persistent, underlying everything. Steve was his war, he thinks.
His head aches as Steve talks, growing steadily worse as he progresses. There's flashes, sometimes, and fragments of knowledge that come unbidden and don't make sense. Him, lying on a threadbare couch. The smell of baking, an image of an apron dusted with flour. A ribbon in dark brown hair. Laughter. Fingers intertwined with slender, graphite-stained ones. A cigar in someone's mouth, a wide grin under a thick mustache. A woman, red lipstick and dark hair. Steve. Steve Steve Steve, everything is Steve, a tapestry made of blonde hair and blue eyes, a whole world inside one person. He knows without knowing why what Steve's skin feels like, how he sounds when he laughs, where his ticklish spots are and the exact softness of his lips. He knows that Steve's hands contain galaxies, and he sees them in memory stained with graphite instead of blood.

When Steve gets to the train it's too much, there's too much in his head and it hurts and he can't take it, he doesn't want to hear this—falling through the air, red blood on white snow—and he taps twice on Steve's hand, no, stop, he doesn't want it, he can't, he can't—"You want me to stop?" Steve says, and he taps once, yes, please, please stop it's too much and he squeezes his eyes against the images and the pain spiking through his head and Sam asks, does your head hurt? and he says yes, brings the metal hand to the head, yes, it hurts, make it stop and there's a click and everything goes floaty again.

He blinks sluggishly, Steve and Sam's blurry forms in front of his eyes. Steve is still holding his hand but he barely feels it, everything is numb and fuzzy and nothing hurts and Steve is here, and Sam, and that is good, he thinks vaguely, they are good, he is...safe and he doesn't ever remember feeling safe but it is what he feels now and it is beautiful, it is calmness and peace and Steve and there is no pain, there is always pain but there is no pain and he likes this, he has likes because he's-he's a person or-or at least he used to be and it's confusing but the thoughts are swept away by the heaviness flowing through him and he allows himself to drift, Steve and Sam's presence like an anchor in a vast sea.

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Sam checks his injuries again and proclaims them almost fully healed. He can move his arm, though it is limited by the IVs in the crook of his elbow and his hand. The one in his elbow leads to a bag full of thick white substance, IV nutrition, Sam said. The one in his hand has two ports, one for fluids and one for pain medication. There is a button by the bed that gives him more pain meds, and that is what makes everything so floaty and nice. Soon, Sam says, he will be out of this bed. And then what? he thinks, but he is not allowed to question, not supposed to think about these things so he doesn't. He lets Sam re-bandage his feet and put on the fuzzy socks and take out the stitches in his side. There is another needle and Sam's voice—just a pinch—and he makes it go numb and it is...nice, the soldier has never had anyone do this and he wonders why not but maybe they just didn't have enough, didn't want to waste it on him. Sam is very generous to give him things to take the pain away when it must be hard and the soldier does not deserve it. Sam is good, he thinks. He likes Sam.

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He sleeps that night, without the drugs, but it's full of flashes and sounds and he jerks awake, struggling to breathe under the mask. He remembers—he remembers pain, and hands, but also Steve, smaller but the same—blonde hair and blue eyes—and his mind is whirling and his head is pounding and he's alone, why is he alone and it's dark and he can't breathe and there's a beeping sound, faster and faster and there's too much, it's too much make it stop make it stop-

There's footsteps, and a light flickers on, momentarily blinding him. There's a voice, warm and soothing, but no touch, he needs touch but he focuses on the voice, trying to breathe.

He flails out with his hand, searching for Steve's. A warm hand closes around his, squeezing tight, and he exhales in relief. The beeping slows and then stops as his breaths regulate under the mask.

"It was just a bad dream," Steve is saying. "You're here. You're safe."

Bucky looks up, Steve's face resolving in his vision. Steve. He tries to say it, throat working, but only a hoarse, "Ste-" comes out, the 'v' eluding him with the mask.

Steve's eyes widen. "Did you-are you trying to say my name?"

He can't-he can't speak, can't even try so he taps his thumb against Steve's hand. Yes.

Steve looks simultaneously sad and happy. "The mask comes off today," he says. "Then you can say everything you want to."

Today. Today. The mask comes off today? He wants-he wants it off, wants to move his jaw, wants the pain to stop, wants it off off off.

He raises the metal hand to his face, carefully splaying it over the mask. His eyes meet Steve's, questioning. Off?

Steve nods. "Yeah. Yeah, Buck. We're gonna take it off. The collar too."

He moves the hand to the collar, tracing the edge. He-he wants this off too, he thinks. He thinks of shocks and pain and a harsh voice-shift-and yes, he wants it off, please, take it off-

He curls metal fingers into the edge, trying to pry it off. It's flush with his skin, almost embedded into it, and he can't find purchase but he tries, digging metal fingers in and pressing against his windpipe. Suddenly Steve's hand releases his and grabs the metal one, pulling it away.

"No. No, Bucky, stop. We're gonna get it off, I promise, but not like that. You're hurting yourself."

He lets Steve pull the metal hand away, dropping it back onto the bed. Okay. Okay. Okay. But he wants it off now. And Steve said-Steve said he wouldn't make him do anything he didn't want to do. But Steve made him stop, is making him wait and he wants it off but they're taking it off and he doesn't know who they are but they're doctors and he thinks of needles and blood and watching himself be cut open and he doesn't want it, he doesn't, he didn't-he didn't choose this Steve lied and he doesn't know what's going on but he just wants them off and everything is confusing and he doesn't know what to think-

The metal hand is around Steve's throat, but gently, gently, not squeezing, just asking. Steve freezes and meets Bucky's eyes, Bucky-hey Buck-who is breathing fast again, head pounding.

"Uh, Buck, it's-it's okay," Steve says. "I know you're frustrated. I'm sorry I had to stop you but I can't let you hurt yourself, okay? I'm not going to make you do anything you don't want to do, but I'm not going to let you hurt yourself either. Sorry pal."

Pal. Pal. Pal. Okay. Okay. Okay. He is-he is sincere, and he isn't-he isn't hurting Bucky even though he attacked him, even though you are not allowed to attack your handler, but Steve isn't his handler but he doesn't want to to hurt him and he's just-he's just so confused and everything is too much and he wants it to stop, he wants them off-
He tightens the metal hand around Steve's neck as beeping starts to echo through the room. He is angry, he thinks, but he doesn't know why and suddenly he hates Steve and he's not his handler and so he must be bad and he lied and Bucky-the soldier thought he was his handler but he wasn't and he feels-he feels...and-and everything is wrong and his whole world has been turned upside down and there are no rules or punishments or chair or handler and it's too much, he doesn't know how to handle it or what to do and people keep asking him questions and giving him choices and it's too much, and if he-if he can hurt Steve it means he's not his handler and a part of him wants to, wants to see how far he can push Steve before he punishes the soldier, and he doesn't want punishment but it would be normal, it would mean everything was the same and he needs it, he needs someone to take control, he doesn't-he can't think for himself, he doesn't want to, everything is chaos and he just wants it to stop, wants to go back to blankness and orders and comforting cold where he doesn't have to think or make choices or answer questions and there's no flashes in his head and everything is simple, he can't-he can't do this, he can't be a person-

"-ucky. Bucky. Hey." Steve's hand curls around the metal wrist gently, patting. "I'm sorry. I don't know-I don't know what you're thinking but I want to help. Can you-can you let me help? Please, Buck." His voice becomes raspy as his airway is cut off.

The soldier loosens his grip slightly, searching Steve's face for... something. An answer, maybe. He's still breathing hard and his body trembles, his muscles straining with his effort of keeping his position and weak from disuse.


He tightens his grip again, something like panic clawing at his insides. He can't. Steve chokes slightly but he can't let go, he can't, everything is too loud and too bright and too much and he's terrified, it's all-consuming, a fear that fills him up and whites out his vision, makes his heart race and breathing pick up and the beeping is shrill in his ears and he can't let go, can't or there's pain, he knows, if he lets go there will be pain and he just wants everything to stop for one moment, he can't-he can't-

There are footsteps, fast and then slower as they approach. A voice, low and even, speaking words that don't make it through the fog of panic.

"-otta let go, come on man-know you don't want to do this-on't want to have to make you stop-afe, it's okay, you're safe-

Safe. It is-it is Sam speaking, Sam who is gentle hands and steady voice and okay? and good and safe and he doesn't want to hurt Sam, he doesn't but he's hurting-he's hurting Steve, and Steve is...Steve is good and safe too, he is blonde hair and blue eyes and a voice-hey Buck-and he is everything but that is the problem, he is everything and it is too much and not enough and it is confusing and the soldier just wants it to stop, wants Steve to stop, stop calling him Bucky and making his head hurt and thinking he's a person, he's his friend, the soldier is not his friend, he's not, he's not Bucky, he doesn't want Bucky he doesn't want this he just wants everything to go away, he's on the Helicarrier again and Steve is saying words that make his head hurt and he lashes out because he wants them to stop, can't fail his mission, doesn't want to believe what he's saying because then... then....

Then everything is a lie. He has-he has nothing, has less than nothing because he has been following Hydra's orders for....a long time, and if everything Steve says is true then he has-he has betrayed his cause, has betrayed Steve, has betrayed himself and everything-everything was
for nothing, all that pain was for nothing and then-then who is he? He is-he is no one, is a dog, has no purpose, is worse than anyone on this earth because he followed the wrong orders and he let-he let them take care of him and they were good handlers and stroked his hair but if it was wrong then...then...they were bad and he was bad, but he doesn't know what to do with this information and...and his handlers were-were good, he liked them-soft voice and gentle hands-and if there's no handlers then there's no one to take care of him and no one is good and he is lost-he is lost without them, is nothing without them, doesn't know how to be a person and doesn't want to be a person but Steve keeps telling him he is a person and he hates it, hates that Steve isn't his handler because he wants him to be and if he's not then he must think that the soldier is worthless because why else wouldn't he be, he must hate the soldier, he doesn't want him, Steve doesn't want him-

Steve is tugging on the metal hand in earnest, face turning purple as he starts to choke. "Bucky," he rasps. "Bucky, please."

"Let him go, Barnes," Sam says.

The soldier growls low in his throat, meeting Steve's eyes with his own narrowed in rage and confusion. Steve's are wide and blue, so blue and he meets the soldier's eyes evenly. He is not-he is not mad. He is not hurt, or even scared. He is-he is sad. His hands wrap around the metal arm like a caress and there is no judgement or condemnation in his eyes, just a deep sadness that pierces the soldier's soul. He is-he is sad for the soldier. The soldier blinks, feeling the rage wash away and be replaced by a similar sort of empty sadness that sits heavy in his chest. He feels wetness in his eyes and the metal hand slips from around Steve's throat as he leans forward, resting his forehead against Steve's shoulder. His breath comes in small, hitching sobs between clenched teeth under the mask and he realizes he is crying as tears slip down his face and dampen Steve's shirt. Steve's hands cautiously come up to touch his back and he shudders at the contact he so desperately craves, pressing closer to Steve.

"Ste-" he says. "St-


He shakes his head against Steve's shoulder. It's not alright. It's not.

He feels Steve chuckle under him. "Okay, maybe it's not. But it will be. I promise, Buck. It's gonna be okay. We're gonna be okay."

Okay. Okay. Okay. He brings the metal hand up to Steve's chest, flattening it and tapping once with the index finger. Okay.

He doesn't know how long he stays there but eventually his breaths even out and his eyelids droop, exhaustion taking over. The beeping has-the beeping has stopped at some point. Steve is-Steve is shaking his shoulder gently, pulling him back and saying-saying something, pay attention soldier-

"-for a while?"


"Do you want to sleep for a while?" Steve repeats hoarsely, thankfully, thank you Steve and yes, yes he wants to sleep and he nods the head, yes, wait-no, no, it's the finger, tap, fuck, he forgot but Steve doesn't seem to care, lowers him back down to the bed and pulls up the blanket over him. "It's pretty early in the morning right now," Steve says. "The surgery isn't until the afternoon. You
should sleep for a while since you only slept a few hours last night. Okay?"

Okay. Okay. Okay. He taps once against the bed, *okay*, remembers to tap not nod and Steve smiles.

"Okay."

The soldier drifts off in minutes, mind blissfully blank.
Chapter 18

What’s this lonely soul to do
when the moon is such a great sight
and only my eyes are here to witness?

And how am I to feel when the distance becomes not the abyss that separates me and the moon but the extensive vastness that separates you and I?

_Lone_ by Shena Robertson

As soon as Bucky is asleep Steve stumbles out of the room, closing the door behind him and resting a hand on the wall as he tries to breathe. He feels like he's small and sickly again, breaths rasped through a swollen throat and heart fluttering in his chest. Sam comes up behind him, setting a hand on his shoulder.

"Just breathe, man. Breathe."

Gradually his breaths even out, though his throat is still sore and swollen. He turns and slumps back against the wall, bringing his hands to his face. He wants to punch something until his hands bleed.

"Sam, I don't-I don't think I can do this." He remembers Bucky's hand around his throat, unrelenting, his eyes narrowed in anger and hatred and heartbreaking confusion as he tried to squeeze the life out of Steve.

Sam tugs his arm. "Come on. Let's get some ice on that throat. Then we'll talk."

He follows Sam blindly up to his floor, sitting at the kitchen table as Sam pulls out ice packs and slaps one to his own slightly bruised throat. He passes another to Steve, who gingerly puts it against his throat where he knows there will be an imprint of Bucky's hand. God, they're a pair.

Sam sits down across from him, eyes worried.

"That had to be pretty traumatic for you. What're you thinking, Steve?"

Steve sighs, voice raspy. "I just-I don't know. I can't. I can't do this, Sam. I thought-I thought he was getting better."

Sam leans forward. "Dude, he is getting better. Listen, this is almost a good thing."

"Good? Him almost strangling me to death was good?" Steve interrupts incredulously.

Sam raises an eyebrow. "You gonna let me speak?"


"As I was saying," Sam continues, "this is almost a good thing, because we know he wasn't allowed to attack his handlers. That means either a), he doesn't see you as his handler or b), he still does but has the wherewithal to resist and fight back."
Steve blinks. He hadn't thought about it like that. "But why... why would he fight back? Against what? I don't know what I did wrong."

Sam sighs. "Okay, think about it like this. First of all, he's been tortured and brainwashed for seventy years, then broke orders on some vague sense of knowing you and now he's here, traumatized and in pain with a fucked-up memory, brain damage, and Stockholm syndrome to boot. He should barely be cognizant, Steve. The fact that he's usually pretty stable and isn't drooling in a corner somewhere is a goddamn miracle. Baby steps, man. Secondly, let's think about it from his perspective, taking those factors into account. He broke orders to save you because he thought you were his handler, so to him that was the right decision. Easy-peasy. Then you rescued him from Hydra and got him medical treatment and shit and he's like great, Steve is great, because he has fucking Stockholm Syndrome, Steve, so he thinks basic human decency is incredible and his entire world revolves around you. Like literally, he thought his entire world revolved around you. Just think about that for a second. And then, we just sweep that right out from under him when we tell him you're not his handler. Like, his entire world just turned upside down. He literally has no sense of self, Steve. Imagine feeling like everything you thought was turned on its head and you don't even think you're a person so how the fuck are you gonna deal with that? And yeah, he seemed okay after strangling me for a bit but I don't think it really set in, or he didn't believe me. But then you told him you guys' entire life story which is a fuck-ton of information to take in for someone who probably had like a week total of memories before this and didn't think he was an actual person. So now his world is even stranger and more overwhelming and basically every single thing he thought about himself and the world we just told him is a lie. Every. Single. Thing. And you wake him up from a nightmare when he's already on edge and I don't know what exactly you said but honestly it probably didn't matter. He was gonna explode at some point and man, I don't really blame him. He's confused and overwhelmed and traumatized, and he's got a lot of emotions surrounding you both positive and negative at this point. You're the source of a lot of confusion right now so him attacking you is sadly pretty expected." Sam shrugs. "We can't know exactly what he's thinking right now but that's my best guess."

Steve stares, stunned. It...makes so much sense, in a horrible, gut-twisting way. He swallows. "Am I... am I making it worse?"

Sam hesitates. "Yes and no. The thing is, you're the reason he broke away from Hydra. That's a huge deal. He's obviously got some intrinsic memory of you and to a certain extent trusts you, which is important for his recovery. On the other hand, the whole handler thing is super duper unhealthy and hard to get away from, and you guys simply have too much history. There's too many complex emotions there for someone who's just trying to get on stable footing again. Like, with me, all he knows is that I'm nice to him and don't hurt him. That's it. Nice and straightforward. No negative emotions, no confusion. He just puts me in the positive column. Check." He mimes checking in midair. "But with you... you're all over the map. He doesn't know what to think, and it's not as simple as that. That's like the cherry on top of his fucked-up ice cream sundae of trauma."

Steve feels the resignation in his gut. "So I should stay away from him?"

Sam pins him with a look. "Did I say that, Steve? No. You can't just leave now, that would just make things worse and confuse him even more. What we need are boundaries. Ever heard of them?"

Steve huffs. "I know what boundaries are."

Sam raises an eyebrow disbelievingly. "Sure, whatever you say."

Steve scowls. "The point?"
"We need to disentangle all that emotional shit and set some boundaries with you and Barnes. You need to stop treating him like your long-lost soul mate and start treating him like any other traumatized soldier."

"But it's Bucky."

Sam shakes his head. "No, Steve, right now he's not. You gotta accept that. That guy sitting in that bed down there is not Bucky Barnes, and you can't expect him to be. He may never be Bucky. He's a guy who's literally been through hell and needs our help to come out the other side with any semblance of okayness. He's a person, whoever he is after this. You gonna be able to deal with that?"

Steve takes a deep breath, feeling the familiar ache in his chest. What if Sam's right? What if he's never Bucky again? It would mean he's really lost him, for good, and Steve doesn't know if he could survive that. But he thinks of Sam's words, *he's a person*, and realizes he's right. Even if he weren't Bucky, even if he were just a random man captured by Hydra, Steve would still want to help him. He deserves that much after what he's been through. The old Bucky would look him in the eye and say *chin up, Rogers. Don't you start quitting on me yet*. He owes it to him, to Bucky's memory, to help whoever is in his body now. Even if Bucky never comes back, even if he never remembers Steve. It will break his heart, but goddamn will he do it, because Steve Rogers never gives up when it comes to Bucky Barnes. He told Bucky *I'm with you till the end of the line*, and he meant it.

He looks at Sam and nods. "I'm good."

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It's only five a.m., but Steve heads down to the gym to work off the emotions churning in his stomach. He works through punching bags until the chain snaps in half, his knuckles bloodying as time wears on. When he's finally exhausted and all of his rage bled out into emptiness he stops, trudging back up to his floor and taking a shower. Sam cooks breakfast, not commenting on Steve's healing knuckles or two hour punching session. When they're done Steve musters up the courage to call Peggy, having avoided it since the incident. He doesn't want to tell Peggy that her precious Shield that she had founded had been rotten to the core, or that Bucky was alive all this time. She probably already knows the first part.

He picks up the phone, dialing the familiar number to the landline in her room. After a few rings she answers, voice creaky but sharp.

"Hello?"

"Hi Pegs."

He hears an intake of breath. "Steven Grant Rogers, you have the audacity to call almost two weeks after you almost died? Did you know I had to find out what happened from the news? And *gossip*? Do you know how much I hate gossip? You should be ashamed of yourself."

Steve winces. "I'm sorry, Pegs. I'm so sorry. I should have called you."

"You're damn right you should have." Peggy's voice softens. "But you're all right?"

He lets out a breath. "That depends on your definition. Physically, yes." He swallows and feels his bruised throat. "Well, fairly all right," he amends.

"And mentally?" Peggy questions softly. "I know it must have been a shock. It was to me.
Everything I did, just to find out..."

"It wasn't your fault," Steve says, hearing the echo of Peggy saying that to him sixty-eight and two years ago all at once.

Peggy sighs. "I know. I just wish that I had known. I wish you didn't have to do this alone."

Steve thinks of Sam, and Nat, and even Tony. "I'm not alone. Not anymore."

"I'm glad," Peggy says. "You will need people to have your back in the dark days ahead. I am just sorry I won't be able to help you."

"You've already helped me," Steve replies truthfully. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

Peggy chuckles. "I'm sure you'd find your way. So, where are you?"

Steve hesitates. He doesn't know if this line is secure. "Staying with a friend," he says carefully.

Peggy seems to get it, and Steve blesses her spy experience. "I see. Any plans?"

He swallows. "Just one. There's...something else I found out."

"What is it?"

He tries to find a way to say it on the unsecure line. "The...dog I lost, a while ago," he says. He hates calling Bucky a dog but he hopes Peggy will understand what he means. "I found him."

There's a shocked silence. "What do-you mean?" Peggy breathes. "You-you found him?"

"Yeah." His voice cracks. "Someone-stole him, it turns out. Turned him into an attack dog. But I found him. He's safe now."

"Oh," Peggy breathes. "Oh, Steve he's alive? After all this time?"

He closes his eyes, feeling tears prickle behind them. "Yeah Pegs. He's alive."

Peggy's voice is teary. "Can I see him? I want to see him."

He feels a tear slip down his cheek. "I don't know." His voice breaks. "I don't know, Pegs. They...he's in bad shape. He's been...abused. It might take time."

"I understand. People are cruel," Peggy says, and her voice is angry. "People are cruel." He hears her take a breath. "You just tell him-you give him a kiss on the head and you tell him Peggy loves him, okay? Just tell him that. That I love him and I can't wait to see him."

"I will, I promise."

"Oh Steve," Peggy says. "I can't believe, after all this time..."

"I know," he replies. "I know."

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After he calls Peggy Jarvis notifies them that Bucky is waking up. Sam volunteers to go sit with him, as Steve doesn't think he can handle that right now. He goes up to Tony's lab, where he and Bruce are still sifting through the information from the tapes, especially about the chair.
"Hey Cap," Tony says as he walks in, eyes flicking to his bruised throat. "Rough morning?"

"You could say that." He stops in front of the holographic screens, an image of the chair and a brain scan pulled up. "Anything new?"

Bruce moves forward, twirling a pen between his fingers. "Well, Jarvis scanned Sergeant Barnes' brain and we've been looking more into the mind wiping to figure out how it works." He points to several white spots on the holographic brain. "These are lesions on his hippocampus, which is responsible for long-term memory storage among other things. As far as we can tell, the electrical stimulation lesioned specific parts of the brain in order to erase basically all memory except muscle memory and some recent semantic knowledge, such as knowing he worked for Hydra and who his handler was. The good news is that because of his advanced healing factor and the way his brain is structured, his brain is healing itself and these memories should come back eventually. It's incredible, really."

Steve feels hope blossom. "So he'll remember everything from before?"

Bruce nods. "Yeah but also..." He grimaces. "He'll remember everything from during. They erased a bunch of stuff during that time, such as killing General Lukin, and it's all...not fun. If I were him I wouldn't want those memories back."

Steve swallows. He hadn't thought of that. He's been so selfishly focused on wanting Bucky to remember him that he's forgotten how many bad memories he must have as well. Just another thing he messed up.

"Yeah," he says. "But he doesn't-he doesn't have a choice, does he? They're all going to come back?"

Bruce nods, lips pressed in a thin line. "Yes. Unfortunately for him, perhaps."

There's a beat of silence.

"So, moving on..." Tony finally says. "The other thing we discovered from our scans is that he's got trackers in him. Luckily, I already blocked all signals when he got here because I'm smart like that and considered the possibility. We'll just throw that into the surgery, simple really compared to the other stuff. One of the trackers is in the collar so that's easy and then there's one in the back of his neck and another in the arm. The surgeon can get the one in his neck out and then I can get the one in the arm whenever Barnes is up for it. Like I said, the signal is blocked so no rush. But I do want to look at that arm." He rubs his hands together, eyes sparking with manic excitement.

Steve nods. "Okay. It's up to Bucky, though." He levels a warning look at Tony.

Tony raises his hands, expression the picture of innocence. "Of course. Whenever he's ready." He pauses. "But I am looking at that arm eventually."

Steve just rolls his eyes. "Okay, Bruce, anything else?"

Bruce shakes his head. "Nope, that's about it. Surgeon and co. should be here in..." He checks his watch. "Oh. Ten minutes."

Steve frowns. "I thought the surgery wasn't until this afternoon?"

"Yes, sorry, it is, but she's coming earlier to look over our scans and prepare. We didn't really send her anything because of...well, it's not safe, but she's been vetted thoroughly so there's no reason to worry."
Steve nods, though he still feels nervous about this. "Oh. That makes sense."

At that moment Pepper strides in, looking beautiful and put together as always with a small smile on her face.

"Hello, Captain Rogers," she says pleasantly. "How are you doing? Settling in okay?"

"Steve, please," he says. "And I'm doing well, thank you. I love what you did with the floor. How are you?"

Her eyes land on his throat and she winces. "Better than you right now, I should think. A little...fiery," her lips quirk up wryly, "but not in danger of exploding anytime soon."

"Well that's...good," Steve tries. He doesn't know much about Extremis or what went down with Tony but he'd heard about the people spontaneously combusting and it was horrifying. He certainly wouldn't want that to happen to Pepper. She's one of the smartest and toughest people he's ever met, besides Peggy. Tony should be thanking his lucky stars that he has her.

"Dr. Price should be here any minute," Pepper is saying, leaning over to give Tony a peck on the cheek. "She's bringing an anesthesiologist and a couple of her most trusted nurses with. Should I bring them up here when they arrive?"

Tony nods. "Yeah, we're all set here. We'll read them into everything and then have them meet Barnes before the surgery. With any luck, no one will get strangled."

Pepper huffs. "Don't worry dear, I'm making them all sign waivers. And non-disclosure agreements. And all of them have been background checked and vetted by Maria Hill herself."

Tony blinks. "What would I do without you?"

Pepper smiles, turning into a light kiss with Tony. "I honestly have no idea."

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The surgical team walks into the lab right behind Pepper, looking around with interest. A tall dark-skinned woman with cropped hair steps forward, holding out a hand to Steve.

"Hi, I'm Dr. Price. You must be Steve Rogers." Her eyes flit briefly to his throat but her expression doesn't change.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, ma'am," he responds.

"Likewise." She turns to Tony Stark, shaking his hand. "And you must be Tony Stark."

Tony grins. "Guilty as charged."

Finally she turns to Bruce. "Dr. Banner, I assume? It's an honor to meet you. Your work is unparalleled."

Bruce blushes, shaking her hand quickly and fiddling with his glasses. "Thank you. That's very kind."

Dr. Price gestures to the short, sandy-haired man behind her. "This is Dr. Jones. He's out anesthesiologist." She points to the two others, a kind-faced man with black hair and a short Persian girl with brown hair styled in a pixie cut. Both look wide-eyed as they stare at Steve, Tony, and Bruce. "These are my nurses, Damien and Fahtema."
Steve nods at them. "It's a pleasure."

They nod back, clearly gobsmacked.

Dr. Price claps her hands together, unfazed. "Well, now that we're all introduced, let's get to it, shall we? I must admit, I have no idea why you called us here."

Tony looks at Steve. "You want to tell them, or should I?"

Steve takes a deep breath. "I've got this." He puts himself in Captain America mode and turns to the team. "I'm sure you all know about what went down in DC."

Dr. Price grimaces. "Yes. Terrible."

He nods. "Yes. Hydra has been in Shield for decades. Using Shield's resources, they have been able to do some pretty bad things over the years, unbeknownst to us." He takes another breath. "One of those things involved something known as the Winter Soldier project. During World War Two, Dr. Arnim Zola-the name makes sickness rise in his throat-the lead scientist for Hydra, experimented on prisoners of war, soldiers they had captured. One of those prisoners happened to be my closest friend, Bucky Barnes. I rescued him along with the other men, but what no one besides me and the Howling Commandos knew was that Zola's experiments worked." He looks around at their faces, all curious and bewildered. "Has everyone heard of the White Wolf conspiracy?" They all nod. He steels himself. "It was true."

He watches their faces go from confusion to shock to disbelief.

"Captain Rogers, you can't possibly be saying what I think you're saying," Dr. Price wonders. "That's not-that's not even possible."

Steve nods. "I know. I thought I was dreaming at first. But it's true. Bucky-Sergeant Barnes-could transform into a wolf at will."

"How about some proof?" Tony interjects. "I didn't believe it until I saw it either."

Steve nods, and Tony brings up a video of Bucky from the beginning of when Hydra had him, rolling just as soldiers dump Bucky in a heap in the middle of the floor. He's dressed in white pants but no shirt, and there's bloody bandages wrapped around the stump of his left arm. Lukin steps forward, the side of his face visible to the camera.

"You will become the wolf," he orders.

Bucky glares. "No."

"If you will not do it willingly, we will have to make you," Lukin says dispassionately.

"Just who the hell do you think you are, pal?" Bucky spits. "I'm not doing a damn thing for you."

"My name is General Aleksander Lukin. You will obey, or will will make you obey." Bucky growls, and Lukin looks pleased. "Ah, there it is. Now, I need proof that you are truly the White Wolf that they say. If you do, you will not be punished."

Bucky spits at his feet. "Go to hell."

"Very well. Солдаты!"

The soldiers step forward, withdrawing batons. Steve sees Bucky try to shield himself with his
right arm before the first one comes down with a resounding crack that makes Steve's stomach lurch. He sees Bucky wince in pain and his eyes flick to the door. As the next soldier swings his baton up Bucky surges forward, shifting in midair and closing his teeth around the soldier's neck. The soldier goes down, and Bucky rips his throat out in a spurt of red, turning to the others. He lunges at the next one but Steve can see him expect to step on his left leg and he crashes to the floor, chin cracking against the cement. He struggles to get up on three legs, the left front one a stump ending a few inches below the shoulder, bloody bandages coming unraveled. He scrabbles, heaving himself to his remaining three feet and staggering, off-balance and unsteady. Steve can see him shaking with exhaustion and he snarls at the circling soldiers with bloody teeth and enraged eyes, swaying as he fights to remain upright. The video stops, and Steve turns to see everyone looking stunned.

"So it's really true," Dr. Price says. "Shapeshifting is possible. Who would have thought?"

"What happened-what happened to his arm...leg?" Fahtema asks. "And he seems like a prisoner here. I don't remember hearing about any of this in history class."

Steve nods. "This is after everyone thought he died. There was a mission, and he fell into a ravine. I was told by the Russian General, Lukin, that they had found his body and that he was dead, even though I knew he had an advanced healing factor and had suspected he survived the fall." He closes his eyes for a second. "He did. Lukin lied. He had discovered what Bucky was and decided to keep him prisoner so he could study him, as you saw in the video. Bucky must have lost his arm in the fall, though we're not sure how. Lukin eventually joined Hydra, and Dr. Zola was recruited by Shield. With all of Shield's resources and Dr. Zola readily available they-" he struggles to keep his voice level-"he struggles to keep his voice level-"they tortured him and eventually wiped his memory, turning him into an assassin for Hydra. It wasn't until DC that I fought him and recognized him when his mask came off. I managed to...get through to him eventually when I brought down the Helicarriers, but he disappeared after saving my life and I didn't find him until a few days ago. He's here, in the tower, and slowly recovering. I know that's a lot to take in, but I swear it's all true. The thing is, what they did to him..." He shakes his head, gesturing at Bruce. "I'll let him explain."

Bruce steps forward, clearing his throat. "Yes. The reason we need you is because Hydra made some...additions to Sergeant Barnes that require surgery to remove." He pulls up the video of when they attached the mask, paused on a still frame of them in the process of screwing it on. Steve sees the team's eyes widen as they stare at it. "After his first fight with Captain Rogers they decided to...attach the mask to his face. Permanently. This will be the easiest to remove, as they simply screwed it on. However, this..." He pulls up another screen with the surgery of the collar frozen on it, pointing at the screen. "This is surgically wired into his spine and has been on there for...years."

Dr. Price moves closer to the screen, squinting. "But what -what is it for? What is it's function? Why wire it into his spine?"

Bruce shifts uncomfortably. "One reason is so he couldn't remove it, because they were able to inhibit his ability to shift forms with it. Another is for..." He shrugs, expression disgusted. "Torture. It's for torture. It's literally a shock collar, and they also wired it into his nerves to send pain signals. It's fucking Hydra."

Steve blinks. He's never heard Bruce sound so...angry. He's always thought he was a bit of a nervous, mild-mannered doctor, but Bruce sounds pissed.

Dr. Price steps back. "Oh." She swallows. "Oh." She looks back at the other screen, where the mask is being screwed to his face. "Oh god." She looks closer, where Bucky's eyes are wide and terrified, and Steve sees the moment she realizes. "Oh. Oh no. Please-please tell me he wasn't
awake for that."

There's a profound silence. Dr. Price looks ill.

Damien speaks up. "What about the arm? Is that metal?"

Tony nods. "Yeah. That sucker's not coming off, though. It's a bit more permanent. Besides, doesn't seem to be causing any problems. The other stuff definitely is."

Bruce nods, adjusting his glasses. "Right now we have him on fluids and IV nutrition, but before that he hadn't eaten in over a week because of the mask and was very malnourished and dehydrated. He was also injured, though he's healed by now."

"He can't speak," Steve interjects flatly. "He can't-because of the mask. He can't speak."

"Is he..." Dr. Price hesitates. "Communicative? Stable?"

Steve grimaces. "Yes? No?" He gestures to his throat. "Sometimes less so than others. He doesn't remember much of anything besides Hydra, because they wiped his memories. He also has-" He has to take a deep breath. "He also has Stockholm Syndrome most likely, and the only reason he's cooperating right now is because he sees us as...I don't know. Good? He thought I was his handler at first, and you can see how well he took the knowledge that I'm not." He gestures to his throat again. "He's good at answering yes or no questions provided they're simple and he doesn't have to make decisions. I'm presuming he's not a fan of doctors but he has been letting my friend Sam Wilson give him medical care. I can't promise you that he'll respond well to seeing a bunch of medical equipment and needles but..." He raises his hands. "It's your choice."

Dr. Price only thinks a moment before nodding. "Of course I'll help. I'm a doctor. It's my responsibility. Now, give me everything I'll need to know to do this surgery."
Chapter 19

Slaughtered by man once
I shall never take my eyes
off my pack again

The Guardian by Sweet P

Sam is reading—Sam is reading next to him. Sam has been here for a while, he thinks, he has been here since the soldier woke up but he has not punished him for attacking not-handler Steve or for attacking him and the soldier doesn’t know why because there is always punishment but Sam is just reading, what is he reading, he's reading out loud and the soldier thinks he keeps losing time because sometimes he blinks and Sam is reading a different part of the story and he doesn't even know what Sam is reading but his voice is soothing and the soldier thinks safe.

There's a buzzing and Sam looks down, pulling out a phone from his pocket. He reads it before looking up at the soldier.

"Hey, remember how you're getting those off today?" He nods to the collar and the mask, the mask- hold him still- and yes, yes, he wants them off, please, he taps once, yes-

"The people who are gonna do that want to come in and talk to you first. That okay?"

Okay? Okay. Okay. Okay. Okay. He doesn't know and there's no handler to tell him what to do and Sam wants an answer, is always asking okay? and he thinks he's supposed to say yes, okay Sam so he does, he taps once, okay, and Sam nods, tapping out something on his phone.

"Okay. They're gonna come in. Do you want Steve to come in with them? You can say no."

Steve. Steve. Not-handler Steve, who he hurt, but hasn't hurt him, and who is safe and good but also confusing and overwhelming, but the soldier needs him, it's Steve, he knows this, he knows him and so he taps once, yes, he wants Steve, he needs to say sorry and he needs him to stroke his hair and tell him it's okay, no, wait, that's not right-

The door opens and Steve steps through, followed closely by four people. They are wearing solid light blue pants and loose short-sleeved shirts, and they remind him of something and he can't place it but there are no lab coats and the woman in front has a warm smile although they can be deceiving, he knows, and the ones in back look nervous and he knows this, they are always scared of him but Sam is right there and Steve is right there, now, he comes up to the bed and his throat is bruised, from the soldier, he did that-

"Hey," Steve says, no hey Buck and he sounds cautious and the soldier feels...bad that he hurt Steve and he brings a metal finger up and taps on his throat, sorry.

Steve frowns. "Yeah, we're getting it off."

He shakes his head, even though it makes pain shoot through his face, and taps again, looking pointedly at Steve's throat. Steve's eyes widen and his hand goes to his own throat.

"Oh, my throat?" The soldier taps once, yes. Steve's expression goes slightly sad. "It's okay, Buck. 
I'm fine."

The soldier frowns, or tries to, and taps again, trying to make the words come out. *Sorry. "Ssurr-"* he says. *"Ssurr-"

Steve's expression gets even sadder. "You don't have to apologize. I know everything's pretty overwhelming right now, and I'm not making it any better."

That is...true, but not. It is overwhelming, and Steve is overwhelming but the soldier wants him here, doesn't want him to leave, he is making it better. He's taking care of the soldier, and not hurting him, and giving him blankets and contact and soft words and it is more than the soldier deserves and he thinks-he thinks *stupid punk*, Steve is a-a *stupid punk* and he rolls his eyes to indicate this, he thinks this is an acceptable form of communication and he hears Steve choke out a laugh and thinks *yes, that's better*, he got Steve to laugh instead of looking sad, he did good-

"I want you to meet the...people who are going to be taking these off," Steve is saying, looking over at the cluster of people standing a little ways away watching them. The tall woman with the warm smile comes closer, radiating calmness as she stops by the foot of the bed.

"Hello. My name is Tamira. My coworkers over there are Ryan, Damien, and Fahtema." She points to each one as she speaks. "We're going to be the ones doing the surgery today. Do you understand what's going to happen?"

He looks between her and the others, anxiety ramping up. No, no he doesn't know what's going to happen but he's not supposed to ask but he's also supposed to respond-*you will respond when spoken to*-and so he taps twice, *no*, he doesn't know what's going on but they said they're taking them off and he wants them off but it means pain and he remembers-he remembers last time-*hold him still*-

"Okay," Tamira is saying. "Basically we're going to put you to sleep and then take off the mask and collar as well as a small tracker in your neck. You'll be asleep the whole time. You won't feel a thing, I promise. Do you understand?"

He finds her eyes-*you will look at me when spoken to*-and searches them, trying to find the darkness that always lies in people's eyes, the lies they spin to keep him calm and complacent. He finds nothing but warm brown depths that are calm and slightly sad as she meets his gaze, and he hesitantly taps a finger, *yes*, he understands. *Asleep*. No pain. It is too great to comprehend.

Tamira exhales in relief. "That's good. Okay, we're going to start getting prepared for the surgery. You'll get anesthesia through an IV by Ryan, and then once you're asleep we'll transfer you to the operating table to perform the procedure. When we're done we'll transfer you back to the bed, so you'll wake up right here. That all sound okay?"

He taps again and Tamira turns, making a fist but pointing her thumb upwards in the direction of the other people. *A thumbs up*, some distant part of his brain tells him. They nod, immediately scurrying around the room and wheeling more medical equipment in his direction. He looks over at Steve and Sam, gauging their reactions as his anxiety spikes. They both look unbothered by the medical equipment but are looking at him with badly disguised concern, which doesn't help his mounting anxiety. Why are they concerned? Maybe they think he will lash out again. Maybe they are worried for the...doctors, they must be doctors, and they didn't say doctors but that's what they are and why would they be concerned unless they are going to hurt him but no, no, he is just unstable, erratic, they are right to worry, he needs to be contained, he needs to be handled-

"We'll be right here," Steve says. "Until you fall asleep, and when you wake up. We'll be right
His eyes flick between Steve and Sam, both of them steady and sure by his side. He taps a finger against the bed. **Okay.**

Then they back up as the man-Ryan-comes forward, IV in hand, and the soldier feels his heart rate accelerate again.

"Okay, I'm just going to connect this to the port already on your arm," Ryan says, disconnecting the nutritional IV and connecting the new IV to a port in the crook of his elbow. His gloved fingers brush the soldier's skin and the soldier flinches involuntarily. "And I'm going to put a heart rate monitor and blood pressure cuff on you. I know the computer in this building can monitor your vitals somehow but I prefer to watch them the old fashioned way." He chuckles, eyes crinkling pleasantly in a way that sets the soldier more at ease.

He takes a small clip-like device, sliding it over the soldier's index finger. Immediately there is a beeping, soft and fast, and a screen near the bed lights up with heart rate and oxygen levels. The Ryan takes out a soft piece of material with a small meter and hose attached, a ripping sound audible as he peels back the velcro.

"I'm just going to wrap this around your arm and take your blood pressure. It's going to get very tight but then it will loosen again. Okay?" His eyes are hazel up close, set into a face that's starting to bear the marks of age in the small wrinkles around his eyes and mouth. His sandy hair is streaked with grey, but his hands are steady and soft and he has an athletic build that suggests running. He's wearing latex gloves that make the soldier's skin crawl but no white coat and no glasses and his eyes are kind and he said-he asked **okay?** which is what Sam says and Sam and Steve are right there, they aren't leaving and so the soldier taps once, **okay.**

Ryan smiles. "Great." He goes to wrap the fabric around the soldier's arm, gloved hands brushing skin and there's constriction around his arm, like the cuffs of the chair, the chair-**wipe him**-and he can't get free, he can't escape, he's pinned down and he hears the beeping accelerate and his breaths are shallow and fast and he freezes, body thrumming with tension and mind whiting out with panic. Ryan stops, hands still on the cuff. "You okay?"

He can't-he can't answer, he can't **speak**, no, no, he's not okay and he taps twice, **no**, what the fuck, he's not-he's not okay-**keep it together Barnes**-

"-right, alright, I'm going to take it off for a second, that's okay." The pressure releases as the cuff slides off and he exhales shakily, pressing his head back against the bed and squeezing his eyes shut as the beeping regulates. He hears Sam speaking to someone, even and low.

"Could we do that after he's asleep?"

Ryan's voice replies. "Yeah, I can do that. No problem." He speaks louder. "I'm not going to try that again, okay? We're just going to let your heart rate come down enough and then we're going to send you off into dreamland. Sound good?"

He opens his eyes, looking into Ryan's honest gaze. He taps once. **Okay.**

"Can you just breathe for me? In and out, slowly." He follows the instructions, heart rate falling and body relaxing. "Good," Ryan says. "Good. Alright, I'm going to start the sedation. You're going to start feeling sleepy, and when you wake up again the surgery will be over. Ready?"

He taps once. **Yes.** His eyes find Steve's, breathing steadily. Steve is here. Steve is not going to

"-right here, Buck-

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He feels heavy and yet also light, as if he's separate from his body. He cracks open his eyes, blinking heavily as white swims in his vision. White wall. White ceiling. Lights. He's in the same room. He's in-he's in the bed. He just went to sleep, or did he? There's someone-breathing next to him. Two someones. He tries to turn his head but it's so heavy and he realizes it's...lighter, different, he can feel air on his face and the mask, the mask is gone and he can't raise the right hand but the left responds and he lifts it, bringing a hand to his face. It's-it's gone. It's really gone. There is something-gauze, over his cheekbones and jawbones but there is no mask, he can feel skin and stubble and he touches his face wonderingly, running metal fingers over the skin. There's a rustling to his right as someone leans closer.

"Hey Buck. The surgery went well." It's Steve, Steve's voice, Steve who said he would be here when he woke up and he is, he's here and the mask is off and the soldier turns his head, meeting Steve's eyes which are sparkling with moisture.

He tries to say it, Steve, but his jaw is stiff and painful and he can't make the words, a slurred "Ste-" escaping. He swallows, throat sore, and tries again. "Stee-ve," he manages, mouth barely opening and jaw aching with the effort. The world is spinning in front of his eyes, sounds jumbled together and head fuzzy.

Steve smiles brokenly. "You probably shouldn't try and speak right now. Your jaw is going to be pretty sore for a while, and you're not used to moving it. It's okay. It'll come."

He frowns in frustration, mouth tugging down and making his jaw pulse with pain. He suddenly realizes another thing, that the collar must be off as well. He moves metal fingers to his neck, feeling bandages wound around it but less constrictive than the collar had been. He looks at Steve, questioning, Steve's face blurring in and out of his vision.

Steve swallows. "Yeah, that's a little worse. Your face will heal but...you might have some scarring on your neck. The bandages should stay on for a while. Okay?"

He goes to tap before trying to speak but then remembering he can't and contemplating nodding but knowing it will hurt his face and he just stays still for a moment, confused about how to respond and head feeling like it's stuffed with cotton wool.

"You can respond however you want," Sam says from next to Steve. "If it's easier to keep tapping, that's fine. Whatever works for you." The soldier contemplates for a moment before tapping once.

Sam nods. "Alright."

He drops the metal hand, limbs still feeling uncoordinated and sluggish. He blinks heavily, feeling disconnected from his body and like everything is unreal. There is a blanket over his body but he is-he is cold and sleepy and his head is fuzzy and Steve is speaking, Steve is speaking, pay attention, he has to pay attention-

"-a few hours. Sound good?"

What. What. What did he say. A few hours-a few hours what, what is going on, again, again Steve, again- 

He squints at Steve, uncomprehending. Steve is looking at him expectantly but he doesn't know, he
doesn't know what he said or what he wants, it's all confusing and he can't speak but he tries, makes the sounds, "Wha-?" he says. "Wha-t?"

Steve frowns. "In a few hours, you can get out of here and move to an actual bed. There's extra rooms on my floor, so you can take one if that's okay with you. But you don't have to stay with me. There's extra rooms on Sam's floor too."

The soldier blinks. Stay with-stay with Steve? He is not-he is not going back to cryo? His own room? Okay? It is—it is too much. He doesn't understand. Steve wants him to stay with him, wants to give him a room and a bed and a choice but why? What does he want from the soldier? But the soldier is not allowed to ask, not allowed to question so he stays silent and waits for Steve, waits for...something-

"It's your choice," Sam says. "Stay with Steve, or stay with me. You can tap once for Steve, twice for me."

His choice? Sam wants him to choose but what does Sam want, what does Steve want and he scans their faces, searching for the answer but finds none and it's...frustrating, he's frustrated but he knows...he knows he wants Steve, Steve who is not his handler but is and so he taps once, Steve, and Steve looks...happy and that is good, he wants to make Steve happy-

"Alright," Sam says. "Whatever works for you. Now, listen-"

"Why?" The soldier interrupts-why why why are you doing this, what is going on, why-and then freezes, panic flooding his veins. He-he asked a question, he interrupted Sam, he's not allowed to- he's not allowed to, he's going to be punished, no no nononono-

He is frozen with fear, breaths coming fast and shallow and the beeping starting signaling his heart rate is too high. His vision whites out with panic and he can't see Steve or Sam but they're going to they're going to punish him, he's not allowed-he's not-he can't, no, no-

"Hey, hey, it's alright, no one's gonna hurt you. It's okay to ask questions. Why what?"

What. What. Sam. What? It's-it's okay to ask questions? No. No. That's-they're lying, that's wrong, he's not allowed to, no, no one is going to hurt him but that's a lie, they always hurt him, always, it never stops why-why won't it stop he wants it to stop make it stop-

Steve is speaking. "-ucky, it's okay, you're safe. It's just us. We're not gonna hurt you. Just breathe, it's okay-"

He takes a shuddering breath and then everything stops. He is not here. He is safe in his head, where nothing can hurt him. The world disappears as he allows blankness to swallow him up.

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He is-he is in the bed. There is breathing, two people, to his right. There are murmured voices, low and soft.

"-ow long?"

"I don't know. However long it takes."

The soldier moves his head to see Steve and Sam by his bedside, talking lowly. They stop when they catch the motion, faces relieved.
"Hey man, you back with us?" Sam asks.

What. Back? Back from where? He was...he had questioned, he had interrupted and then everything was fear and then blankness and now...now he is here, and he has lost time, he thinks and yes, he is back and he taps once, yes.

"Good. That's good," Sam says. "Do you want to get out of this bed?"

Get out. Does he does he want to get out. He-he doesn't know, where is he going, right, Steve's, he remembers, he is staying with Steve but why-no. NO. Do not ask. Can't ask. No. Does he want to get out, does he want to go with Steve he doesn't have wants but he knows Sam wants an answer and he thinks yes, tap the finger once, he wants get out, sure Sam, yes-

"Good. Tamira's going to check you over and then disentangle you from all these wires, okay?"


Sam gives—he gives a thumbs up to the air and the door opens and it is Tamira and one of the people from before, before the surgery, the short girl with brown skin and dark hair and curious eyes and she smiles tentatively as she comes closer and he can't remember he name but he thinks-he thinks it started with an "F"-

"Hi," Tamira says, brown eyes warm as she assesses him. "You remember me from before?"

Of-of course he does, yes, and he taps once, yes and she smiles.

"Good. I notice you're not talking, which is perfectly okay. I'm just going to check on how everything is healing, okay? Your healing factor is so fast a couple of hours is like a few days for most people."

He-he knows that, somehow, knows it with pain and blood and screams. Tamira comes closer, pulling on gloves that make his skin crawl and stepping up to his left side. Bad-bad idea, a small voice says. He will-he can hurt her with the arm, she should be afraid, but she is not and she just speaks calmly, waiting for him to respond.

"Can I touch your face?"

Can she-of course she can. They always can. He thinks she means something different but he is tired and she wants a response and he taps once, yes, of course she can, he doesn't know what she wants him to say.

"Okay. First I'm going to take off the bandages to check and re-bandage them and then I'm going to assess your range of motion in your jaw." She reaches forward carefully, peeling off the bandage on his left cheekbone as he stays utterly still and tries to breathe evenly against the ghost of fear. She peers at it before nodding and reaching onto a nearby cart to get more bandages. She presses it against his cheekbone and there are hands on his head, pressing the mask to his face, hold him still-

He makes a small sound of terror, still frozen in place. Her hands retreat, replaced by her soothing voice.

"I'm sorry. I know this must bring up bad memories. I'm not going to do anything you don't want. Take as long as you need."

He tries to breathe, body gradually relaxing as nothing happens and Tamira simply stands back
unthreateningly. *Keep it together, Barnes,* a small voice in his head says. He is—he is Barnes, he thinks. He knows. Somehow.

When he is calmer he taps again, *okay,* he is—he is okay. He is...safe. *No one is going to hurt you.***

Tamira approaches again, movements slow and telegraphed as she brings the bandage to his cheekbone again and quickly secures it in place with the lightest brush of her fingers.

"You're doing great," she says. "Now for the other side." She takes off the old bandage, inspects the wound, and puts a new one on as he swallows down the panic and forces himself to breathe evenly. Then she moves to his jaw, where there were two pins on each side, he knows this, and it is sore and stiff and she prods at it gently.

"Okay, can you open your mouth for me?" Tamira asks, fingers on either side of his jaw. "Only as much as you can without it hurting a lot."

He complies, opening his mouth as his jaw protests. He can only open it a little ways before it's too much, the muscles weak and aching. Tamira's fingers dance along his jawbone, pressing lightly.

"Okay, you can close your mouth." He does, the ache subsiding. "You should try to move your jaw more and more over the next few days as it heals to reduce the stiffness and get those muscles working again. Don't do it too much or if it's too painful. With your healing factor the bone should be healed in a few days but you may have some lingering stiffness that will go away with time and exercise. You should be able to start drinking water, and since you've been on IV nutrition for so long we're going to have to start you with a liquid diet anyway so that won't be a problem. Sound good?"

He taps once. *Yes.*

"Okay. Now lets check on your neck." She carefully unwinds the bandages from his neck, lips pressed into a thin line as she assesses it. The soldier sees Steve swallow and turn away from the corner of his eye. Tamira sets a hand on the metal shoulder. "Can you lean forward a bit so I can see the back?"

He complies, stomach muscles weak as he leans forward, Tamira's hand steadying his shoulder. He is not wearing a shirt but she doesn't seem bothered by the seam where metal meets flesh, hand resting lightly over it.

"Okay, you can sit back." He slumps back against the bed, frustrated by the weakness in his body. Tamira retrieves more bandages, wrapping them around his throat and plastering more to the back of his neck. The skin feels raw and sore but the bandages are soft, nothing like the tight restriction of the collar. He doesn't remember ever not having the collar but he thinks he must have at some point. With Steve. Steve hadn't made him wear the collar, he thinks. It was Hydra that put it on.

Tamira sits back, stripping off her gloves. "While your healing factor is advanced, I'm afraid you're going to have some permanent scarring on your throat."

The soldier blinks. Steve had said so, but now the doctor is telling him the same thing and it sinks in. He doesn't know how to feel about this. He doesn't—he doesn't really have feelings. His body is not his own. But he thinks of the other scars, on his shoulder, and the sense of permanent horror they give him. He thinks that even though the collar is off, he will never really be rid of it. It is...sad, he thinks. Bad. He doesn't...like it. But it is not his choice. He has no control over it. Compared to everything that is going on and the confusion in his head this feels insignificant, like it is of no consequence. He can't care about a few scars when he doesn't even know what's going
on. When he doesn't even know if he's a person or not.

"I can recommend some things to help with it later but for now we're just going to let it heal and then see what we have to work with. Sound good?"

He taps once. Yes.

"Alright, I'll be back to check on you tomorrow." She waves a hand and the other woman steps forward. "Fahtema is going to get everything undone so you can leave. Have a good evening." She turns to Steve and Sam. "And you too."

"Thank you again," Steve says.

She waves a hand. "No need to thank me." With a last smile at the soldier she leaves the room, leaving the short woman behind. Fahtema, he remembers.

Fahtema approaches the bed, more cautious than Tamira. "Hello," she says. "Let's get you untangled from these wires, huh?" She comes around to his right side, reaching for his arm. "I'm just going to take these IVs out. We took everything else out while you were asleep so no need to worry about that." She deftly slides the IVs out, taping gauze over the crook of his elbow and the back of his hand. "Okay. All set. You're going to feel pretty weak when you try to get up but that's normal. You've been through quite an ordeal in the last couple weeks." Seventy years, a small voice in the soldier's head says. "Get some rest and make sure you drink lots of fluids. Steve and Sam have a list of foods you can start to eat so just follow their lead and do what feels okay. Don't worry if you can't eat much at first, it will take a while for your system to get used to food again. I think that's about it. Any questions?"

So many, the soldier thinks, but he is not allowed to ask questions so he doesn't, staring at Fahtema blankly. She blinks, looking unsure for a second before schooling her expression.

"Okay. Just...let someone know if you do. Again, doct-Tamira will check on you tomorrow so if you think of any questions feel free to ask her. Otherwise, you're all set to go. I'll get out of your way." She nods to Steve and Sam who usher her out with murmured words of thanks. Then Steve is standing by his bedside, looking down at him.

"Ready to go?"

Yes. Yes. He taps once. Yes. He manages to swing his legs around, feet bare against the cold floor.

"Want some help getting up?"

Yes. He wants Steve's hands on him, wants to lean into his strong arms and let him take away all his worries. He taps again. Yes. Steve extends his hands palm up, the soldier gripping onto them and using them to lever himself up until he is standing. He sways and Steve's hands come to his shoulders, warm and soft.

"You alright, Buck?" he asks softly. The soldier nods slowly, and Steve moves to the side to let him walk forward. He takes a small step, then another, legs weak and wobbly underneath him. Steve guides him with a hand on his flesh shoulder, Sam following close behind. They get into an elevator and Steve hits a button, sending them upwards. When it opens again they step out into a large living area, with a kitchen off to the side and a hallway set back a ways. Steve leads him over to a comfortable couch, the soldier falling into it ungracefully. Steve pulls a blanket off the back of the couch, handing it to the soldier who drapes it over himself, curling into the corner of the couch and bringing his legs up. Sam comes over with a glass of water, handing it to the soldier.
"Okay, take small sips of this."

The soldier does as he is told, the cool liquid soothing his parched throat. He's forgotten what it's like to be able to drink, or even really drink at all. He has vague memories of sticking his head under a tap in Steve's apartment, nearly choking under the mask. He hands the glass back to Sam when he's done, burrowing deeper into his blanket.

"You want to try some food?" Sam asks. "Nothing much, just some applesauce."

The soldier hesitates before nodding. He doesn't remember applesauce, or even food, but he thinks he is supposed to start eating now.

"Okay. One sec."

Sam disappears into the kitchen and Steve carefully sits on the other end of the couch, watching the soldier.

"How are you feeling, Buck?" he asks.

The soldier just stares in confusion. He doesn't know how to answer that even if he could. Steve seems to understand and amends, eyes sad.

"Thumbs up for good. Good would be no pain and you're feeling safe. Thumbs down for bad, you're in pain or you feel unsafe. Flat hand, rocked like this for 'eh.' In between."

The soldier contemplates this. There is not much pain, certainly less than usual, and he is feeling fairly safe but...everything is still confusing and not...good. He raises his hand into view and makes it flat, rocking it side to side like Steve had done. *Eh.*

Steve nods. "Okay. If there's anything we can do to make it better, let us know."

Sam reappears before the soldier can process that statement, bearing a bowl of something greenish and watery and two bowls of something that smells like...cheese and...pasta. He sets down the bowls on the small table next to the couch, passing the greenish one to the soldier.

"Sorry you can't have what me and Steve are having right now. I promise you'll get to taste my mom's famous mac and cheese someday." He picks up his own bowl, sitting down in an armchair facing the couch as Steve takes the other bowl. The soldier watches them, trying to remember how to eat. He sees Sam take the metal...fork, it's a fork and stab it into the...mac and cheese, bringing a bite to his mouth. The soldier looks at his own bowl, where there is a...spoon set into it. He picks it up with his right hand, the motion feeling familiar as muscle memory kicks in. He scoops a small amount of applesauce and brings it to his mouth, his tongue immediately lighting up with flavor. He can taste, and it is a revelation. He has no memory of tasting and he blinks owlishly as his mouth tingles and the taste elicits memories of...something, but with a different texture and he swallows, the applesauce going down as easy as the water.

"Good?" Sam says and the soldier nods. Yes. Yes. It is good.

He keeps eating, disappointed when it is gone after a few spoonfuls. He sets the empty bowl down on the table, huddling into the blanket.

"I would say you can have more but we have to take it slow," Sam says. "Gradually you can start to eat more and more things and bigger portions but right now it'd just make you sick. You can have as much water as you want, though. Fluids are important."
The soldier nods. He understands. They need him functional.

"So, Barnes." Sam hesitates. "What do you want us to call you? I realized we never asked. Are you okay with Steve calling you Bucky?"

The soldier frowns and then nods. They can call him whatever they want.

Sam nods. "Alright. But if you change your mind, that's okay. You can be whoever you want to be."

That is...too much. He doesn't know who he wants to be, and he's not allowed to choose it. He is whoever they say he is. He doesn't understand what Sam is trying to say, or why, and he can't ask because he can't, it's not allowed-

"I want to talk about what happened this morning," Sam is saying, and what happened—what happened this morning but then he remembers confusion and anger and metal fingers wrapped around Steve's throat and he stiffens because this is it, they're going to punish him, he knew it-

"No one is mad," Sam says, and what, what, what is happening—"We just wanna know what's going on so we can help you. Okay?"

Okay. Okay. Okay. He looks between Steve and Sam nervously, gauging their expressions. They don't look mad, but then Pierce never did either, when he punished him...but no, they are not Pierce, they are good, and safe, and Sam asked okay? and he is supposed to respond, okay, and he nods his head, okay.

"Okay. First things first, let's just start with what you were feeling. Nod your head for each one that applies. Overwhelmed?"

He nods.

"Confused?"

He nods.

"Uh, scared?"

He nods.

"How about angry?"

He nods.

"Anything else?"

He doesn't know. He remembers it as if through a haze of panic and confusion and anger but he doesn't know any other feelings, can't describe them. He shakes his head.

"Okay. That's a lot of stuff to be feeling. Let's move to why you were feeling this way. I wanna ask you something. Do you still think Steve is your handler?"

He tenses, eyes darting between Steve and Sam. He doesn't know, he doesn't, he thought he was but then Sam said he's not and he thinks that is right but it's still so confusing and he looks at Steve and Steve looks...sad and he doesn't want him to be sad and he thinks that Steve doesn't want to be his handler and that is...bad but he supposes, he supposes that Steve isn't his handler even though
he wants him to be because there is too much evidence against it and so he shakes his head. No.

Steve exhales and even Sam sighs in relief. "Good. Good. That's right. Is that why you attacked him? Because he's not your handler?"

The soldier frowns. Yes, but no. He can't-he can't remember. It is just pain and fear and confusion and hatred, hatred for Steve that he can't fathom now. He slowly nods his head and then shakes it. Yes, but there is..more to it. It was just too much, and he didn't-doesn't want to be a person.

"Yes and no?" Sam says.

No. No, it's-it's yes, but different. He shakes his head in frustration.

"Yes, but that's not the only reason?" Sam guesses.

The soldier nods.

"Okay. It is because everything was just a bit too much to handle? I know we kinda turned your whole world upside down."

He nods. Yes. Yes. That is it. Everything is wrong, and too much, and he doesn't know what he's supposed to do.

Sam nods calmly. "That's understandable. I get that, man. We kinda dropped a bunch of stuff on you that you were not prepared to handle. But I think we can find some better ways to express your feelings than strangling people. Okay?"


"If you get overwhelmed, or scared, or confused, all you have to do is say stop, and we'll stop. No matter what. And you're allowed to ask questions. Ask whatever you want. I don't care if you ask what my favorite color is for an hour, you're allowed to ask questions at any time." Sam looks him in the eye. "You got that?"

He is-he is allowed to ask questions? He searches Sam's gaze but finds only truth. He is allowed to ask questions. He swallows, trying to find the burning question that has plagued him since he's been here. His finger taps nervously on his knee.

"W-why?" he asks hoarsely, heart racing.

Sam's expression doesn't change. "Why are you allowed to ask questions?"

He shakes his head. Then nods. "Why-" He gestures to himself, and then to the air around him. "Why...help? Why..." He clenches his hand into a fist, frustrated. He looks at Steve, pleading. "Why?"

Steve looks sad. "We want to help you, Buck. Because-because you deserve it. You're a person. What Hydra did to you was wrong."

The soldier frowns, not satisfied. He doesn't deserve this. He is not a person. That does not make sense. Do they want to use him? He has no other purpose.

"Why?" he repeats.

Steve looks throwed. "Why what?"
He tries to order his thoughts. "Why...me. What...purpose."

"To make you better, Buck," Steve says. "We just want to help you get better."

He is...frustrated. His fingers dig into his leg. "Why. What. Purpose," he grits out.

"No-no purpose, Buck, except making you healthy and whole. That's it. No ulterior motive, I swear. You don't have to do anything you don't want to. It's your life now. You can stay here forever and just sleep and eat all day if that's what you want to do with your life."

The soldier stares. What. What. That is...inconceivable. Impossible. No-no missions? No purpose? They don't want to use him? He looks between Steve and Sam in shock and disbelief. It can't be true. Everyone has an agenda, everyone wants to use him for something. He is a weapon. What other purpose does he have? He doesn't have a-a life. He isn't a person. He doesn't-he doesn't understand. He can do nothing? He doesn't have to do anything ever again? It is...terrifying.

He looks at Steve. "You don't...want me?" Steve doesn't want to use him, wants to hang him up like a defective weapon. Maybe he is defective. Maybe this is why Steve doesn't want to be his handler. He is going to leave the soldier alone forever, without even cryo to soften the blow. It is...the worst punishment. He is...sad, he thinks. He wants Steve to want him. He wants to prove that he is useful, that he isn't defective. He's...good, he's a good boy-

Steve looks crushed. "Of course I want you, Buck. I'd want you no matter what. But I want you as a...friend, not to...use you. You're not what Hydra said you are. You're a person. You don't have to do anything for me."

Friend. Person. He is...neither of these things, but they are what Steve wants. He has-he has to try, for Steve. He doesn't understand, but Steve said I want you and that is all he needs, it is everything he needs and he needs Steve to keep wanting him so he won't leave him, won't leave the soldier alone and afraid. His head aches and his jaw aches and he is suddenly overwhelmed with everything that has happened in the day and the thoughts swirling in his mind.

He swallows and nods, eyes skittering around the room nervously. Okay, Steve. Okay. Metal fingers tap on his knee, over the soft pants. Taptaptap, tap tap, taptap, tap tap tap, taptaptaptaptaptap, taptaptaptaptaptap, tap tap, taptap, tap tap tap tap tap, taptaptap, tap tap, tap tap tap, taptaptap-

"You okay?" Sam questions. "That's a lot to process."

It is. It is a lot. It is too much. He brings up his hand to rub his temple, squeezing his eyes shut. Exhaustion hits and he drops his hand, blinking slowly. He just-he just wants to sleep. It's too much and he wants to sleep.

"Are you tired?" Steve asks.

He nods heavily.

"Okay. It's been a long day and you need to rest. Let's get you to bed." Steve gets up, offering his hand to the soldier. The soldier takes it, blanket still wrapped around his shoulders. Steve helps him stumble down the hallway and to a door on the left, hand gentle on the soldier's shoulder. He ushers him through, into a dimly lit room with a bed that looks soft and comfortable. The soldier falls into it, exhaustion tugging at him.

"You should get some sleep," Steve says. "I'll be right across the hall if you need anything. Okay?"

Okay. Okay. Okay. The soldier nods, burrowing down into the blankets and resting his head back
against the pillows. He can't turn his head or the pillow will press against his tender face but he's too tired to care and lays on his back, his chilled body gradually warming up and the blankets soft against his skin.

"Good night, Buck," Steve says softly. The soldier exhales as Steve's footsteps retreat and the light flicks off, plunging him into darkness. He closes his eyes, drifting off in minutes.
Chapter 20

We were both lone wolves, wandering, never getting it right
No other could match our howl; no other could match our fight
After the long journey of searching every day and every night
Our howls met and danced together in the mist of the moonlight

Two Lone Wolves by Kara S

Steve closes Bucky's door softly, trudging down the hallway and into the living room to sink back down onto the couch with a groan. It's only seven o'clock but this day has felt like a lifetime. Sam is sprawled in the armchair, digging into another portion of mac and cheese that he'd made this afternoon during the surgery. He looks as tired as Steve feels, dark shadows under his eyes and a general air of exhaustion surrounding him. Steve suddenly realizes that he's been so wrapped up in his own worries and dealing with Bucky that he hasn't stopped to ask how Sam is dealing. He knows Sam is a vet, had lost someone just like Steve but hadn't gotten his back. Steve is hit by how lucky he is to have found Bucky and have even a chance at getting him back. Sam will never get that luxury. And here Sam is, being Steve's rock and dealing with Bucky even though he doesn't even know him and Bucky tried to kill him more than once. Hell, he left his home and his job and everything in DC to help Steve, and Steve hasn't given him anything in return unless you count psychological scarring and a bruised throat. Sam is a saint, and Steve thinks he would give him the world if he could.

He clears his throat. "I'm sorry, Sam."

Sam looks up in mild surprise. "What for?"

Steve shrugs. "Everything. I know this isn't what you signed up for, and I feel like I've been putting too much on your shoulders without even considering your feelings. I'm a terrible friend."

Sam sighs, leaning forward. "Steve, look, I appreciate that. You're not wrong. You've got blinders on when it comes to Barnes, and I've been playing therapist for you both. But I did sign up for this, in a way. Heaven help me, you and Barnes are the two broken white boys I've for some reason decided to fix. And yeah, maybe I've got a bit of a savior complex." He shrugs. "I'm a pararescue. And I couldn't save my own dumbass white boy so maybe I'm thinking if I can save you and yours..." He shakes his head. "Point is, we're all fucked up. You can bet your ass if it was Riley in that room that I would be going FUBAR, so I don't blame you. And I know that if I needed anything, you'd have my back no matter what. So yeah, do I really want to be playing therapist to Captain America and his fucked-up assassin boyfriend forever? No. But right now, you both need me, and I've never been able to turn away from someone that needs help. It's just not in my nature. Why do you think I worked at the VA? This is my job, Steve. And sure, this crosses a few ethical boundaries because you're my friend, but this isn't exactly a normal situation so I don't really give a flying fuck." Sam sighs, leaning back against the chair. "Man, I don't even know what I'm trying to say. I'm fucking tired. Just pay me in mac and cheese and I'll be happy forever."

Steve chuckles. "Sam, I will make you mac and cheese every day for the rest of your life if you want."

"I'm gonna hold you to that," Sam says, pointing his fork at Steve. "You feed me, I'll therapize."
Works for me."

Steve laughs, relaxing into the couch. "Seriously though, Sam. I've been kind of a shitty friend. You know pretty much everything about me, and I feel like I know nothing about you. I never asked. So, you know-" he waves his hand tiredly. "Tell me."

Sam raises an eyebrow. "You want my life story, Rogers?"

"Every sordid detail," Steve says with a straight face. Sam looks at him incredulously for a moment before laughing.

"You're a little shit, Rogers, anyone ever tell you that? How do people think you're all stuffy and grandpa-y? I have been deceived. Anyway, anyway, alright. My life story. Well, it all starts in Harlem, 1982..."

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Steve wakes with a stiff neck, blinking to find he's lying on the couch with one arm dangling off and brushing the floor. He pushes himself up, wiping away drool from the corner of his mouth. Looking over he sees Sam asleep in the armchair, head tipped back and mouth slightly open. He smiles slightly, something soft and warm in his chest at the sight. He thinks that anyone who doesn't love Sam Wilson is either stupid or evil. Sam Wilson is a literal angel in human form, a tough yet gentle soldier who's been through some serious shit and still came out kind and selfless. He's so much more than what Steve had assumed on their first meeting, when he'd tried to flirt with the attractive man he always saw on runs. There's layers to him, contradictions and complexities that shouldn't work and yet do. And the fact that he's here, that for some reason he decided to follow Steve, is incomprehensible. He feels like he's sixteen again and wondering what Bucky sees in him, what he'd done to deserve such loyalty and devotion. He swears that he'll find a way to repay Sam, even if he has to make him mac and cheese every day for the rest of his life.

Sam twitches, waking up, and Steve hurriedly looks away. He pulls out his phone, checking the time. 6:12 A.M. They had talked late into the night and at some point fallen asleep, both exhausted. Steve thinks this is the most sleep either of them have gotten in days. He looks back over to see Sam stretching, rubbing at his eyes as he yawns. It's cute.

"Hey," Sam rasps, voice thick with sleep.

"Hey," Steve replies. "Sleep well?"

Sam cracks his neck, grimacing. "Like a baby, though my neck hates me now. Note to self, don't sleep in a chair."

Steve chuckles. "What?" he asks innocently. "I thought you were used to sleeping on rocks."

"Fuck off, Rogers," Sam mutters, but he's grinning. "Shut up and make coffee. I am not moving until I have some."

Steve snaps him a sloppy salute, getting up. "Aye aye."

Sam rolls his eyes. "I hate you."

Steve walks past him and into the kitchen, feeling lighter than he has in days. He plugs in the coffeemaker and measures out a generous amount of coffee, filling it with water and turning it on. It starts to gurgle as Steve gets out the frying pan, grabbing eggs from the fridge and cracking them in over a wedge of butter. Soon the kitchen fills with sizzling and popping and the smells of coffee
and eggs, making Steve's mouth water. When the eggs are done he divides them onto two plates, grabbing two mugs and filling them with coffee. He brings them out into the living room, setting them down on the coffee table as Sam sighs in relief, making grabby hands at the mug. He takes a sip, nodding in approval.

"Barnes still asleep?"

Steve frowns. "I think so. I haven't heard anything."

"Going on twelve hours now. Must need it."

Steve sighs. "Yeah. Yesterday was a long day."

Sam raises his cup. "You can say that again. But hey, surgery's done, no more torture devices. That's good. And he's making progress. He doesn't think you're his handler, and he's actively asking questions. That's a pretty big deal for him."

"Yeah, I guess." Steve thinks this over. He's been so focused on getting Bucky back but he has to step back and realize that the small steps are actually huge. Bucky's not going to bounce back overnight after everything he's been through.

There's a creaking sound and both their heads whip around to see Bucky standing in the hallway, blinking sleepily. He's wearing the same sweatpants but still no shirt, scars on display and bandages stark against his pale skin. Steve remembers the deep burns and puncture wounds from the prongs of the collar that are under the bandages on his neck, and has to drag his eyes away from Bucky's neck before he does something like punch a wall.

"Hey Buck," he says. "How are you feeling?"

Bucky lifts his hand and makes a teetering motion like he had yesterday, expression blank. Eh. Steve nods, reminding himself that Bucky is communicating and this is good. He looks sleepy but calm, and his hair is a verifiable birds nest on his head. It would be funny if the whole situation wasn't so sad. He thinks that the last time Bucky took a shower was when they first found him, and they hadn't even used soap. After a few more days lying in a hospital bed he could probably use a real one.

"Okay. Do you want to get cleaned up and then have some breakfast?"

Bucky nods slowly, eerily still and quiet. The old Bucky was always in motion, with a quick smile and an easy voice. This new Bucky, who moves little and speaks less, is totally foreign to Steve.

"Okay. Let me show you where everything is." Does he remember how? Steve wonders. They only took baths in their small apartment in Brooklyn, the tub doubling as the kitchen table with a board over it, and the communal showers they occasionally got during the war were nothing much to speak of. He doesn't know how Hydra maintained his hygiene and he doesn't really want to know.

He gets up, passing Bucky and heading for the bathroom. Bucky follows like a silent shadow, footsteps almost inaudible on the floor. Steve hesitates in the large bathroom, wondering how best to do this. He doesn't want to get Bucky's bandages wet, and he has a feeling Bucky is going to need help. He spies the large tub on one end of the bathroom and decides that it seems like the best option. This way they can keep Bucky's head and neck out of the water.

"You want to take a bath?" he asks.

Bucky squints at the tub before nodding, brow furrowed. Steve reminds himself again that Bucky
is actually making choices and responding to want questions, which is miles better than before. Really, if he's thinking about it, his progress so far is incredible.

"Okay," he says. "We want to avoid getting your bandages wet so try to keep your head out of the water. I'm going to fill the tub now." He turns on the tap, adjusting the water temperature until it's fairly hot. Bucky's obvious penchant for blankets and history of cryofreeze seem to suggest that he's always cold. He finds a bottle of bath product, squirting a little in until there are pleasant bubbles. There's a knock on the door and he turns, seeing Sam standing there holding something.

"Plastic wrap," Sam says, holding out the package. "To keep the bandages dry."

Steve stands up, wiping his wet hands on his pants as he accepts the package. "Thanks, Sam. That's a good idea." He turns to Bucky, who is still standing in the middle of the bathroom. "You mind if I put some wrap around your neck?"

Bucky blinks and then nods. Taking that as an okay instead of a yes, I do mind, Steve approaches, tearing off a long section of wrap. He reaches forward carefully, telegraphing his movements as he wraps the plastic around the bandage Bucky's neck and tucks it into place. Bucky stays still, eyes watching Steve intently. Steve steps back, surveying his work.

"Alright, looks good. Thanks again, Sam."

Sam nods before ducking out of the room and closing the door behind him.

"You wanna get undressed and get in?" Steve asks Bucky.

Without a word Bucky starts undoing his pants, seemingly uncaring of Steve's presence. It's...unsettling, and Steve turns away slightly to give Bucky privacy. It doesn't matter that before it would have been fine, he knows Bucky didn't get any privacy or consideration from Hydra and feels he needs to try and give him that back. He waits until he hears the sloshing indicating that Bucky is in the bath before turning around.

He sees Bucky relax as he sinks down into the warm water, face bearing a blissful expression. Steve kneels down by the side of the tub, smiling softly.

"Feel good?"

Bucky nods deeply, leaning back against the edge. The water laps just below his neck, hair still dry and tangled.

"Can I wash your hair?" Steve asks.

Bucky blinks and then nods again. Steve goes to the bathroom counter and roots around until he finds a cup and bottles of shampoo and conditioner conveniently stocked by Pepper. He brings them back to the tub, setting them down.

"Okay, I'm going to wet your hair using this cup so your bandages don't get wet, and then we've got these." He holds up the bottles of shampoo and conditioner. "Sound good?"

Bucky nods and Steve leans forward, carefully dipping the cup into the water and starting to pour it over Bucky's hair. He starts at the ends, in case pouring water over Bucky's head turns out to be a bad idea. Gradually he moves up, Bucky calm and complacent under his ministrations. When his hair is sufficiently wet he squeezes a small blob of shampoo onto his hands, moving behind Bucky and working it into his hair. Bucky lets out a sigh and his eyes slip closed as Steve runs his fingers over his scalp in soothing circles. Steve gets a flash of Pierce petting Bucky's hair but shoves it
away. This is nothing like that. Bucky knows he isn't his handler, and he made the choice to let Steve do this. It's obviously something Bucky wants, and Steve had washed Bucky's hair all the time back in Brooklyn.

When the shampoo is done he rinses it using the cup, Bucky looking supremely relaxed. He does the conditioner next, detangling a few strands with his fingers. He assumes Hydra just never bothered to cut Bucky's hair, although they seem to have kept his face fairly shaven. Probably because of the mask. It's starting to grow in now, his chin covered in stubble except for the small holes under the bandages where the screws were. His skin is too pale, as if he hasn't been out in the sun in years, which he hasn't. There are lines on his face that are unfamiliar, reminding him that they have been apart for years. There are extra crinkles around Bucky's eyes offset by deep shadows, but his face is relaxed and his eyelashes flutter against his skin, long and dark. Steve finishes rinsing out the conditioner from Bucky's hair but keeps massaging his scalp gently, wanting this moment to last forever. Bucky is boneless under his hands, head resting against the lip of the tub and eyes closed in a humbling display of trust.

Finally the water starts to go cold and Steve stops, Bucky's eyes opening as Steve gets up and retrieves the fluffiest towel he can find.

"Ready to get out?" he asks softly.

Bucky frowns slightly but levers himself using the sides of the tub, Steve coming forward to wrap him in the towel. He realizes Bucky needs clothes and steps back, turning to grab some.

"I'll be back in a sec. Just grabbing some clothes."

He hurries to his bedroom, tearing open a new package of boxer briefs and selecting a pair of his black sweatpants and a grey t-shirt that he thinks will fit Bucky. When he returns to the bathroom Bucky is still standing where he left him, dripping on the floor. Steve helps him dry off, and thankfully Bucky is able to dress himself, which is another point for functioning human being and Steve cheers internally. He unwinds the plastic wrap from Bucky's neck, the bandages still passably dry although Bucky's hair is dripping down his neck and dampening his shirt. At least he's clean and more content than Steve's seen him yet, no longer exuding a fearful, nervous air.

"Ready to eat some food?" Steve asks.

Bucky nods, eyes clear and bright. Steve smiles, feeling hope burgeoning.

"Alright, let's see what Sam cooked up."

Bucky follows him to the kitchen, where Sam is stirring something on the stove. He turns at their arrival, benevolent smile in place.

"Hey, you look good, Barnes. I've got some soup for you to try. It's butternut squash, easy to eat and easy on your stomach. Want some?"

Bucky nods, following Steve's lead and sitting down at the table. Sam brings out bowls of steaming soup, giving him and Steve some too, probably to make Bucky more comfortable. Steve sees his eyes flick to them as if waiting to be told to eat and has to compose his expression.

"Go ahead, Buck," he says. "You don't have to wait for us."

It seems this was what Bucky was waiting for as he immediately picks up his spoon, taking a tentative mouthful. Steve sees his eyes widen at the taste and thinks that to Bucky, every single thing is new because he doesn't remember. He's like a child, if that child was a thirty-year-old
brainwashed assassin.

"Good?" Sam questions.

Bucky nods emphatically, taking another spoonful. Steve digs into his own soup, finding it thick and rich and mouthwateringly delicious. He blesses Sam's cooking skills again. This is so much better than anything they used to eat.

His phone buzzes and he pulls it out, seeing a text from Tony.

Dr. Price good to check up on Tin Man?

He looks up, drawing Bucky's gaze. "Hey, is it okay if Tamira comes for a checkup?"

Bucky nods and Steve types out a reply.

Yes.

Tony's response comes only a second later.

Okay. Will be up in fifteen.

They all finish their soup. Bucky's portion suitably small for his adjusting system. Steve washes the breakfast dishes as Sam dries and puts them away, Bucky staying where he is as if unsure what he's supposed to be doing, which seems to be the norm. His utter shock and confusion last night when Steve had told him that he didn't have to do anything ever again had been heartbreaking, as was his broken you don't want me? Steve wants to find all the people who made Bucky believe he was just a weapon and strangle them slowly. Very slowly.

The elevator dings, Dr. Price stepping through with a medical bag. She smiles at them as she approaches, put-together as always.

"Good morning. How are you?"

"I'm well, thank you," Steve replies. "How are you?"

"Oh, I'm doing just fine." She stops by the table, smiling at Bucky. "How are you feeling?"

Bucky makes the same see-saw motion with his hand, indicating he's not good and not bad. It's the best Steve can do to assess him, as Bucky isn't very talkative.

"Alright," Dr. Price says. "Does anything hurt?" Bucky hesitates before nodding slightly. "Can you show me where?" Dr. Price presses.

Bucky points with a finger to his neck, his face, and his head before repeating the see-saw hand gesture. A little, Steve thinks he's trying to say. It's incredible, how he's actively trying to communicate even though he's not using words. He's in there, and he's smart, even if it seems like no one is home.

Dr. Price nods. "Okay. I can give you some more pain medication before I leave. For now, can I check how you're healing?"

Bucky nods and Dr. Price sets down her medical bag, opening it up and withdrawing more bandages. Bucky shifts in his chair so his right arm is against the table, facing Dr. Price as she stands. She puts on gloves, Bucky's eyes flicking to her hands with a faint glimmer of nervousness. Then she peels back the first bandage on his cheekbone, revealing nothing but a small puncture
wound that looks too benign for the pain and horror it inflicted. It looks to be closing up already, though Steve knows it goes all the way down into the bone.

Dr. Price nods. "This looks good. With your healing factor, I'd say this should be completely healed in a couple of days. I'm just going to put a small dressing on it, more like a bandaid than anything." She takes out a small white square with adhesive around the edges, pressing it onto the wound. Bucky has tensed up again, metal finger twitching restlessly on his leg. Dr. Price moves to the other side, repeating the process. Finally she moves to his jaw, peeling back the long bandage that runs the length of it. There are two puncture wounds there on each side, interrupting the growing stubble on Bucky's face. Dr. Price takes off both sides at once, the wounds looking similarly healed to the ones in his cheekbones.

"Can you open your mouth?" Dr. Price asks. "I want to see if your range of motion has improved."

Bucky complies, opening up his mouth more than he had yesterday. Steve can see the edges of his sharp teeth, still white and strong. Did Hydra brush his teeth? he wonders. That seems like a dangerous task.

"Can you move it side to side?"

Bucky moves his jaw, the faintest wince crossing his features.

"Okay, that's excellent. You can relax. It looks like you have pretty good range of motion, though it's probably still pretty sore. You should be okay to speak now, just don't overdo it. The pain meds I'm going to give you should help with that. I'm going to put the same small dressings on these." Dr. Price rips open another package and Steve sees Bucky flinch slightly. She presses the dressings on as Bucky sits stock still, body tense and finger tapping out his service number on his knee.

"Done. Now for the throat." Dr. Price reaches forward to undo the dressing and Steve sees the moment Bucky panics, eyes going wide and metal hand lunging forward to wrap around Dr. Price's throat. Dr. Price freezes, hands in the air, eyes wide but admirably calm. Bucky's hand is loose around her throat, not squeezing, and Steve takes that as good news. Bucky's eyes are dilated and terrified and he's breathing heavily but he doesn't look murderous.

"I'm sorry," Dr. Price says. "I didn't mean to scare you. I'm not going to hurt you."

"Hey Barnes, remember we talked about not strangling people?" Sam says. "You just gotta say stop, or ask. No need for violence. No one's gonna hurt you."

"Stop," Bucky rasps, still breathing heavily. He releases Dr. Price, almost trembling as he watches her warily as if expecting her to hurt him. Dr. Price just backs away slowly, hands raised, and Bucky takes a shuddering breath.

"Good. That was real good," Sam says calmly. "Take as long as you need. When you're ready, just let us know."

Bucky takes several more deep breaths before nodding, eyes still wary. Dr. Price inches forward slowly.

"Stop," Bucky says. Dr. Price stops. Bucky exhales, looking stunned, as if he can't believe it actually worked. He looks around to Steve and Sam and then back to Dr. Price, eyes wondering. It's like he's made a revelation, his own little experiment, and it's so profoundly sad that Steve wants to cry. Bucky's literally just figured out that he can tell people to stop. That people will actually listen, instead of just restraining him and doing whatever they want. He's so used to not
having any say or bodily autonomy that the simple act of someone stopping when he says so is like
someone just gave him the keys to the universe. Steve sees Bucky relax, panic draining from his
eyes and replaced by something settled and hopeful.

Bucky looks up, meeting Dr. Price's eyes. "Sorry."

Dr. Price smiles, Steve's own emotions reflected in her eyes and voice slightly choked. "It's okay.
No harm done. But thank you."

Bucky squints at her. "Okay."

"Are you okay for me to keep going?"

Bucky nods. Dr. Price steps forward again, movements telegraphed. She undoes the bandages
around Bucky's neck, Bucky remarkably calmer than earlier. It seems knowing that he has some
modicum of control has done wonders for his psyche. Who knew.

As the bandages unwind Steve swallows, steeling himself. He'd watched the surgery, had seen
them take off the collar, and it had resulted in another round with a garbage can. The collar had had
small prongs on the inside for the shocks, and because it was so tight the collar had gradually
become embedded into Bucky's neck, the prongs making deep puncture wounds that had kept
healing around them and were now almost permanent. Add to that the constant use of the collar and
the flesh on Bucky's neck had been burned badly over and over, resulting in layers of burn scars
that kept multiplying as Bucky's body kept trying to heal them but couldn't keep up. Steve had
watched as they had had to peel the collar away from Bucky's neck even after it was no longer
casped because it was embedded into his flesh so deeply. Where it had once been was now red,
raw tissue and burn scars dotted with deep puncture wounds, and Steve has to take a deep breath to
compose himself as the bandages fall away. He's glad Dr. Price has such a poker face and is used
to dealing with gruesome injuries, because he would not be able to keep himself calm enough to
actually treat it and look Bucky in the eye without having to punch something, or someone.

Dr. Price just makes a humming sound, face implacable. "Alright, this is healing but will take
longer than the others. No problems swallowing?" Bucky shakes his head. "Okay. Good. Now,
does this hurt more or less than your face?"

Bucky frowns. "Less. What? Steve thinks. His neck is definitely worse than his face, and yet he's
always seemed unbothered by it in comparison.

Dr. Price nods thoughtfully. "I thought as much. You may have some nerve damage because of the
scar tissue. Can if I touch it so I can see how much you feel?" Bucky nods. "Okay, I'm going to
press lightly and I want you to tell me if you feel it. Okay?"

"Okay."

Dr. Price reaches forward, pressing against the scar tissue. "Do you feel this?"

"No," Bucky says, and Steve doesn't know if that's better or worse than being able to feel it.

"Here?"

"No."

"Here?" Dr. Price moves towards one of the puncture wounds, where the scarring is less
pronounced.
"Yes."

"Okay, does that hurt?"

"Yes."

"Okay, I won't press. How about here?"

There's a pause. Bucky raises his hand, making the see-saw motion.

"A little bit?" Dr. Price questions.

"Yes."

"Okay." She moves to the back of his neck. "Here?"

Bucky winces as she presses. "Yes."

"I see that hurt. Sorry. This is the surgical incision so that makes sense. It's healing pretty well though, so that pain should go away in a couple days."

Dr. Price moves all the way around Bucky's neck, assessing his feeling. In much of it, Bucky doesn't feel anything at all, and Steve thinks that's almost a blessing. Finally Dr. Price finishes her examination and re-bandages Bucky's neck, wrapping it in layers of white.

"Okay, you're all set. I'm going to give you some pain medication to take the edge off, and I'll be back tomorrow to check these again. Sound good?" Bucky nods. Dr. Price pulls out a bottle of pills, shaking one out. "Okay, these are specially made for your metabolism. Do you know how to swallow pills?" Bucky shakes his head. "Okay, we'll see if you can and then if not we'll crush them up and put them in something. Basically, you're going to want to put it on your tongue fairly far back and then kind of throw it back into your throat as you take a drink of water. Do you think you can try that?"

Bucky nods and Sam comes over with a glass of water, handing it to him. Bucky takes the proffered pill, putting it into his mouth and taking a drink. Steve sees his throat work as he swallows and he sets the glass down, nodding.

"Great," Dr. Price says. "That makes it easier. Take one once a day, preferably around the same time. Any questions about anything?"

Bucky hesitates, and then brings a hand to his chest, tapping with his finger as his gaze darts to Steve questioningly. Dr. Price's brow furrows, confused.

"I don't know what that means."

Bucky is still looking at Steve, hand over his chest. "Can I-"

Steve suddenly understands. Bucky wants to shift.

"You want to know if you can shift?" Steve clarifies for Dr. Price.

Bucky nods, looking nervous. Dr. Price's face clears and she looks thoughtful.

"Well, the only thing is that it would mess up your bandages. Can you wait a couple days until they're okay to take off?" Bucky frowns slightly but nods. Dr. Price smiles in relief. "Alright. If that's it then I'll see you tomorrow, about the same time."
Bucky nods. Steve reaches out to shake Dr. Price's hand, Sam doing the same. "Thanks as always," Steve says. "I don't know what we would have done without you."

Dr. Price waves a hand. "It's my pleasure to help." She turns to Bucky. "Get plenty of rest and fluids, okay?"

"Okay," Bucky says quietly. He seems to think a moment, brow furrowing, before the softest "thank you" passes his lips. Steve thinks his heart is going to explode. Bucky's been brainwashed for seventy years and yet one of the first things he remembers to say is "thank you," to someone who probably brings up bad memories at that. It's extraordinary.

Dr. Price looks uncharacteristically affected. "No, thank you," she says gently. With that she turns to leave, elevator doors closing behind her.

***

Steve is sitting on the couch, trying to pretend he doesn't notice Bucky shifting closer ever so slowly. Over the past hour Bucky has migrated from his corner of the couch to only a foot away from Steve, like a cat who wants affection but doesn't want you to know. Steve is sketching as Sam reads in the armchair, and they keep making eye contact as Bucky creeps towards Steve surreptitiously. Steve decides it's best to just pretend like nothing is happening in case he spooks Bucky and destroys their burgeoning trust. Bucky's arm barely brushes Steve's as he shifts closer, like some sort of heat seeking blanket burrito that almost makes Steve want to laugh. He doesn't, continuing to sketch Bucky as Bucky peers over his shoulder at the drawing, blanket-covered arm pressed against Steve and breaths audible in Steve's ear. Steve relishes the contact, Bucky a solid warm weight against his side that reminds him he is here, with Steve, alive and fairly well, not dead or missing.

Bucky presses closer, and Steve has the thought that Bucky is starved for touch but doesn't know how to ask for it. He's certainly always been tactile, more so after the wolf, but then there was the horrible petting from his handlers that makes Steve sick and he's not sure which thing is the cause of Bucky's desire for contact. If it's the first, then he's happy to give it to Bucky. But if it's the second...he can't do that again. Even if Bucky wants it.

"You used to...before." Bucky's soft voice startles him, breaking him out of his thoughts. He turns slightly to look at Bucky, who has an expression of deep contemplation on his face.

"What, Buck?"

Bucky extends a hand from the blanket burrito, pointing to Steve's drawing. "Before. Remember."

"You remember me drawing before?" Bucky nods, and Steve's heart soars. He nods, trying not to be too enthusiastic and scare Bucky. "Yeah. Yeah, Buck. I used to draw back in Brooklyn. Mostly you."

Bucky looks to be thinking this over, brow furrowed. "I-I remember. You. Smaller?"

Steve nods. "Yeah, I was real shrimpy before the serum. That's right." Against his better judgement, he asks, "What else do you remember?"

Bucky frowns. "I don't...know. Fla-flashes. You." His face darkens. "Hydra." He squints, looking frustrated. "I don't-I don't know. I can't-"

Steve swallows. "You don't-you don't have to remember right now. It's okay."
Bucky frowns, pressing closer to Steve. "We...you..." He trails off, expression almost pleading. "Can-?"

Steve thinks he knows what Bucky is asking. "Whatever you want, Buck," he says. "But it has to be your choice. I'm not going to do anything first."

Bucky scans Steve's eyes before carefully scooting back just enough so that his whole burritoed form can flop down on the couch, head resting in Steve's lap. Steve cautiously sets a hand on his head and Bucky exhales, eyes closing. Steve begins to stroke Bucky's hair, feeling him relax completely. This seems to be what Bucky needs, for better or for worse. He looks up, catching Sam's eye, but Sam only nods reassuringly with a small smile. Steve keeps stroking Bucky's hair until he hears his breaths even out as he drops off to sleep, utterly trusting and content.
Chapter 21

The forenoon is burn-faced and wandering
   And I am the death of the moon

Below my countenance the bell of the night has broken
   And I am the new divine wolf

*The Divine Wolf* by Adonis (Ali Ahmed Said)

Bucky spends the day napping on Steve's lap in between eating more soup, and it's better than anything he remembers. He doesn't have to do anything, and he is warm and comfortable and Steve strokes his hair and it is perfect. No missions, no orders, no pain and punishments and confusion. Just soft blankets and warm food and Steve and Sam who are gentle and safe and good.

When evening comes it is Sam who shows him how to brush his teeth, something he doesn't remember doing. His mouth no longer tastes like river water and instead is minty and clean and he is satisfied with this new procedure. He falls into the comfortable bed again, drifting off to Steve's murmured, "Night, Buck."

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-He is walking quickly down an alley, following the sounds of fighting. He rounds the corner to see Steve get punched in the face, Bucky's blood immediately starting to boil. He grabs the bully by the arm, wrenching him away and punching him in the face. The bully runs away, holding his nose as blood streams down his face.

"I had 'im on the ropes," Steve pants, wincing as he wipes blood from his lower lip. His eye is rapidly purpling. Bucky rolls his eyes, reaching forward to tilt Steve's chin up and inspect the damage.

"Jesus Christ, kid. You gotta fight every mook you come across?"

Steve scowls, eyes burning with righteous fire. "He was disrespectin' Bonnie. Someone had to do somethin'."

Bucky sighs, slinging his arm around Steve. "I know, Steve, I know. But why's it gotta be you? You're gonna be the death of me someday, I swear."

-He is running through the woods, paws light against the ground and dog tags clinking softly. Steve runs beside him, the sounds of gunfire and explosions behind them.-

-He is strapped to a table, mumbling something over and over. "...32557038. James Barnes, Sergeant. 32557038...".-

-He is in a white room, finger tapping incessantly against the floor. Taptaptap, tap tap, taptap, tap tap tap, taptaptaptaptap, taptaptaptaptap, tap tap, taptap, tap tap tap tap tap, taptaptap, tap tap, tap tap tap, taptap- -

-He is in a cold grey room, surrounded by guards. He snarls, teeth bared and lips pulled back.
There are footsteps, and a scent, familiar and calming. A man steps forward, and he is soft voice and gentle hands and the wolf goes forward, he knows this, he knows him but something in him snaps and his teeth are around the man’s throat-

-He is falling. He is falling through the air, Steve’s voice following him down, and it is cold, red blood on white snow-

-He is laughing, and Steve is there, and they are laughing and it smells like gunpowder and cigarettes and there are other men and they laugh, too, but he can’t make out what they are saying-

-He is in the chair, and everything is pain, they are taking it away-

-Taptaptap, tap tap, taptap, tap tap tap, taptaptaptaptap, taptaptaptaptap, tap tap, taptap, tap tape tap tap tap tap tap, taptaptap, tap tap, tap tap tap, taptap-

-He is in the chair and there are hands holding him down, the mask pressed to his face. "Hold him still," someone says-

-He crumples to the ground, sobbing. "Steve. Steve-"

-"Hey Buck," Steve says, and he is blonde hair and blue eyes but small and his fingers are stained with graphite and his eye blackened with bruises-

-He is on the table, and they are cutting into him and he can’t move and everything is pain and he can see his own bones inside his body-

-Taptaptap, tap tap, taptap, tap tap tap, taptaptaptaptap, taptaptaptaptap, tap tap, taptap, tap tap tap tap tap tap tap, taptaptap, tap tap, tap tap tap, taptap-

-Keep it together, Barnes-

-He is in the cage, and there is only pain-

-Taptaptap, tap tap, taptap, tap tap tap, taptaptaptaptap, taptaptaptaptap, tap tap, taptap, tap tap tap tap tap tap tap, taptaptap, tap tap, tap tap tap, taptap-

-"This is lesson one," Pierce says, and everything is pain-

-Pierce’s hand cracks against his face-

-Taptaptap, tap tap, taptap, tap tap tap, taptaptaptaptap, taptaptaptaptap, tap tap, taptap, tap tap tap tap tap tap tap, taptaptap, tap tap, tap tap tap, taptap-

-Pierce’s hand strokes through his hair-

-"It’s okay, valchonak," someone says-

-White walls and white floor and his own voice, "make it stop, make it stop-"

-Taptaptap, tap tap, taptap, tap tap tap, taptaptaptaptap, taptaptaptaptap, tap tap, taptap, tap tap tap tap tap tap, taptaptap, tap tap, tap tap tap, taptap-

-Everything is pain, and he is screaming-

-He is screaming-
-He is screaming-

He is screaming.

-ake up, Bucky, wake up." There is a hand on his shoulder and he lunges, shifting in midair and closing his teeth around the person's throat, mind white with panic and rage and confusion. He pins the man to the floor with his paws, jaws still clamped around his throat but he can't-he can't kill him, can't rip his throat out, he smells familiar, tastes familiar and the wolf thinks there is something he is supposed to know but everything is whirling and confusion and he is panting and he doesn't know where he is or what is happening but there is too much in his head-too much, he wants it to stop, make it stop why won't it stop-

There are footsteps and someone rushes into the room, making the wolf snarl with his teeth still around the man's throat.


He feels the man choking under his teeth, the scent of blood filling his nose. It is-it is wrong. He knows this scent. He knows this voice. No one is going to hurt you. It is-it is Sam, who is okay? and gentle hands and steady voice, and this is-this is Steve underneath him, who is blonde hair and blue eyes and hey Buck and they are good and he is safe and he looks down and sees Steve, who is meeting his gaze pleadingly and oh God, what is he doing-

He releases Steve, stumbling backwards into the corner of the room and whining softly. He-he hurt Steve, he hurt him, no, it is...bad, he doesn't want to hurt Steve but he did and they will punish him and he deserves it because he hurt Steve-

"-okay, Bucky, it's okay." Steve pushes himself to his feet, one hand to his throat where puncture wounds from the wolf's teeth are bleeding sluggishly. "I'm okay. I shouldn't have tried to wake you up. You were having a nightmare."

The wolf whines, pressing himself further into the corner. His head is still swirling with confusion, pounding in time with his racing heart, and he hurt Steve and it is bad and everything is bad and he wants it to stop-

Sam is speaking lowly. "Steve, let's get you patched up first. Let things settle. Come on." Louder he addresses the wolf. "I'm gonna patch up Steve, okay? Just try and breathe. Everything's okay. We're just gonna go over to the bathroom for a minute."

Steve shoots the wolf a look before letting Sam tug him out of the room. The wolf stays where he is, trying to breathe as Sam instructed. He hears Sam and Steve rustling around in the bathroom, running water and tearing sounds, and the smell of antiseptic stings his nose. Sam and Steve are speaking softly, words inaudible to the wolf. Finally after a few minutes they return, a white bandage on Steve's throat. They stop a distance away from the wolf, expressions wary.

"You with us?" Sam asks.

What. Is he-is he with them? He doesn't-he doesn't know, can't respond, can't speak, he doesn't know-

Steve takes a step forward and he growls, no, stay away Steve, he doesn't want to hurt him and he can't handle-he can't do this and it's too much and he needs Steve to back away and he's-he's trapped, he feels trapped and he is-he is erratic, unstable-
Steve backs up, hands raised. "Okay. Okay."

"Do you want Steve to leave?" Sam asks.

What. What. Does he—does he want Steve to leave? No. Yes. NO. Yes. He doesn't—he doesn't know. It is—it is too much, and Steve is too much and he needs—he needs Steve to be safe and he nods his head, yes, he wants Steve to leave because—because he is dangerous—

Brief emotion flashes across Steve's expression before he nods and disappears through the doorway, leaving Sam and the wolf alone. Sam lowers himself to the floor, sitting cross-legged.

"Alright. We're gonna sit here till you're okay. Take as long as you need. No one is gonna hurt you, or do anything. I'm just gonna be here if you need me."

He needs—he needs....something. Someone. Soft voice and gentle hands. He needs someone to take it away, to pet his head and tell him it's okay, valchonak—

He slinks forward, approaching Sam and lying down in front of him, nose nudging his knee. He looks up at him pleadingly, whining. Please, make it stop, please. Sam just looks down at him sadly.

"I'm not your handler, man. I know what you're doing, and I am not gonna play into that shit."

The wolf whines, frustrated. Sam won't—Sam won't take it away, won't pet his head and reassure him and he's—he's punishing him, he thinks, and it hurts and he just wants Sam to tell him it's okay but Sam said—Sam said he's not his handler, he doesn't have a handler, because—because that was Hydra and this is not and he is allowed to ask questions and say stop and do nothing and this isn't Hydra, this isn't—

He springs to his feet, growling in confused anger. What. What. This isn't—this isn't Hydra. What the—what the fuck is he doing. Keep it-keep it together, Barnes. Sam is not his handler. Sam is safe and good and gentle hands and steady voice and okay? and the wolf likes Sam but Sam is not his handler and he doesn't—he doesn't have to do things and he hurt Steve but he didn't hurt Sam and Sam is here and he said he's here if you need me and yes, yes, the wolf needs Sam but not like a handler or maybe like a handler but he doesn't know the difference and he just needs Sam and he stumbles forwards, climbing into Sam's lap and pressing himself against Sam's chest. The contact grounds him and he trembles as he presses closer to Sam, smelling oranges and antiseptic and Sam and hearing his heartbeat under his head.

"Oof," Sam says. "You are...way too big for this." But his arms come up around the wolf and the wolf flops down, sprawled across Sam's lap as he exhales in relief. "You sure this isn't some handler shit?" Sam asks, and the wolf growls in response. "Alright," Sam says. "Just checking." He starts to pet the wolf, smoothing a hand over his real shoulder. "You're real fluffy, you know that?" He runs a hand over the wolf's head, scratching behind an ear. "And you got that whole ragged ear thing going, like super badass, but you're just so fucking fluffy. I swear to god, you're getting white hair all over my black pants. I'm gonna need a lint roller after this."

The wolf relaxes as Sam chatters, his voice even and soothing and hand still stroking his head. Sam's voice turns serious. "Okay, now that we're cuddling, let's talk about what just happened. You had a nightmare, Steve woke you up, you freaked. Right?"

The wolf nods against Sam.

"Okay, that's okay, happens to the best of us. So you went wolfy and went for Steve's throat. Little
terrifying, but point is you didn't actually kill him. That's good. Still pretty shaken up afterwards, I get that. Was it because you realized that you had hurt Steve?"

The wolf nods again.

"Okay. That's understandable. But Steve doesn't blame you, I know that. It's normal to lash out when you're scared. The main point is that you didn't hurt him badly. Something in you stopped you from ripping his throat out, even though you could have. That's a positive. A success. And now you're cuddling with me because you need contact when you're upset, right?"

The wolf nods.

"Okay. As long as you're not substituting us for your handlers, or Hydra. That's not okay. I know they gave you physical contact but it was only to manipulate you. I need you to understand the difference. When you came at me and did that submission thing, that wasn't okay. You don't have to do that. This, right here, is okay. You wanted contact, so you actively asked and I gave. No power imbalance or expectation. You understand?"

He-he thinks he does. Maybe. He nods hesitantly.

"Good. That's good. You need to stay here another minute?"

The wolf nods and Sam keeps stroking his fur, hands soft and steady. The wolf's head is still whirling with the new and old memories from his dreams, a kaleidoscope of sound and images and emotions. Some are...good, but others are not so good. Bad. He remembers pain, so much pain, and anger, and confusion, and he presses closer to Sam in a vain attempt to stop the onslaught of emotions. Sam murmurs soothingly as he pets him and the wolf tucks his head into Sam's side.

"You ready to get up?" Sam questions.

The wolf whines, pressing closer. No. No. He can't he can't let Sam go. The contact is the only thing holding him together, like tape over shattered glass, and he knows if he moves he will fall apart again. He is trembling, the adrenaline wearing off and memories rising to the forefront now that he is not in a blind panic. He is...terrified, he thinks, everything is terrifying and overwhelming and Sam is the only safe thing he has right now and he can't move, can't let go, needs Sam to hold him and tell him it's okay even though it's not, it's not, it's not okay-

"Alright. Alright," Sam says. "Bad nightmare?"

The wolf whines in response, breaths shallow and body trembling. Yes. Yes. Bad-bad nightmares. Bad memories. He doesn't-he doesn't want them, he doesn't want to remember, make it stop-

"That's rough. I wish I could tell you it gets better soon, but it'll probably get a whole lot worse as your memories come back. The thing is, you got what, two or three years of memories of Hydra? Yeah, that's a lot, and it sucks, but you also have over two decades of mostly good memories before that. That's what you gotta focus on, in the end. A lot of bad memories are gonna come back, but also a lot of good. You just gotta get through this. Steve and I are gonna be right here with you, okay?"

Okay. Okay. Okay. Steve and Sam are here and they are good and safe and they don't hurt him and they don't make him do things, and everything is bad but they are good, it is okay-

"Speaking of Steve, you want him to come back in? It's okay if you don't."

Yes. Yes. The wolf wants Steve, needs Steve. He nods his head, yes, please-
"Okay." Sam manages to pull out his phone with one hand, typing something out. A minute later footsteps approach and Steve's scent hits the wolf's nose, familiar and soothing but tinged with blood and that makes him feel...bad but Steve is here and that is all that matters.

Steve sits cross-legged across from Sam, leaning back against the side of the bed. Blood stains the white bandages on his throat.

"Hey Buck," he says cautiously, voice rough. "Feeling better?"

The wolf clambers off Sam's lap and into Steve's, pressing his head to his chest and whining. *Sorry,* he thinks. *Sorry.*

Steve's hands come up to the wolf's shoulders, resting lightly. "It's okay Buck," he says, reading his mind like always. "I'm okay."

The wolf turns and presses his side against Steve, lying down across his lap. Sam gets up, stretching with a groan before resettling next to Steve, shoulders pressed together and the wolf's head moving to his outstretched legs. Sam pets his head as Steve's hands start to stroke down his back, the wolf finally starting to relax. He closes his eyes, exhaling as the memories die away and are replaced by the feeling of *safe.* He is safe. No one is going to hurt him. Steve and Sam are here. Everything is *okay.*
He awakens with a jerk, dream fading quickly. He is—he is lying on something soft and warm. Steve. His head is resting in Sam's lap, Sam's hand still tangled in his fur. He raises his head, dislodging Sam's hand and waking him up. Sam's head is pillowed on Steve's shoulder and Steve's head resting back against the side of the bed, mouth slightly open. Sam blinks, bringing up a hand to rub sleep out of his eyes. Steve starts to wake as well at the movement, hand twitching on the wolf's back.

Sam blinks down at the wolf sleepily. "Morning, Barnes. Or, well, second morning. But the last one doesn't count. Three a.m. is too goddamned early to qualify as morning."
The wolf gets up, body stiff and sore and nervous energy thrumming through him from whatever forgotten dream had woken him. Sam groans, similarly stretching as he levers himself off the floor awkwardly.

"God you're heavy. I can't feel my legs."

"And this is him at half weight," Steve adds, smiling down at the wolf softly as he gets up with considerably more grace. "Shoulda seen him during the war. Used to sit on me to keep me from running off sometimes."

Sam snorts. "I would've liked to see that. Looks like I'm not the only one who knows you're a dumbass."

Steve laughs, shrugging. "I can't even argue that." He pulls out his phone, squinting at the screen. "Shit. We overslept. Doct-Tamira will be here any second."

Sam's gaze swivels to the wolf. "Shit. The bandages. I didn't even think."

Steve's eyes widen. "Oh god. Me neither. I didn't notice under all that fur. Buck, you wanna shift for your exam?"

The wolf feels...unstable. He is jumpy, body tense and wired with anxiety, skin crawling uncomfortably. He backs away slightly, suddenly repulsed by closeness, and shakes his head vehemently. No. No, he-he can't, he can't-he feels like the wolf, the soldier gone and replaced by animal instinct, and he just-he can't, he doesn't want to be the soldier, he is-he is the wolf, he is not human-

"Okay. Okay," Sam says, eying him with concern. Suddenly there's the sound of the elevator doors opening. Sam takes a breath. "Well, she's just gonna have to roll with it. Come on, let's go."

The wolf follows a little ways behind Steve and Sam as they troop out of the bedroom and down the hallway to find Tamira at the kitchen table, looking around worriedly. She brightens when she sees them but then her eyes fall on the bloodstained bandages on Steve's neck, their general air of dishevelment and sleepiness, and finally the wolf, and her eyes widen in surprise and worry.

"Uh, hello," she manages, eyes still drawn to the wolf. "This is...unexpected."

The wolf sees Steve grimace as he reaches the kitchen table, sinking into a chair on the other side as Sam takes another next to him. "Yeah. We had an..incident." Tamira's eyes flick to his throat. "How's your veterinary knowledge?"

Tamira seems to compose herself. "I'm sure I can manage." She turns to the wolf, still at the end of the hallway. "Hello. Can I examine you again?"

The wolf creeps forward, coming to a stop by the table. His heart is racing slightly, anxiety flooding his veins though he doesn't know why. Tamira crouches down in front of him, eyes warm and wondering.

"Okay, does anything hurt?"

The wolf considers before shaking his head slightly. Pain levels are acceptable.

"Good. That's good. Now it looks like all your bandages are off but I can't see the wounds very well through your fur from here. Mind if I take a peek?"
His anxiety ratchets up but he shakes his head again, eyes trained on Tamira warily. She reaches towards his face and there are hands holding him down, forcing the muzzle over his nose as he whimpers-

He skitters backwards, blind panic taking over as he pants for breath, body shaking with fear and adrenaline. His eyes rove wildly but all he sees are grey walls and hands closing in, shoving him into the cage and everything is pain-

"-kay, it's okay. Just breathe, Barnes. No one is going to hurt you."

That is—that is a lie. They always— they always hurt him. Guards, surrounding him, jeering as they aim kicks at his defenseless body-

There is someone moving, crouching in front of him and he snarls. Soft voice and gentle hands, crouched down, a hand outstretched, his teeth in his throat-

"-just me. It's Sam. I'm not going to hurt you. See?" The figure sits down on the floor, cross-legged. "You're safe. Everything's okay."

It's okay, valchonak. I'm here-

The wolf snarls again, baring his teeth. No. No. Make it— make it stop. He doesn't— he doesn't want, he won't, he remembers, he had—he had killed him, his handler, he killed him— soft voice and gentle hands— he ripped his throat out, he killed him but why, why did he kill him, he was—he was soft voice and gentle hands and he took care of the wolf and he gave him pets and treats but also— also there was pain but remember you deserve this and he did, he did deserve it, you're so difficult sometimes, valchonak, and he killed him and they took it away, they took him away but why, why why why why it's too much he doesn't understand why why why make it stop make it stop make it stop why are you doing this—

He springs forward, knocking the figure onto his back and planting his paws on his chest as he snarls in his face, eyes boring into his. There is aborted movement in the corner of his eye. Why why why why why why— why won't it stop, make it stop he just wants it to stop— why are you doing this—

"-arnes. Barnes. Come on, man. You don't want to do this. I'm not gonna hurt you," the man is saying, eyes calm but tinged with fear, fear of the wolf — you're goddamn right you should be scared of me— and he is— he is familiar, not like before, he is not the man who is soft voice and gentle hands except he is, he is gentle hands and steady voice but the other one is dead, the wolf killed him, he ripped his throat out and he wants— he wants him to stop because he is— he is lying, he will always hurt him remember you deserve this and he deserves it but he doesn't— he doesn't want it he just wants it to stop and the man is looking up at him and he...he doesn't want to hurt him, the man is safe and good but the wolf is so confused and terrified and he can't— he can't take it why won't it stop—

The growls cease but he stays still, breathing heavily as he stares down at the man. Brown eyes in a kind face, not resisting as he lays pinned under the wolf's mismatched paws. He is still speaking, murmuring soothing words.

"-okay, it's okay. I'm just gonna stay here. Take your time. Just breathe, that's it."

The wolf is trembling, sides heaving and metal paw digging into the man's chest. He is— he is confused, everything is too much and he needs— he needs it to stop, everything to stop and he knows— he knows the man, Sam, and he is safe and good and he is gentle hands stroking his fur
and *here if you need me* and *okay?* and the wolf whines softly, overwhelmed and confused.

"Hey. Hey. It's okay." Sam's hand comes up towards his head—*hands on his head, forcing the muzzle on-*

In a flash the wolf's teeth are closing around Sam's hand in midair, terror spiking but not biting down, don't hurt him, not allowed-

"Sam." Steve's voice is weaved through with a hint of panic.

Sam doesn't take his eyes off the wolf, hand limp between his teeth. "We're good. Sorry, Barnes. My fault. I shouldn't have tried to touch you without asking. I'm sorry. That's on me."

He's...sorry? He is-he is apologizing, to the wolf. Why? Whywhywhywhywhywhy but he is not-he is not going to hurt him, no one is going to hurt him, and he can't-he can't believe that because they always hurt him, always, it doesn't-it doesn't stop but he wants to believe it and he is just-he is just exhausted, and overwhelmed, but Sam is unresisting under him and he has-he has *control*, Sam is under his control and it feels...good, and safer, no one can hurt him and he can-he can hurt Sam if he wants, and he doesn't want to hurt Sam but he *can* and it is like yesterday, when he said *stop* and everyone stopped and he has *control* and no one is doing things to him, there is no one holding him down-*hold him still* and no shocks and pain and everything is *okay* and gradually his breathing slows, panic lessening.

A minute passes in silence, Sam watching him steadily as he breathes and calms.
"You wanna let go of my hand?" Sam eventually asks.

The wolf growls softly in response. No. It is-it is all the control he has and he can't-he can't give it up. He can't.

Sam just nods slightly against the floor. "Okay. Whatever you need. You're not hurting me, so I'm good."

Another minute passes in silence and the wolf comes fully back to reality, registering Steve and Tamira standing a ways away and exuding nervousness. Sam's chest rises and falls steadily under his paws, face relaxed and eyes calm. Another minute passes.

The wolf hears Tamira clear her throat from across the room. "Do you think I could check your
neck? You seem to be bleeding slightly. You can keep your hold on Sam if it makes you feel safer."

The wolf hesitates before nodding slightly, Sam's arm moving with the motion. He is—he is in control.

Tamira moves forward with exaggerated slowness, finally crouching down next to Sam's side.

"Okay, can I touch your neck?"

The wolf nods again. Tamira reaches forward ever so slowly, parting his fur and assessing his neck with critical eyes as he stays tense and still, breathing shallowly.

"Alright, you just popped some of your surgical stitches but that's okay. They should have come off soon anyway so I won't redo them. Everything else is okay enough to leave as is. I'm just going to bandage this if that's okay?"

The wolf nods. Okay. Okay. Okay. Tamira reaches into her bag and takes out a bandage, plastering it over the back of his neck. His jaws clamp tighter around Sam's hand with anxiety, eliciting a small wince from Sam. Tamira quickly secures the bandage and then backs up, retreating to the table and out of his line of sight.

"Okay, all done. I'm going to...go. I'll be back tomorrow morning."

"Thank you," he hears Steve say quietly. "I'm sorry."

"No, no, there's nothing to be sorry for. I just want to hurt some very specific people, Hippocratic Oath be damned."

"Yeah, you're not alone. Thank you."

There's a pause, and then Tamira's footsteps lead away, the sound of the elevator doors opening and then closing. The wolf feels relief at her exit, jaws relaxing again on Sam's hand. Steve comes closer, dropping to the floor by Sam's head and crossing his legs as he meets the wolf's eyes.

"Hey Buck. You okay?"

What—what kind of dumbass question is that, Steve, *is he okay*, what do you think, you-you-you goddamn punk—keep it together, Barnes—

"Okay, stupid question," Steve amends. "You gonna drop Sam's hand anytime soon, pal?"

Pal. Pal. Pal. He is—he is safe. It is just Steve and Sam. No one is going to hurt him. Safe. Safe. Safe. If only he could believe that. He slowly releases Sam's hand, keeping his eyes on Steve as he backs off of Sam and away.

Steve looks relieved. Sam slowly sits up, cradling his right hand slightly as the wolf's eyes flick back over to him.

"Just a little bruised," Sam says, holding it up. "See, didn't even break the skin. No harm done." His hand has slightly red imprints from the wolf's teeth but doesn't look badly damaged, and the wolf thinks good. He didn't—he doesn't want to hurt Sam.

There's a moment of silence as Steve and Sam stare at him and he stares back warily.

"Alright Barnes, let's figure this out," Sam says. "Are you with us?"
Is he-is he with them? He doesn't-he doesn't know. Yes? No? Everything is still confusing and overwhelming and his head is aching fiercely with the weight of new memories. His skin is still crawling and he feels jittery and off-center, like everything has been shifted a foot to the left while he was asleep and now he is awake and he doesn't know if this is normal or he is imagining it or this is some cruel trick and nothing is as it seems but there are memories in his head now, competing for dominance, good and bad and contradictory because he thought-he thought his handlers were good and he wasn't human, that he deserved everything but then there are memories of fighting them, and hatred, and being a person, before, with Steve and he doesn't know which is true or if both are true and it makes his head hurt and he just wants it to stop, doesn't want to have to think because it's too hard, he can't, he can't-

"Bucky?" Steve asks worriedly and no, no he's not Bucky, he's not, he is...he is...valchonak, soldier, worthless dog, what do I have to do to get you to comply-

He growls, taking a step backwards. Make it stop make it stop make it stop-

"Barnes? Buddy, talk to us. Or...something. We don't know what's going on in your head right now."

What is going on in his head. What is going on in his head is a-it is a goddamned shit show, Barnes, keep it together-

Stop. Make it stop. Why are there voices in his head, it is like there is someone else in his head why why why where do these thoughts come from he doesn't, he doesn't remember but he does, he does, but he doesn't want to and he just wants it to stop-

He staggers forwards, pressing his head into Steve's shoulder and shifting into the soldier, words spilling out of his mouth as his breaths hitch in ragged sobs.

"Make it stop make it stop please make it stop, p-please, make it stop, I don't want to remember."

Warm hands find his shoulders and everything goes blank and numb as he retreats inside his own head far away from the memories and pain and confusion, the world blurring and then disappearing as he sinks into blissful emptiness.
Chapter 22

If you chain a wolf to the wall, then thrown away the key,
Because they will submit to you until they become free.
Once the chain goes slack and the collar falls down,
The wolves will then be free to once more take their crown.

The proud Rulers of the Forest will never belong in a cage,
They are meant to always run free, not to be put on a stage.
But humans are cruel, they care only of themselves,
So they take them as trophies and put them on shelves.

But the wolf who is chained has the time to wait,
Because the human will forget and leave open the gate.
Once the chain is not steadfast, the collar laying unlocked,
The wolf will surge forward, no longer to be blocked.

The danger comes then, when the animal runs wild,
When wild eyes lock on, and you could swear the wolf smiled.
Your throat becomes vulnerable, with nothing in the way,
Because the roles have switched: the hunter now prey.

So you better take a deep breath and pray to your god,
You played being King, and have been proven a fraud.
Because the law of the wolf is of strength and of power.
As strong as a hurricane and as beautiful as a flower.

To Chain a Wolf by Tempestxiii

Steve grips Bucky's shoulders lightly, heart breaking. Make it stop. I don't want to remember. Bucky is limp in his gasp, and when Steve gently pushes him back to see his face his eyes are vacant and unseeing. Checked out. Dissociation, Sam called it. Steve is almost relieved. He doesn't want to think about what memories resurfaced to make Bucky say I don't want to remember, to make his eyes fill with such fear and pain.

He hears Sam jog away and when he comes back he's bearing clothes, which Steve accepts gratefully, Bucky still kneeling on the floor supported by Steve's hands on his shoulders.

"Steve," Sam says, and his voice sounds frayed. "I need-I need a break. Can you-are you good?"

Steve nods. "Yeah. Of course, Sam. You've done more than enough."

Sam takes a deep breath. "Yeah. Yeah. Pouring from an empty cup and all that. I'm just-I'm gonna go for a run. I'll be back, I just...need a bit."

"I understand. Take as long as you need."

Sam grabs his things and is out the door in under a minute, leaving Steve alone with Bucky.
"Alright, Buck," he says softly, to no response. "Let's get you dressed." He gently nudges Bucky to his feet, Bucky moving with all the grace of an automaton and utterly compliant under Steve's hands. He dresses him quickly, remembering the last time he'd had to do this, after they first found Bucky. So much has changed since then, and yet this is the same. When Bucky is dressed in yet another pair of sweatpants (His last pair are shredded from the shift, Steve thinks they're going to run out of them at this rate) and a t-shirt Steve guides him over to the couch, sitting him down and wrapping his favorite blanket around him. He resists the desire to comfort him with touch, knowing it has to be Bucky's choice and that right now he's nowhere near able to consent.

He settles on the other side of the couch, picking up his sketchbook from the coffee table and flipping to a blank page. He starts sketching Bucky in wolf form, first from memory during the war, when Bucky had four legs and two whole ears and no scars ringing his neck and his eyes were bright and clear as he looked at Steve. Then he draws him as he is now, a faded shadow of his previous self, scarred and mutilated and with eyes haunted by pain and fear, teeth bared in a snarl.

The two drawings are side by side, the difference stark and like a punch to Steve's gut. He knows Bucky will never be the same again, even if he remembers Steve. He'll have psychological scars to rival the physical, and Steve has to accept the fact that the Bucky he knew before is really, truly gone.

But then again, isn't the Steve of before gone as well? The idealistic, hopeful Steve of the past had died the moment General Lukin pressed Bucky's dog tags into his hand and said those fateful words. What was left was a Steve Rogers with all of his reckless, stubborn traits and righteous anger but without his heart. He'd channeled all his grief and rage into destroying Hydra and then just kept fighting after the ice with the same robotic automation as Bucky is displaying right now.

And now he knows Bucky never really died, but the damage is done for both of them. Steve can never go back, can never quite repair the damage that Bucky's death and his own non-death had done to his heart, and Bucky can never quite repair the damage that Hydra had done to his mind. They're quite a pair, he thinks. But maybe, just maybe, their new selves can find a way to fit together again. The Steve of before could never have handled Bucky now, wouldn't be able to summon the objectivity and calm gentleness that he needs to help him. And the Bucky of before wouldn't know what to do with this new Steve, would probably pull away from him and be unsettled by his newfound intensity.

Maybe this is good, in a way. Steve certainly would have spared Bucky the years of torture, but if they're going to be given a second chance maybe it's for the best that they've both changed. God knows their relationship before wasn't always the healthiest, and they fought like cats and dogs sometimes. Bucky could be cocky and brash and overbearing, and Steve could be stubborn and reckless and quick to lose his temper. Their love was like an explosion, fiery and bright and earth-shattering in its force, ripping them to shreds. Maybe the universe is giving them another chance to get it right, to start over and build a new life. A better one.

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Sam comes back eventually, showered and looking tired but less like he's a second away from falling apart. He jerks his head towards the kitchen and Steve follows, glancing back at Bucky. Bucky is still a motionless lump under the blanket, eyes vacant and glazed although Steve thinks he saw him blink once. Maybe.

"Better?" Steve asks when they're out of earshot, Sam slumping into a chair at the kitchen counter.

Sam nods. "Yeah. It's just..been a long day. And it's not even nine o'clock." He looks over back at Bucky, chewing on his lip. "I gotta admit, I haven't been...scared of him, since we fought on the
Helicarrier. I guess he's been so compliant and scared of us that I kinda...forgot he's actually dangerous. But when he attacked me..."

He swallows, shaking his head. "For a second, I thought he was going to kill me. And when I came in this morning and saw his teeth around your throat I thought, 'oh god, what have I done.' I thought maybe we made a mistake just letting him stay here without any kind of safeguards. He's dangerous. He's a highly trained assassin who also can turn into a huge wolf, with teeth. Big teeth. I mean, when he pinned me down, I saw my whole life flash before my eyes. I thought, 'this is it, he's gonna kill me. This is what you get for trying to fix broken white boys, Sam.'"

Sam leans forward, scrubbing his face. "But he didn't. Sure, he got you pretty good, but he didn't kill you and he didn't kill me even though he damn well could have. And he doesn't lash out because he's violent. He lashes out because he's scared. It's not even his first instinct. His first instinct is to run away. He's way more scared of us then we are of him, and that's fucked up because he has the potential to be fucking lethal. But he's so...gentle, and some of his first words were sorry and thank you and he likes cuddles and blankets and acts like my food is the greatest thing on earth, and he actually is willing to talk and work through things and set boundaries and he's trying, he's trying so hard, Steve, and it breaks my heart."

Sam takes a shaky breath. "There's someone in there, and he's real smart and real good. What he's been through...he should be a wreck. He should be, I don't know, going on a murderous rampage or rocking in a corner somewhere with no hope of recovery. They obliterated him, Steve. They tried to erase and warp him so thoroughly but he still manages to be a decent fucking human being under all that. That's what he is, a human being. He's a person, and a damn good one at that."

Sam throws up his hands. "I like him, Steve. I actually like him, as a person, the few glimpses I get of him. I was expecting...I don't know, a shell? Nothing left? But goddammit there is a person in there-" he jabs his finger at Bucky-"and the toughest, most resilient one I have ever met at that. And it kills me, to watch him struggle. I got my own issues, Steve, my head is still a little fucked up, but it doesn't hold a candle to what he's going through and sometimes it's just too much to handle. Sometimes I need a break or else I think I'm going to fall apart, and that won't help Barnes." Sam covers his face with his hands, breathing shakily.

Steve feels tears prick at his own eyes. "Come here," he says roughly, touching Sam's shoulder. Sam turns, falling into Steve's arms as they hold each other tightly.

"This is a manly hug," Sam says hoarsely. "We're men."

"Fuck that," Steve replies, hugging Sam tighter. "I'm Captain America, and I say men can hug."

"Well shit, I guess it's okay then," Sam says, and they both laugh, though it's more like a sob.

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They make breakfast, managing to coax Bucky into getting down some oatmeal. He is compliant and responsive to a degree but just seems...flat. No expression, no emotion. Just quiet obedience before he seems to drift off into his head again. Sam changes the bandages on Steve's neck, which have already soaked through with blood. The puncture wounds from Bucky's teeth are healing and didn't hit any major arteries but they are deep and tender. A centimeter to the right and Steve would have bled out in minutes, healing factor or not.

He sits back down on the couch as Sam takes the armchair, Bucky in the same spot as before. Suddenly there's movement and Bucky shifts over before toppling onto his side, head coming to rest in Steve's lap. Steve takes it as a good sign, that Bucky is coming back to reality. Bucky's hair
falls over his face and Steve tentatively brushes it away, seeing Bucky's eyes squeeze closed. He turns his face downwards and his hand comes up to clutch at Steve's leg, body trembling slightly. A small sound of distress escapes him and Steve starts to stroke his hair, feeling powerless to help. He can't protect Bucky from his own mind, from the horrors he's sure to be starting to remember. All he can do is watch, and offer comfort.

"It's okay," he murmurs, running his fingers through slightly sweaty strands of hair. "You're safe."

Bucky breathes and trembles on his lap, eyes scrunched closed and metal hand bruising Steve's knee. Steve keeps stroking and after a while Bucky starts to relax, breaths evening out and hand letting up its death grip. His eyes blink open, staring at nothing, though he's still present. Steve looks up to meet Sam's gaze, giving him a meaningful look.

Sam leans forward, taking a breath. "Barnes, you with us?"

Bucky nods on Steve's lap, appearing calm.

"Good. That's good," Sam says. "You remember what happened before?"

Bucky nods again, breaths hitching slightly. Steve continues to stroke his hair soothingly.

"Alright. You got pretty scared but you didn't actually hurt anyone. That's good. It sounds like you're getting some memories back and they're not fun, is that right?"

Bucky nods.

"Yeah, that's gotta suck. But remember what I said before, it's not all gonna be bad. You just gotta get through the bad ones, and Steve and I will be right here with you. Okay?"

Bucky nods. "Okay," he whispers.

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They stay there for a while, Bucky relaxing as Steve starts putting tiny braids in his hair, Sam reading and occasionally looking over with barely suppressed laughter. Steve had learned to braid from the showgirls when he was touring as Captain America. After a while he used to have a line of girls wanting him to braid their hair since his artist's fingers were well suited for the task, and he took pride in giving them perfect braids and helping them with their hair for shows.

He only has one half of Bucky's head to work with in his lap but it doesn't matter, Steve making tiny braids only to undo them and do them again. Bucky's long hair is growing on him. He likes the fact that he can stroke Bucky's head and run his fingers through the silky strands, something that seems to be soothing for both of them. The scruff on Bucky's face is growing thicker and Steve thinks he should probably nudge him into shaving soon, if it doesn't bring up bad memories. Unfortunately, Bucky's mind is like a field of landmines, and Steve never knows when something is going to trigger a memory or a reaction. The best he can do is just keep going and be there for Bucky whenever he spirals again. He's never going to give up, no matter what.

***

They make lunch and Bucky gets down some more soup, eating with more enthusiasm than the previous meal. He seems calmer but his eyes still flit around the room nervously, mapping out exit points the way Steve knows all soldiers do. The way he does. The scars on Bucky's throat are unavoidable with the bandages off, just a small dressing covering the back of his neck. Bucky doesn't seem bothered, although Steve wonders if he even knows what they look like. Does he
even know what he looks like? He doesn't think Hydra had mirrors, and the thought of Bucky not even knowing what his own face looks like is disturbing. How far Hydra had gone to try and strip Bucky of his humanity.

Bucky sleeps for the entirety of the afternoon, passed out on the couch with the blanket wrapped around him. He seems to be sleeping a lot, but Sam tells him it's probably normal. His brain and body are trying to heal, and the constant stress must be exhausting.

"Just know, Steve, it's gonna get worse before it gets better," Sam warns. "When he sleeps, memories are gonna come back, usually as nightmares. Just be prepared."

Sure enough Bucky wakes screaming, and Steve pushes down the impulse to run to his side, his throat twinging painfully in reminder of the last time. Bucky flails and breathes harshly, eyes skittering around the room wildly. Finally his gaze lands on Steve and he calms slightly, extending a hand in a silent plea. Steve moves forward, sinking into the couch as Bucky curls into him. Bucky trembles against him, pulse fluttering rapidly and breaths puffing against Steve's leg. Steve strokes a hand through his hair and he slowly melts into the touch, body relaxing.

"Want to talk about it?" Steve asks softly. Bucky hasn't been that talkative yet beyond yes and no, but sometimes he manages to string together broken sentences, such as when he told Steve he remembered him drawing.

He feels Bucky take a breath. "I-" He turns his head so he's looking up at Steve, eyes searching his nervously. "Question," he says.

Steve blinks. "You have a question?"

Bucky nods, looking apprehensive. "You. And...Sam."

Steve looks up, finding Sam at the kitchen table and jerking his head. Sam gets up and comes over, sinking into the armchair.

"What's up?" he asks.

"Bucky has a question. Buck?"

Bucky seems to think for a moment. He sits up, scooting to the corner of the couch and away from Steve. His fingers worry at the edge of the blanket.

"You are...not. Handlers. But-" He seems to struggle. "But...same. Good. But I-I killed...handler. I don't-I don't understand. Why."

Steve looks over at Sam. Is Bucky saying what he thinks he's saying? Sam grimaces slightly before turning his attention back to Bucky.

"Okay. Okay, there's a lot to unpack there. Let's clarify a few things. You said we're not handlers, but we're the same. Good. You thought your handlers were good?"

Bucky looks conflicted before nodding hesitantly. Steve sees Sam struggle to keep a calm expression. He understands. He feels a sinking horror. He had known Bucky had Stockholm Syndrome, but to hear him say it...

Sam takes a deep breath. "Right. Right. Um, listen, I know it seems like your handlers were good, but they...weren't. They may have done some 'good' things to try and make you more compliant, but they were the ones who did all that bad stuff too. They were Hydra, and Hydra is bad. Full
Bucky looks confused. "But-but-" He shakes his head. "No. No." His hand comes up to rub his temple. "I-they-I don't-I don't understand-

"Hey, hey, that's okay. It might take a while to wrap your head around that. I know this turns your whole world upside down. It's good that you're asking questions."

Bucky is breathing shallowly, eyes narrowed in confusion. "Hydra is...bad."

Sam nods. "Yes."

"Handlers are Hydra."

"Yup."

"Handlers are...bad?"

"Yes, exactly. You're getting there."

But Bucky shakes his head, pressing his hands to his eyes and breathing shakily. "No. No. But-he-he wasn't-he wasn't Hydra, he was-he was good, he was, I killed him-" He sounds like he's trying to convince himself.

Steve knows who he's talking about. Lukin. The one who'd done the most damage to Bucky's mind even before the chair.

"Bucky, he was the one who captured you," he says, trying to keep his voice level and paint it in black and white terms that Bucky can understand. "He tortured you. You killed him because he was bad. He tried to make you forget all the bad parts, but you remembered anyway."

Bucky drops his hands, looking shattered. "But he was-he was good," he says in a small voice, broken and pleading. Like he knows he's wrong, but he desperately wants it to be true.

Steve feels his eyes fill with tears. "No, Buck. No, he wasn't."

Bucky's face crumples. Steve reaches out automatically but Bucky flinches.

"Don't touch me!" he screams. Steve recoils, hands in the air.

"Sorry. I'm sorry. I won't touch you."

Bucky doesn't even seem to hear him, curling into the corner of the couch as harsh sobs escape.

"No," he mumbles. "No. No. No."

Steve feels his heart break. He looks over, meeting Sam's eyes, which are similarly pained and glistening with moisture.

"No," Bucky repeats. "No, I don't-I don't want to remember, make it stop, make it stop-"

"Bucky-"

Bucky lunges, wrapping his metal hand around Steve's throat and pressing him down into the arm of the couch, poised over him. He is trembling, face contorted and eyes a mixture of pain and anger but his hand is loose around Steve's throat, not squeezing.
"No. No. How do I-how do I know. I don't-I don't know. Why-you-I-I killed him but not-not you I can't-I don't know-"

Steve can't decipher what he's trying to say in the broken string of words. He doesn't even think Bucky knows. But Bucky is confused, and angry, and wanting answers to something, and he has to give them.

He meets Bucky's crazed eyes. "Buck, I don't know what you're trying to say."

Bucky makes a sound of frustration, squeezing his eyes closed for a second and exhaling. "I don't-I don't know...what the fuck I'm trying to say, Rogers." Steve looks back in shock. He-it's Bucky. It's him. Bucky takes another breath. "I don't-I don't know."

"Okay," Steve says. "That's okay. We'll figure it out."

Bucky lets out a breath. "I-I killed my handler. He was-he was good, but...not good? You are...good. I couldn't-I can't kill you." He blinks, looking like he's coming to a realization. "Oh. He was...bad?"

Steve nods under Bucky's hand. "Yeah."

"I-I remember." Bucky trails off, brow furrowing. "I-he was...bad." He blinks again, something like anger creeping into his expression again. "He was bad. But then he was...good, sometimes, and it's-it's-I can't-I don't know." He sounds lost and frustrated.

Steve swallows. "Yeah, Buck, sometimes he seemed good. I get that. It's gotta be confusing. Just-he wasn't doing it out of the goodness of his heart. He was doing it to manipulate you."

Bucky bites his lip, searching Steve's eyes. "Why-why do you?"

This-this is the question, Steve thinks. This is what Bucky wants to know, what he's been trying to say. Why is Steve good to him when his handler was as well but he killed him.

Steve meets his eyes. "Because you're my friend. Because I care about you, and want you to be safe and happy."

Bucky narrows his eyes, searching Steve's intently. Finally he lets out a breath, releasing Steve's throat but staying where he is, metal hand dropping to Steve's chest.


Steve feels his heart melt. "I try. I'm not perfect, but I try. I promise you, I'll never hurt you. Not like them."

Bucky nods slightly. "Okay." He withdraws, retreating to his corner of the couch. Steve sits up, breathing a sigh of relief at the semi-successful resolution to the conversation. All told, it wasn't as bad as it could have gone, and they've addressed one of the major issues Bucky has. It's a step forward. Progress. He repeats it, over and over, like a mantra. Progress.

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They eat dinner, Bucky graduating to chicken and rice. He seems skittish but calm, shying away from touch and occasionally staring at Steve with a contemplative expression. Steve supposes he's still working through everything, which is to be expected. At least he is present and communicative and stable, neither scared and violent nor overly compliant and blank. Progress.
After dinner Steve leads Bucky to the bathroom, showing him how to work the shower. He turns it on, spinning the handle until it's almost burning hot. Bucky extends a hand under the spray, expression going awed when he feels the hot spray.

"You good on you own?" Steve asks. "There's soap and stuff in there."

Bucky nods, beginning to strip with no compunctions. Steve turns away, closing the door behind him to give Bucky some privacy and wandering into the living room to sketch a little. After almost twenty minutes he hears the shower shut off and grabs a new set of clothes, knocking on the bathroom door.

"Hey Buck, it's me. I've got some clothes for you. Can I come in?"

He hears footsteps slap against the floor and then the door opens, Bucky standing there with a towel wrapped around his waist and hair dripping wet. He takes the proffered clothes, dropping the towel and beginning to put them on. Steve thinks he's become so desensitized to being naked around people and having his body examined and prodded that he no longer even thinks about it. It's not a fun thought.

Steve clears his throat. "Do you want to, um, shave?"

Bucky's hand goes to his face and he narrows his eyes at Steve suspiciously.

"You can do it yourself," Steve tries. "They've got these great new razors that are super easy to use."

Bucky squints before nodding slowly.

"Okay. Here, I'll show you." Steve goes over to the sink, pulling out a safety razor and shaving cream from the cabinet. Bucky follows behind him, coming up to the counter to inspect them. He looks up, into the mirror, and Steve sees him freeze.

Bucky blinks, bringing his hand to his face again, and Steve is reminded of his earlier thought that Bucky doesn't know what he looks like. Bucky is staring in wonder and confusion at the mirror, hand sliding from his face to touch his throat. His eyes widen with horror as he stares at the reflection of his throat in the mirror, the red scars stark against his pale skin. His gaze travels back up to his face, as if trying to map his features.

"I-" he says. "Me?"

Steve swallows. "Yeah Buck. That's you."

"Bucky." He turns to look at Steve. "I'm-I'm Bucky?"


Bucky's hand comes to his throat, still looking at Steve. "Bad. They-"

"I know. I'm sorry."

"I'm Bucky," he repeats, sounding surer. "I am-I am not Hydra." He rubs his temple, which Steve has come to associate with him remembering something.

"No. No, you're not."

"Good," Bucky says, anger sparking in the depths of his eyes. "Good."
Steve smiles. "Yeah."

Bucky turns back to the sink, assessing the shaving cream and razor. He pauses. "I...remember. Before?"

Steve nods. "Yeah. I used to help you shave, sometimes."

Bucky picks up the shaving cream, hesitating when he goes to spray it into his left hand. Oh. Steve didn't think of that. He thinks getting shaving cream in the joints of the arm would be a nightmare. He holds out his hand.

"Want me to do it?"

He expects Bucky to give him the can so he can spray it in Bucky's hand, but instead Bucky nods and sprays it into Steve's hand. He tilts his head towards Steve, clearly waiting in a display of trust.

Steve carefully smears shaving cream on Bucky's face, careful around the almost fully healed dimples where the screws had been. Then he picks up the razor, running it under the water.

"You want to do this, or me?"

Bucky hesitates. "You."

Steve nods, steadying Bucky's chin lightly with one finger as he starts to glide the razor over his cheek.
He swipes and rinses, swipes and rinses, Bucky's eyes never straying from his face and breath warm against Steve's hands. When he finishes he gently wipes the excess cream away with a washcloth, Bucky looking unbearably young without the scruff. Steve's hand trails over Bucky's face and cups his cheek, pausing as he looks at Bucky. Blue eyes stare back, clear and familiar, something soft in their depths as he tilts his head slightly into Steve's hand. They are close, so close, and Bucky's cheek is warm and soft under his hand, and they could be back in Brooklyn if it weren't for the long hair framing Bucky's face and the scars around his throat. Finally Steve steps
back, clearing his throat and breaking the tension.

"All done."

Bucky is still looking at him, brow furrowed slightly and head cocked to the side. "We-I remember...we used to-" He brings a hand up, brushing his lips, a question in his eyes.

Steve swallows. "Yeah. We were together. But I don't expect anything from you," he hastens to add. "You don't ever...if you don't want to. I just care about you and want you to be happy."

"Happy," Bucky says. "We-we were?"

Steve smiles softly. "Yeah Buck. We were. We can be, again, whatever that looks like."

Bucky nods. "Okay," he says. "Okay." He looks exhausted but relaxed, exuding an almost peaceful air.

"Do you want to sleep?" Steve asks.

Bucky nods, then hesitates. "We used to...before. Safe. Can-?"

Steve feels his heart swell. "Of course. Let me get ready for bed first. You should brush your teeth, too."

Bucky nods. "Okay." He picks up his toothbrush and Steve grabs his, both of them applying toothpaste before bringing them to their mouths. It's so...domestic, both of them brushing their teeth together, Bucky warm and damp from the shower. For a moment Steve thinks he can see what their future can be.

When they're clean Steve changes into sleep clothes and Bucky follows him to his room, looking around with sharp eyes. Steve slides into bed, leaving it up to Bucky. Bucky only hesitates a second before climbing in as well, shifting so he is on his right side facing Steve. Steve stays still, wanting him to make the first move. Eventually Bucky shifts closer, curling into Steve's chest and tucking his head under Steve's chin. Steve hears him exhale, body relaxing and breath puffing against Steve's neck. Steve cautiously drapes his right arm over Bucky, rubbing small circles into his back. Bucky presses closer, damp hair smelling of lavender and coconut and something else that Steve can't identify, body warm and solid against Steve. If Steve closes his eyes they could be back in their room in London during the war, young and safe and whole. He falls asleep in minutes the way he hasn't in years, not since he lost Bucky.
Chapter 23

Lupum Nostrae Somnium

(His Wolf, Our Dream)

The ancient eyes, slanted feral
gaze from a child's face
innocent new, fearfully pale
remnant of a sylvan race.

Moonlit reflections, shadows held
in mysterious silence
secrets hidden, desperate seems
the sudden violence.

Flashing teeth, a wavering howl
the bestial longing high
lunar cycle, a blood-bound curse
the laws of nature defy.

Time passes, the summer wasting
a fleeting childhood fades
sometimes wolf, bearing human soul
the skeptical heart invades.

Familiar stranger, arcane lore
whispered confessions tell
growing attraction, tender bond
wonder where reason fell.

Perilous love, devotion needs
the spirit to sacrifice
trusted nightmare, passionate kiss
a design in artifice.
Forbidden act, defiance proves
a dangerous affair
loyalties strain, difficult choice
fantasy ends in despair.
A mournful song, the bloodied moon
how often mortal hearts break
impossible dream, sorrow brings
better to never wake.

-by CRW (2018)

-He is in the forest, surrounded by men, but he knows them, knows them like the back of his flesh hand. The man in the bowler cap is speaking, words inaudible, and they are laughing and Steve is there, blonde hair and blue eyes and a bright smile and Bucky laughs as well and he is happy, he thinks-

-He is strapped down to a table, mumbling something over and over. "James Barnes. Sergeant. 32557038. James Barnes. Sergeant. 3255-"

-His legs dangle over a fire escape, smoke winding up into the night from the cigarette in his hand. There is a warm weight pressed against his left arm, his left arm which is flesh and bone and real, and a head rests on his shoulder and he is happy-

-"What in the goddamn hell is this?" the man with the bowler hat says, and there are explosions and fire and blue light and he looks around but they are surrounded-

-There is a woman, dark hair and red lipstick, and she presses a gentle kiss to his lips. "Be safe, James," she says-

-Steve is throwing up into a garbage can, everything bright and loud and glittering around them. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand as Bucky rubs circles into his back.

"I hate you," Steve says, but Bucky only chuckles.

"Come on, punk, you can't go to Coney Island without riding the Cyclone."

Steve huffs, straightening up. "I'm gonna get you back for this someday-"

-He leaps forwards to sink his teeth into someone's neck. Footsteps run past and it is Steve, in his uniform, shield flashing as he knocks down soldiers. Bucky tips his head back and lets out a howl-

-Steve presses him down into their small bed and kisses him, breaths loud in the silence. Blonde hair flops over blue eyes in a thin face, shoulders slim and pale, and Bucky thinks he has never seen anything more beautiful-
"Hey! Give me back my hat!" someone shouts, a bowler cap clutched in Bucky's teeth as he weaves and dodges, the men breaking into uproarious laughter.

-Bucky holds Steve's struggling form as he spits obscenities at the man at the bar, eyes sparking with righteous fire. The bartender points and Bucky sighs, dragging Steve out as he kicks and yowls like an angry cat.

-He is strapped down to a table, mumbling something over and over. "James Barnes. Sergeant. 32557038."

-"Ready to follow 'Captain America' into the jaws of death?"-

-Hands scrabbling at clothes, cold, slim, graphite-stained hands trailing over his chest-

-"Hey!" he says. "Let's hear it for Captain America!"

-He wipes the blood from Steve's face with gentle hands, knuckles bruised-

-"Bucky, behind you!" someone shouts, and there are explosions and fire and blue light-

-"Bucky," Steve says in exasperation. "Come on, there are men laying down their lives."

-"Bucky!" Steve shouts, and there is wind rushing past his face, hands clinging to the railing. "Grab my hand!" He reaches but he falls, a scream torn from his lips and Steve's face seared into his mind.

He jerks awake, heart racing. He is lying on something warm and soft-Steve, he realizes. His face is tucked into Steve's neck, limbs wrapped around his prone form like an octopus. It is...familiar, he thinks. He has memories of this during the war, presumably, because Steve is big and strong in these memories and the setting is different every time, from a small room to a tent to out under the stars. As he lays there other memories trickle in and slot into place, and it feels like waking from a long sleep. He is...he is Bucky. And he is not. He knows things about his life, can remember images and feelings, for all intents and purposes is Bucky, but it feels far away, as if viewing his own life through a blurry lens. He is not quite Bucky, he thinks. Not yet.

He thinks of what Sam calls him. Barnes. It feels...better, somehow. Less weighted with meaning and expectation. He is not the soldier, and he is not Bucky, but maybe, just maybe, he is Barnes. He tests it out, repeating it in his mind. I am Barnes. It is terrifying and yet exhilarating, to give himself an identity. He was never allowed to, before, and he thinks that his identity has always been defined by Steve. Bucky. But Barnes is his, is his name that he chose for himself, and he clutches it tightly to his heart. No one can take this from him. It is...his.

His life is his. He knows this now. There are no handlers, and this is good, even though the small, scared part of his mind that Hydra warped protests the thought. Shut up, he tells it. You goddamn dog. He feels shame and anger boil over as he thinks about what Hydra did to him. There are two parts of his mind battling, one full of hatred for Hydra and deep shame, and the other part that wants nothing more than for a handler to stroke his head and tell him good boy. It is confusing and overwhelming and Barnes just wants it to stop, doesn't know what to do with the information that is overloading his head and pounding against the inside of his skull. It is like yesterday, when Sam said handlers are bad and he-he knew that but half of him was screaming that handlers were good and he knows that Hydra is bad, and handlers are Hydra, and so handlers are bad, but it only makes his head hurt because it is ingrained so deeply, handlers are good, that he can't erase it no matter what he does, and it only makes his head pound and hand shake and he can't, he can't think about it or he thinks he'll go insane. You're already insane, a voice says. Shut up, he tells
Steve shifts under him and grunts but doesn't wake. Barnes lifts his head slightly, studying Steve in the dim light. His mouth is parted slightly, lips soft and pink, and his blonde hair is mussed on the pillow. His eyelashes flutter as his eyes rove back and forth under his lids, and Barnes wonders what he dreams about. Does he dream about Barnes, about the Bucky he knew? Does he dream about war and death and blood? Or are his dreams peaceful, full of laughter and light and beauty? Barnes hopes it is the latter. Steve deserves peace, even though Barnes knows that he is war. Steve has always been war. It was Barnes that was peace, once upon a time, it was Barnes that pulled Steve from fights and cleaned the blood off his face and worried that this would be the day that Steve was taken from him. But now their positions are reversed. Barnes is war, is blood and death and tragedy, and Steve is...Steve is the promise of peace. He is hope, and goodness, and everything that Barnes is not. He deserves better than the wreckage of a person, of the person he used to love. He said I don't expect anything from you, but he does, Barnes can see it in the way his eyes light up when Barnes says something like before, in the way he smiles at him softly, eyes still full of love for a person that doesn't exist any more.

Barnes looks down at his chest, seeing the metal chain glinting from under his collar. With careful fingers he withdraws it, studying the dog tags on the end. James Buchanan Barnes. Sergeant. 32557038, the tags read. They are...they are his. They are Barnes. He remembers...I provided Captain Rogers with your dog tags, of course. Lukin. Lukin had told Steve that he was dead, and given him his dog tags in proof. And Steve had kept them, all these years. His heart clenches with something that is closer to anger than to sadness. He was...he was a person, he thinks. He knows. He was a person, and he was Steve's, but Hydra took that away. He wants to-to burn them down, to kill all of them. He hates them. He hates them.

He realizes his fingers are digging into Steve's chest as Steve starts to wake, breathing changing. Barnes tucks the dog tags back in Steve's shirt hastily but remains where he is, propped on Steve's chest watching him. Steve's eyes flutter open and focus on Bucky, blinking sleepily.

"Hey Buck," Steve says, voice thick with sleep.

"Hey," Barnes returns softly, and Steve's eyes go sparkly and happy in a way that makes Barnes' heart squeeze painfully. Steve studies him intently, as if searching for something.

"How are you feeling?" Steve questions.

Barnes hesitates before bringing the metal hand up and seesawing it. He doesn't think he'll ever be good, but at least he's not bad.

Steve nods slightly against the pillow. "Anything hurt?"

Barnes shakes his head. Pain levels are acceptable.

Steve's brow furrows. "Memories then?"

Barnes nods hesitantly.

"I'm sorry. Bad ones?"

Barnes bites his lip. "Some. Not-not all. Some are...good." He swallows. "You."

Steve's expression softens. "Oh."

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They get up eventually, Sam coming up to introduce Barnes to the wonders of omelettes. Then it is time for his checkup, Barnes waiting at the table with Steve and Sam for Tamira to appear. He thinks back to yesterday, when everything had been overwhelming and confusing and the wolf had attacked Sam, and feels...bad. Now that the memories have settled he no longer feels that clawing desperation and panic that had suffused everything, though the inside of his head still feels like someone is banging pots and pans inside it and screaming, full of fractured selves and images and sounds. He feels a sort of quiet rage that simmers inside him, his head full of knowledge that burns like fire on his soul.

The elevator door dings and Tamira steps through, looking remarkably composed as always. She approaches without fear, a small smile on her face as she takes in Barnes, setting down her medical bag on the table.

"Hello. You look well. How are you feeling today?"

He repeats the hand gesture for *eh*, although he thinks it's more like *okay* for him. Okay is all he's going to get.

"Any pain?"

He shakes his head.

"Okay, that's great. It looks like your face is healed; I just want to check your neck again but then I think I can let you go." She smiles warmly.

Barnes nods, since it seems appropriate. Tamira comes closer, pausing before she reaches out.

"Can I touch your neck?"

He doesn't know why she's asking again, but he nods. Her gentle fingers peel away the bandage from the back of his neck, inspecting it closely.

"Okay, this looks good. The stitches are dissolvable so I don't need to take them out, and it's pretty much all healed. Lastly I just want to see if there's any change in feeling in your neck. That okay?"

He nods again. She starts with the back, pressing down near the surgical scar.

"Can you feel this?"

"Yes," he says. He sees her move out of the corner of his eye but the feeling of her fingers disappears. "Can you feel this?"

"No."

She makes a humming sound, a prickling feeling suddenly arising on the side of his neck, the faintest sense of fingers pressing down. "Here?"

"A little. Weird."

"It feels weird?"

"Yes. Like...when your foot...falls asleep. Tingly." He knows this without knowing how he knows this.

"That's a good description," Tamira says. "That's exactly what nerve damage feels like a lot of the time. Okay, moving on. Here?"
"No."

She moves around his neck, Barnes only feeling her touch about half of the time. He thinks about the image he saw in the mirror last night, twisted scars under a face so familiar and yet different. It is proof that he is no longer Bucky, but the sight of the scars had been...unsettling. Though the collar is off he is still collared by scars, a permanent mark of Hydra's ownership. He doesn't—he doesn't want that. He doesn't want to belong to Hydra. *I belong to Steve,* he remembers his own voice saying and it is—it is true, he thinks, but there is nothing to show for it except Steve's name branded on his soul. Hydra owns his body now more than Steve ever did. They had replaced his flesh with metal and collared him for life, had carved out his soul and replaced it with nothing but pain and anger, had even turned him into the wolf, before the soldier, and in truth his body belongs to them more than anything. His body is not Steve's. It is not even his own.

Tamira steps back, stripping off her gloves. "Okay, all done. It looks like you still have a lot of nerve damage, and I'm afraid at this point it looks permanent. Of course, there may be improvements over time, especially with your healing factor, but you may never regain full feeling."

Barnes nods. He had known, but hearing it drives it home. He raises a hand to his throat, glancing at Tamira. "Will it...always. Look like-like this?"

There's something sad in Tamira's eyes as she nods. "I'm afraid so. There's just...too much damage to fix. I'm sorry."

He swallows and nods, dropping his hand. *Too much damage to fix.* He thinks that applies to him, too. He is—he is damaged, like a shattered glass, and he doesn't think there is anything in this world able to put the pieces back exactly as they were, for each piece has been melted and warped so it is unrecognizable from its original shape. He thinks Steve and Sam are desperately trying to glue the pieces together but only ending up with a misshapen, fragile lump of glass that will fall apart at the slightest puff of air. It is—it is a hopeless endeavor, one that is killing them in its futility. They are trying so hard, he thinks, and for what? So he can sink his teeth into Steve's throat or clamp his jaws around Sam's hand as he pins him to the floor? So he can make Steve's eyes fill with pain and grief or Sam valiantly try to mask his horror? He is erratic, unstable, he should be *put down—*


"Sorry," he says. "Sorry. What?"

Tamira doesn't look upset. "It's okay. I asked how you've been eating. It looks like you've put on a little weight, are you able to get food down?"

He nods. "Yes."

Tamira smiles. "That's great. Keep up the good work. Okay, I'm officially releasing you from my care. Of course, if you need anything in the future, don't hesitate to contact me."

Barnes nods. "Thank you."

Her smile softens. "There's no need to thank me. It was my privilege to get to help you. I wish you the best of luck in your recovery."

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After Tamira has left Steve's phone buzzes and he takes it out, frowning at the screen. Finally he
looks up at Barnes, hesitating.

"What?" Barnes asks.

"That was Tony. He's the one who owns this building. He was wondering when you wanted him to look at your arm. There's a tracker in there. We took out the other ones, during the surgery, but there's still one in the arm. All the signals are blocked in the tower but it should probably come out eventually. Do you, uh, is that something you want to do?"

Barnes thinks. It is another tie to Hydra, another way they own him. Yes. Yes, he wants it out. He nods. "Yes."

"Okay. When?"

"Now."

"Now? Oh. Okay. Yeah. Let me just check." Steve types something out on his phone, the phone buzzing not a minute later. Steve nods. "Yeah. Tony says he can do it right now. He's-no..." Steve frowns before typing more, the phone buzzing again afterwards. "He's going to come up here in a minute. Sound good?"

Barnes nods. He waits, feeling Steve and Sam's eyes on him. Sure enough, a minute later the elevator dings and a man steps through, carrying a bag. His face splits into a grin when he sees Barnes, something familiar about it that Barnes can't put his finger on. His facial hair is well-groomed and brown hair styled, wearing jeans and a t-shirt with some design on it.

"Hey, David Kessler, hear you're finally letting me take a look at that arm."


Steve shakes his head. "Sorry."

Tony turns to Sam, expression pleading. "Sam? Help me out here."

"Yeah, yeah, I got it. You're hilarious," Sam says flatly.

Tony sighs, turning back to Barnes, who is still confused. "No one appreciates my humor. Anyways, Bucko, let's have a look. You're not going to, like, strangle me, are you?"

Barnes raises an eyebrow, the motion familiar. "I'll try."

Tony's mouth falls open. "Was that-was that a joke? Are you joking?" He blinks. "Wow."

"Stark," Steve says in exasperation.

Barnes blinks. *Stark.* He-he knows that name, thinks of a flying car and easy grin. "Stark?" he repeats, glancing at Steve questioningly.

Steve nods. "Yeah. Howard's son. You remember?"

Barnes shakes his head. "I don't-I don't know. Maybe. Some." The familiarity in Tony's face makes sense now. *Howard.* He knew him, can almost picture him, but there's still something niggling at him, just out of reach. Something he should know.
"That's all right," Tony says, setting his bag down on the table. "I'm the better version." He smiles, though there's something jagged underneath. He starts removing tools from the bag, laying them out in neat order. "Okay, so I'm going to take a peek, remove the tracker, yada yada. Sound good?"

Barnes nods. Tony pulls up a chair to his left side, eyes glinting with excitement as he stares at the arm.

"I'm gonna roll your sleeve up," he says, reaching forward to do just that. He rolls the sleeve of Barnes' t-shirt up his shoulder, stopping just before where the arm ends. Then he takes out a couple familiar-looking tools, bending forward to pry at the plates of the arm. Barnes watches as they come away to reveal circuitry and interlocking metal parts, Tony stacking the plates on the table.

"Wow," Tony murmurs as he peers inside the arm. "Wow. Just incredible."

Barnes stares into the intricate parts, having to agree. He thinks that he loved science, before, would have been fascinated by the arm. But now it is just another piece of Hydra inside him, another way they had made him into a machine. He doesn't...hate the arm, but regards it with a sort of detached apathy, a dislike but grudging acceptance that it is permanent. It is part of him now, for better or for worse. Like the scars around his throat, he must accept that. Has no choice not to.

Tony takes a pair of pliers and reaches in, pulling out a small blinking part. "Aha!" he says. "There's the tracker." He sets it on the table, face smug. "You are officially tracker-free, Barnes." He starts putting the pieces of the arm back together, the plates moving as they recalibrate. Finally the arm is whole again, Tony pushing back his chair and nodding.

"All set. I'd love to poke around some more but I don't feel like getting strangled today. Maybe someday, huh?"

Barnes raises an eyebrow again. Tony is the strangest person he's met yet. "Sure," he says. Tony grins. "Wonderful. I'm holding you to that." He gets up, packing up his toolkit. "Well, it's been a pleasure, Sergeant Barnes. Really." He looks up at Barnes, and Barnes freezes.

A familiar face looking up at him, eyes wondering. "Sergeant Barnes?"

"No," he breathes. He pushes his chair away and stumbles backwards, pulse racing. "Please, help my wife."

Tony looks surprised, hands raised in the air. "Barnes? You okay?"

Tony looks like he's been struck. He stares at Barnes before turning around and walking across the room, hand over his face. Barnes is-he is crying now, taking shuddering breaths as his hands clench into fists, something horrible and agonized and shameful curling in his gut.

"I killed them," he whispers. "I-"

Sam is suddenly there in front of him, face pained. "It wasn't your fault," he says. "They made you do it."

Barnes shakes his head. "No. No. I killed them." He had known, for a second, had recognized Howard somehow but he had still killed him, hadn't questioned his orders because he was a
He sees Steve go over to Tony, placing a tentative hand on his shoulder. "It wasn't him," he hears him murmur. "Hydra had control of his mind."

Tony shakes the hand off. "I know that, Steve. Trust me, I know. I watched those tapes until I wanted to claw my eyes out. I know. And you told me Hydra killed my parents, I should have put it together that it was him. I just-I need some time, okay?"

Steve steps back. "Okay," he says softly.

Tony turns, not looking back as he disappears into the elevator. Barnes' back hits the wall and he crumples to the floor, sobbing. He killed him. Howard. He had known Howard, before, had been his friend. But he had killed him, along with so many others, and suddenly it hits him. How had he forgotten the people he had killed? He had only been thinking of himself, had been feeling sorry for himself, when he was responsible for so many deaths. It's disgusting. He is a murderer. He deserves to burn. Hydra deserves to burn.

It's like the floodgates have been opened and suddenly memories rush in, blood and death and images of bodies falling through the scope of his rifle. So much death, wrought by his hands. It may have been Hydra that created the weapon, that pointed him at the targets, but it was him that pulled the trigger. He presses his hands against his head, trying to stop the tide of memories that crash against his skull with fiery pain. It is-it is too much, and he deserves it, but it is too much and he finds himself slipping, the world growing fainter as his mind seeks to protect him from the onslaught, from the emotion that threatens to drown him. Eventually the world fades and blankness swallows him up, Barnes falling into peaceful nothingness.

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When he blinks back to reality he is sitting on the couch, wrapped in a blanket. He feels empty, a black hole inside him where his soul should be. All that is left is a quiet rage, one that has been growing since this morning and threatens to consume him. He remembers...not all of them, but enough. Enough to know that his hands will never be washed clean of blood. There are others, too, during the war, deaths that make his stomach turn. He had ripped out throats and shot young soldiers through the scope of his rifle without feeling a thing, because he had believed he was doing right. That he was protecting Steve. But he had thought-not that it was right, he wasn't allowed to question or think about those kind of things—that what he was doing for Hydra was...okay. His duty. What he was made for. He hadn't questioned it. He hadn't questioned it because he was so broken and pathetic that he believed anything they said, that he never tried to escape, that he let his handlers pet him and tell him good boy-

He hates himself, suddenly. Hates himself almost as much as he hates Hydra. For he is exactly what they made him. Lukin had succeeded, in the end. He had made Barnes into a weapon, had made him serve him and Hydra. Now there is no going back. He is dripping with blood, every inch of him tainted. And he knows, he knows that it was Hydra that made him into this, that maybe, just maybe he didn't have a choice, but he cannot stop the shame that floods through him. He looks over at Steve, seeing him sketching, oblivious, on the couch. He is beautiful and bright and too good for the likes of Barnes. He shouldn't be tainted by him, shouldn't have his heart broken when he realizes how damaged and twisted Barnes is, that he is not Bucky.

"Hey," Sam's voice breaks his thoughts. "You back with us, Barnes?"

No, he thinks. I don't want to be. He feels anger again, anger at Sam's gentle tone when he is a murderer, has hurt Sam, has torn his wing off and kicked him off the Helicarrier, has wrapped his
hand around his throat and snarled in his face and still Sam is kind and gentle and never blames him, and it is incomprehensible. It is painful. He wants Sam to hate him, to be angry at Barnes for everything he's done.

"Fuck off," he snarls.

"Bucky," Steve says, in that pained, sorrowful voice.

"I'm not Bucky," he growls, and he knows this will break Steve's heart but it is better this way.

Steve just nods. "Okay. That's okay."

Sam leans forward in the armchair. "Barnes, we can't help you unless you talk to us. I know you're hurting, but you gotta let us in."

Barnes glares at him. "What the-fuck do you want me to say? I killed people."

"It wasn't you," Steve says. "You didn't have a choice."

"I know," Barnes says, the energy draining out of him. "But I did it." Grief suffuses him, heavy and cold.

"I doesn't matter," Steve insists. "You didn't want to do it. God, B-you didn't even have memories. You wouldn't have known right from wrong even if they had allowed you to. There was no way you could have resisted, but you tried anyway. It wasn't your fault."

Barnes feels tears begin to spill down his face, part of him desperately wanting to believe Steve. "But I killed them," he whispers.

"I know," Steve says, voice breaking. "I know, and I'm so sorry." He extends a hand towards Barnes, an offer. Barnes takes it, pulling himself closer and laying his head in Steve's lap as the tears stream down his face. Steve strokes his hair and Barnes clings to him like he is a lifeboat in a storm, the part of him that craves reassurance taking over as he lets himself fall apart into Steve's solid form. He-he knows he didn't have a choice, and it is so horribly, devastatingly unfair. It is tearing him apart.

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He spends the afternoon napping with his head in Steve's lap, feeling drained and wrung out. There is still an emptiness inside him, a void that cannot be filled by Steve's comforting touch and gentle words. The rage that fills him is cold instead of hot. It is the kind of rage that festers, that eats a person up from the inside out. Barnes knows this, but still the rage grows.

Dinner is quiet, and afterwards Sam takes Barnes' old room while Barnes follows Steve into his bedroom. They are worried, he thinks. They keep shooting him looks and exchanging glances when they think he is not watching. It only makes Barnes feel more empty.

He climbs into bed, settling against Steve. Steve strokes his hair, heartbeat steady under Barnes' ear. It is quiet and peaceful but for the storm brewing inside Barnes. Steve's strokes slow and then stop as he drifts off to sleep, breaths even and deep. Barnes lies awake, mind spinning. The rage pulses under his breastbone, icy and constant; rage for Hydra and what they had done, what they had made him do. He wants-needs to burn them to the ground. He can, he thinks suddenly. He remembers bases, can track them using smell and skill. His body is healed and functional and his mind fractured but clearer than it's been in seventy years. He-he needs to do this, needs to enact justice for all the victims of Hydra, for his victims. This is his responsibility. It solidifies in his
mind, becoming tangible. He needs to do this. It feels like waking from a long sleep. He is awake now, and he is coming for Hydra.

He sits up slightly, looking at Steve. His face is open and relaxed in sleep, without the lines of worry in his face or the grief and pain in his eyes. Barnes' dog tags glint around his neck. Barnes feels a deep sadness as he looks at Steve. He-he *loves* him, he thinks, whatever that looks like in his broken mind. Steve is *everything*, always has been, and this is why Barnes needs to leave. Steve is too much, holds too much of Barnes' heart in his hands. This will break Steve's heart, but it's better this way. This way, Steve can remember him as he was, young and good and beautiful, instead of the damaged, scarred murderer he has been turned into. He can remember *Bucky*.

Barnes reaches forward, carefully grasping the dog tags and lifting them over Steve's head, smoothing a hand through Steve's hair. Steve sighs in his sleep and presses into the touch, murmuring something inaudible. Barnes puts the dog tags around his own neck, the weight familiar and *right*. A reminder of who he is. Steve had carried them for Bucky, and now Barnes will carry them for Steve. Then he gets up, moving silently as he finds a pair of Steve's tac pants and puts them on, pilfering a pair of boots, a long-sleeved shirt, a hat, and a jacket as well. He puts them on, popping the collar on the jacket to cover the scars on his throat as best he can and pulling the brim of the hat down low. He roots around for a duffel bag and stuffs some clothing into it, finding a wad of cash and MREs already in the bag. It's a go bag, apparently, and Barnes silently apologizes to Steve for taking it.

He hesitates by the bed, looking down at Steve. It *hurts*, like his heart is being ripped in two, but he knows he has to do this. He has to figure out who he is apart from Steve; has to find out who Barnes is now, rather than who Bucky *was*. He bends down, pressing his lips to Steve's forehead softly. Then he slips out the door, knowing if he looks back he won't be able to leave.

He gathers toiletries from the bathroom and some stocks of food from the kitchen, piling them into the duffel. He's halfway to the elevator when the sound of footsteps on the floor stop him. He turns to see Sam standing in the darkness, eyes wide with realization.

"You're leaving," he says, a statement rather than a question.

Barnes nods, watching him warily. "I'm not a prisoner, am I?" he questions, scanning Sam's eyes for the answer even though he knows what it will be, knows it is a low blow.

Pain flashes across Sam's expression briefly. "No," he says softly. "No, you're not a prisoner."

Barnes nods, turning to leave before Sam's voice stops him.

"Barnes," Sam says, and his voice is almost pleading. "Just...why?"

Barnes takes a breath. "I'm going to burn Hydra to the ground."

There's a pause. "Okay. Want any help?"

Barnes shakes his head. "I have to-I have to do this alone. I can't-Steve..." He shakes his head again. "I can't."

"I understand. You gotta do this for yourself, right? This is something you need to do?" Barnes nods. "I get it, man. I'm not-I'm not gonna stop you. Just know we're here for you, if you need us. Will you-will you take this?" Barnes turns to see Sam holding out his phone. "Steve's number is already on there, so if you wanna talk just call or text that. You don't have to talk to Steve, though, if you don't want to. I can answer it if you want."
Barnes hesitates before coming closer and taking the phone. Sam's hand lingers on his as he hands it over, eyes filled with inexplicable sadness.

"Thank you," Barnes says, and he means it. He puts the phone into the duffel.

Sam nods, swallowing. "You're welcome. Stay safe out there. Please. Promise me you won't go self-destructive."

Barnes hesitates, but nods. "I promise." Hydra are the only ones getting destroyed for now.

Sam sighs in relief. "Good. I can't-I can't lose you, Barnes. You hear me? I can't lose you. You stay safe, or I swear I will fly up to heaven and drag your white ass back down."

Barnes cocks his head. "You think I'm going to heaven?" He doesn't know why he latches onto this part of Sam's admission, but it strikes him somehow. If there is a hell, he is certainly destined for it. After all, he's already been there.

"If God doesn't take you to heaven-in like, fifty years, mind you- I will fight him with my bare hands." Sam steps closer. "You are the toughest, most good-hearted person I've ever met. Don't you ever forget that."

Barnes feels tears pricking at his eyes. He thought leaving Steve would be hard, but he was unprepared for the difficulty of leaving Sam. "Come here," he says roughly, dropping the bag and dragging Sam into a hug on forgotten instinct. Sam hugs back, face buried in Barnes' shoulder. Finally they break apart, eyes wet.

Barnes nods at Sam before picking up the duffel and turning, not looking back. He steps through the elevator, the doors closing on Sam's lone figure in the darkness, silent and still.
Chapter 24

I sing.
Sometimes I sing to break the empty silence,
Before the night devours my very existence.
And sometimes I sing to express myself,
And to let my story be heard by the woods.

I cry.
Sometimes I cry out of sheer sadness,
As I carry this heavy broken heart.
And, yes, sometimes, I cry out of joy,
When I stand at the eye of the storm.

I howl.
But when I Howl, I sing and I cry,
and I pray.... And I scream.. And I beg....
For him to hear me...
Is he there? Does he exist?
Will he ever answer?

_Hear Me_ By Arfael

Steve wakes slowly, something niggling at his brain. Something is wrong. He opens his eyes, looking around to find nothing but empty space, Bucky's weight absent from his side. He frowns, heart jumping, wondering where he is. Maybe he woke up early, or had a nightmare. Or maybe he's in the bathroom. Steve sighs, relaxing. He's just being paranoid. He can handle Bucky being away from him for two seconds. He lays there, drifting as he waits for Bucky to come back. When minutes pass with no Bucky, the apartment silent and still, Steve starts to get a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach. He sits up, and there is-something is missing from his neck. He raises his hand, groping for the familiar chain and tags, but finds nothing. They are gone.

His stomach drops, dread settling in. Maybe they just fell off, the logical part of his brain says, but deep down Steve knows something is wrong. They are nowhere to be found on the bed or in the room, and Bucky remains absent. Steve feels his heart rate start to pick up as panic sets in. Where is Bucky?

He stumbles out into the hallway, checking the bathroom. It is empty. He tries Sam's room but it is empty as well, door ajar. Desperately, he jogs into the living room, seeing Sam sitting on the couch looking tired and sad, deep shadows under his eyes. Steve's heart skips a beat.

"Where's Bucky?" he asks, voice frayed with panic.

Sam looks up, and his expression tells Steve everything he needs to know.

"No," Steve says. "No." He feels his legs go weak under him.

"He's gone," Sam says softly. _No, no, not again_, Steve thinks. _I can't do this again._ "He's going
after Hydra."

Steve feels cold. "We have to—we have to go after him. We have to help him." He is back in a frozen wilderness, pleading with Dum Dum to go back, we have to go back, we have to find him-

Sam shakes his head. "No. No, Steve. He has to do this on his own. I gave him my phone, so he has a way to contact us."

Steve blinks. "You talked to him? You let him go?"

Sam stands up, anger flashing across his face. "I didn't let him go, Steve. He's not a prisoner."

Steve feels like he's been slapped. He exhales, meeting Sam's eyes guiltily. "I know. I'm sorry, Sam."

Sam's expression softens. "I know. I know how much you love him, that this is breaking your heart. It's breaking mine. But he's gotta do this. It was the most coherent and sure I've heard him sound about anything, Steve. He knew what he was doing."

Steve bites his lip, tears pricking at his eyes. "But I can't—I can't lose him, Sam. Not again. I can't."
His voice breaks.

Sam moves forward, drawing Steve into a hug. Steve clutches him tightly, feeling tears slip down his face. He feels like if Sam lets go, he might fall to pieces, might shatter like glass. He can't lose Bucky again.

"You won't," Sam says. "I promise. You won't lose him."

***

The day passes in a blur. Sam coaxes Steve into going for a run, and then Steve works his way through a line of punching bags in the gym. He feels numb, the way he had after Bucky had fallen, a sort of empty grief that swallows him up. How many times does he have to lose Bucky? When will it be enough? He thinks the universe is infinitely cruel, that he only ever gets Bucky back just to lose him again. It is like they are destined to end in tragedy, fated never to be together. He thinks of how Bruce rambled about parallel universes one day and thinks that if they are real, this must be the darkest one. He prays, desperately, that somewhere out there is a universe where he and Bucky are happy, where there is no war and no Hydra and they remain innocent and hopeful forever, just two Brooklyn boys in love. Somewhere out there, they must get their happy ending.

***

Steve checks his phone obsessively throughout the day, hoping desperately that Bucky will call, or text, anything to show that he is still alive. But the phone stays silent, and Steve wonders if Bucky will ever come back to him. Maybe this is his fault. Maybe Bucky doesn't want anything to do with Steve anymore. That's—that's okay, Steve thinks. As long as Bucky is safe, he doesn't care. But the ache in his heart tells a different story. Come back, it says. Please, come back to me.

***

Finally, in the evening, the phone buzzes. Steve fumbles, hands shaking as he reads the short text on the screen.

*Dikeman Street. Warehouse at end by water. Base cleared.*

He is already getting up, Sam shooting him a worried look.
"What did he say?"

Steve passes him the phone. Sam reads, brow furrowed.

"We're going, I assume?" Sam asks.

Steve nods. "Gear up."

***

When they arrive at the warehouse in Red Hook they approach cautiously, not knowing what to expect. Steve is wearing civilian clothes since both uniforms are destroyed, but carrying his shield. Sam is similarly in regular clothes, but there's a gun tucked into his waistband. When they get to the door Steve can hear muffled groaning inside, and motions to Sam to follow his lead. After a silent countdown he bursts through the doors, stopping short at the sight.

There are agents and men in lab coats scattered on the floor, all bound or bleeding from shattered kneecaps. Around the edges of the walls are...cages, filled with various animals and surrounded by strange equipment. It looks like Hydra has been experimenting on them, and the thought turns Steve's stomach. The animals look terrified and half-starved, some with bleeding wounds or clear signs of experimentation, wires and tubes and shaved patches of fur dotted with needle marks. Steve is horribly reminded of Bucky.

"Jesus Christ," he hears Sam breathe. "What the absolute fuck."

Steve takes a deep breath, composing himself. "Okay, we're calling this in, after we make sure there's no...sensitive information."

Sam nods, getting his drift and face smoothing as he switches to soldier mindset. "Security cameras." He strides towards the central command station, typing away. The men are still groaning on the floor, watching Steve and Sam nervously. Steve strides over to one, crouching down.

"What happened here?" he questions.

The agent glares. "I'm not saying a word."

Steve nods. "Good." He sees the agent's eyes widen and shock and stands up, joining Sam at the command station. There's a paused feed on the screen, marked only an hour before. "Anything?"

Sam nods. "Yeah. Here's from when he hit it." He presses play, the feed resuming.

The agents are milling around, working at the station or standing guard as scientists work around the cages, jotting down notes and reading screens. Suddenly the door bursts open, the men scrambling as a familiar figure steps through. It's Bucky, in tac pants and a long-sleeved shirt, looking focused and deadly. The agents shoot but Bucky blocks the bullets with his metal arm, moving with terrifying grace as he disarms them and takes their weapons, using them to shoot out kneecaps. Nonlethal, Steve notices. He supposes that's a good thing, that it means Bucky is still in there. Soon everyone in the room is down, Bucky using spare parts and bending links of metal from the cages to bind most of them. He sweeps the warehouse and Steve sees him hesitate as he takes in the animals, something dark flashing across his face. Then he shakes himself and crouches down next to one of the agents, mouth moving but words inaudible. Steve sees the agent glare and shake his head but Bucky wraps a hand around his throat, eyes cold. Finally the man gasps out something, mouth moving for a minute before Bucky lets him go. Bucky disappears through the door the way he came, swift and silent.
Sam stops the feed. "I'm gonna delete this segment but leave the rest for evidence. We can probably call this in now."

Steve nods. "Sounds good."

Sam sets a hand on his arm. "This is good, Steve. He's actively taking down Hydra, but he's not killing anyone. It's the best we can hope for."

Steve swallows. "Yeah. I know." He closes his eyes. "I know."

***

They call it in, the police and FBI showing up to process everything. The agents and scientists are taken into custody, the animals carefully coaxed into cages to be taken to a special rehabilitation center and examined to discover the extent of the experimentation. Steve tries not to think about Bucky when he sees them. He knows Bucky must be long gone by now, though even if he weren't Steve knows he doesn't want them to look for him. It hurts, but he knows this is Bucky's choice. God knows he hasn't been given any choice in seventy years.

***

When they return to the tower Tony calls them down to the lab, bags under his eyes and a manic air that suggests he hasn't slept since he found out Bucky killed his parents.

"So," he says. "Jarvis says Barnes left?"

Steve swallows but nods. "Yeah."

Tony looks uncharacteristically vulnerable. "I'm sorry, Rogers. I really am. It wasn't-it wasn't because of me, was it?"

Steve shakes his head. "No. I don't think so. At least that wasn't the only reason. He just...this was something he had to do."

Tony nods. "Well, whatever you need, whatever he needs, all you have to do is ask."

Steve sets a hand on Tony's shoulder and squeezes. "Thanks, Tony."

Tony clears his throat. "Right, well, Sam, I have something for you. Turns out I can get a lot done when I don't sleep." He laughs jaggedly. "I finished your new wings."

Sam brightens. "Seriously? That's incredible. Not the no sleeping part, you really should sleep, man."

Tony huffs. "Yeah, yeah, I've heard it from Pepper already. I'll sleep after this, cross my heart. Want to see them?"

Sam raises his eyebrows. "Are you kidding? Of course."

***

Steve can't sleep that night, bed feeling cold and empty, feeling alone even though Steve knows Sam is in the next room. He keeps wondering where Bucky is, if he's doing okay. Is he eating? Does he have somewhere to sleep? Questions spin through his mind until eventually he drops off into an uneasy sleep, dreams filled with Bucky's face.
Pepper comes up the next morning, face lined with sympathy. She hands Steve a package, smiling softly.

"Thought you could use a new one."

Curious, Steve opens the package, revealing a new suit. It's similar to his stealth suit from Shield, a dark blue with the star in the center of his chest and silver accents, but the red and white stripes are back on the abdomen, just like his old one from the war. He looks up at Pepper, feeling unnameable emotion well in him.

"Thank you."

Pepper just smiles. "Don't mention it."

He runs with Sam, outpacing him easily and leaving Sam gasping for breath. He chuckles, feeling lighter than before. Sam is a grounding presence, not letting him spiral into grief and rage the way he usually would. Steve's been so focused on Bucky that he thinks he's forgotten how to live. Maybe this is what they both need, time apart that is not marked by death. He knows Bucky is out there and he can only hope he's safe so it's not like before, when he thought he was dead. It's...okay. Maybe they both need to figure out who they are on their own before they try to fit back together. It still hurts, but the ache has lessened. It will be okay. Bucky will come back. He just has to believe that.

The phone buzzes in the afternoon, with an address in New Jersey. Steve bites his lip, thinking. It looks like Bucky is going on a scorched earth tour, taking out Hydra bases as he goes. Eventually he's going to get further and further away, where Steve and Sam won't be able to get there very fast if they're in the tower. They need to be close, giving Bucky space but right behind him to clean up and offer help if necessary.

He turns to Sam. "How do you feel about a road trip?"

In under an hour they're packed and in the car, the radio playing softly. Sam sings along, voice clear and melodic. He goads Steve into singing as well, who is significantly less good. Sam looks over at him in incredulity.

"Dude, aren't you like, a perfect human specimen? How come you can't sing very well?"

Steve blushes. "I was partially deaf growing up. Never could hear pitch very well. Now I can, but I still never really learned how to sing."

Sam nods. "Well, we're fixing that. Also, your musical taste. You are way behind on the times. It is time for some serious education, Steve. We've got a whole road trip in front of us, and you bet imma make you learn every single Beyonce song. I can just picture it, Captain America himself singing Beyonce." Sam sighs. "It's beautiful."

"I hate you," Steve says, and Sam laughs.
"Oh, we haven't even begun."

***

When they get to Jersey it's to find a base filled with bound Hydra agents, kneecapped and groaning in distress. This one seems to be a munitions and personnel base, and it looks like Bucky took some supplies from Hydra judging by the cleared out shelves. Steve is glad, for this means he's taking care of himself. In the security feed Bucky looks dangerous but okay, again sticking to nonlethal methods and clearing the base with calm efficiency. Sam wipes the segment of the feed and they call it in, continuing to stick to the story that they've been taking out the bases. Steve is not risking Bucky being exposed to any government agency, no matter how virtuous they seem.

***

They find a motel to spend the night, two beds in a cramped room. They order Thai for dinner, some hole in the wall place that is surprisingly delicious. Steve leans back against the wall, fiddling with his chopsticks as he finishes his meal.

"Do you think he's okay?" he asks, breaking the silence.

"I don't know," Sam replies. "But I think so. He promised he was gonna take care of himself. I think he'll reach out if he needs anything."

Steve sighs. "Yeah. I just..." he trails off.

"You miss him, and you're always gonna worry about him. I get it. That's not a crime, Steve. You're allowed to have feelings."

Steve huffs in frustration. "But this was his choice, Sam. I should be okay with that. But I'm not, and what does that say about me?"

Sam turns, forcing him to meet his eyes. "It says you're human, Steve."

***

The next address is in Philadelphia. The base is tucked into the heart of the city, passing for an office building. Kneecapped agents line the hallways, and this time it looks like Bucky has rifled through all the information they have. File cabinets are in disarray, and sitting on the front desk is a stack of paper and a flash drive with a sticky note on the front, S+S written on it in shaky letters. Steve and Sam, Steve thinks. He picks up the pile, flipping through the papers. They're all about "The Asset," which as Steve reads he understands with a sick feeling to mean Bucky. Status reports, scientific notes and procedures, mission briefings, transcriptions of any correspondences that mention him. It seems Bucky wants Steve and Sam to have all this information, to keep it safe. It's a show of trust, one Steve holds to his heart. Bucky trusts them.

It makes their job a lot easier, now that they don't have to scour the base and destroy any information on Bucky. All they have to do is erase the security footage, which Bucky has left for some reason. Sam waves him over, a small grin on his face.

"Our boy says hello."

Steve peers closer, leaning over Sam's shoulder. Sam plays the feed, just as Bucky is leaving the building. Bucky is fully decked out in tactical gear, presumably swiped from the last base. He looks almost exactly like he did on the Helicarrier, except there is no mask covering his face. His left arm is in full view, shining silver in the light, and the high collar of his tac jacket masks the
scars on his neck, long hair brushing the edge. On screen Bucky stops under the camera, looking up deliberately. Then he raises a hand and snaps off a small salute before vanishing.

Steve lets out a breath, feeling hope blossom in his chest. It's Bucky. It's really him. That's what they used to do during the war, what Bucky had done the night before he had left. A small salute, a thanks, pal. Bucky remembers, Steve thinks. Hopes. Bucky will come back to him.

***

They crash at a hotel in the city, not much nicer than the first.

"Steve," Sam says, "You got all this money, and we're staying in two-star hotels? Nah, man. Not cool."

"It's Philadelphia," Steve protests. "All the hotels suck. Plus, I'm pretty recognizable. No one cares in a two-star."

Sam sighs, rolling his eyes. "Alright. But I demand nice digs at some point. I'm spoiled from the tower, and you bet your ass I'm gonna use your money for an actual worthy purpose."

Steve chuckles. "Deal."

***

"Okay," Sam says, as the credits roll on the small tv in their room, having just finished the first Harry Potter film that happened to be playing. "That was the first one. How'd you like it?"

"That was amazing. How many more?" Steve asks.

"Well, there's seven books but they made the last one into two movies so...seven more."

"Wow. Seven books?"

Sam grins. "You know what, next time we pass a bookstore we're getting them. Books are better than the movies."

"Aren't they always?" Steve says.

Sam laughs. "You're not wrong. Look at this, I've turned Captain America into a Harry Potter fan. My sister would be so proud."

"Molly?"

Sam nods. "Yeah." His expression goes soft. "I miss her."

"She's living in Seattle, right?"

"Yeah. Hey, maybe there's a Hydra base there. We could stop by. She'd love to meet you."

"Of course," Steve says. "I'd love to. I'd love to meet all your family."

"Well, when we get back to New York I'll take you up to Harlem, treat you to my mom's famous cooking. As soon as she sees you she'll be all over you like a mother hen." Sam mimics her voice. "'Samuel Wilson, what have you been eating? You're far too skinny. You sit your ass down at this table and eat, right now.' I swear, I could be 300 pounds and my mom would still say I'm too skinny. She's gonna see your dorito-shaped self and just about faint with horror."
Steve raises an eyebrow. "Dorito-shaped?"

"Uh, yeah, dude have you ever looked in a mirror? You got these huge shoulders and tiny hips. You're literally shaped like a dorito. Every time you ran past me I was like, 'damn, who's this dude with the tiny ass and too-tight shirt?''

Steve can't help it, he laughs. "Were you looking at my ass?"

"Hell yeah. A man can admire. And don't you dare tell me you weren't flirting with me. I got eyes."

Steve blushes. "Sorry."

"What the hell are you sorry for? I got flirted with by Captain America. And let me tell you, I was into it."

Steve blinks. "Wait, really?"

Sam looks at him like he's an idiot. "Uh, yeah. Who wouldn't be? And Jesus, Steve, you came to my house for help and I immediately dropped everything and took down the government with you. Then I up and went to New York just to follow your dumb ass. You think I would do that for just anyone?"

Steve shrugs. "I guess I didn't...think about it like that. I thought you were just being a good friend."

"I was. I am. But there's more to it. You're the first person since-since Riley that I really felt a connection with. And goddammit, I can't seem to stop falling in love with dumbass white boys."

Sam sighs. "It's a curse."

"Love?" Steve says softly.

Sam gives him a small smile. "If you don't know by now that I love you, Rogers, you're even more of an idiot than I thought. Platonically, whatever, take your pick. I'd follow you into hell at this point."

Steve swallows. "I love you too, Sam."

Sam rolls his eyes, gesturing with his arms. "Come here, man. Hug it out."

Steve obeys, making his way over to Sam's bed and wrapping Sam in a hug.

"You're amazing, Sam Wilson," he says. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

Sam squeezes back. "Probably get yourself killed in some dumbass way, and you know it."

Steve laughs. "You're not wrong."

***

Steve musters up the courage to look through the flash drive, plugging it into Sam's laptop. Immediately files come up, looking to be video files. After clicking on a few Steve realizes it's the tapes from Russia of Bucky, along with the ones in DC. This must have been where everything was backed up. Tony already has all the films at the tower, and Steve has no interest in watching any again. He clicks on a few other files, finding schematics for the arm, the collar, and the mask along with detailed notes on every aspect of Bucky, from his metabolic rate to how he shifts. Another file
contains all the information for the chair, which makes Steve shudder with horror. It's laid out in such clinical terms, detailing exactly what it does as if it's nothing but a harmless piece of technology instead of a torture device. Once he's satisfied there's nothing imminently important on the flash drive he stores it safely in his bag along with the papers. He'll keep them safe, but he has no desire to look at them. It's up to Bucky what to do with them, when he returns. If he returns. *He'll come back*, a voice in Steve's head says. He wants to believe it. For now, all he can do is respect Bucky's choice and help him in any way possible, even if that means keeping his distance. He'd do anything for Bucky.

He falls asleep with Sam in the next bed, sleeping soundly. In his dreams he reaches for Bucky only for Bucky to disappear into smoke, as if he had never been there at all.
Chapter 25

Howl at the moon, lone wolf.
For your anger fuels your cry.
Left to roam, but without a home.
Your voice echoes to the sky.

Howl at the moon, lone wolf.
For you have left the pack.
Prideful and strong, you refuse to follow.
And for you there's no turning back.

Howl at the moon, lone wolf.
For the forest will spread fear.
Late at night, with no hope in sight.
Your call will catch their ear.

Howl at the moon, lone wolf.
The blood flows through your core.
The flesh of your enemy torn to shreds,
Leaves you only wanting more.

So howl at the moon, my dear lone wolf.
For it's they only way you know.
You'll cry to the unforgiving sky.
And never find where to go.

_Lone Wolf_ by Nolan Davis

Barnes drives the stolen car down the road, a gloved metal finger tapping on the steering wheel. The window is cracked and a cool breeze ruffles his hair, carrying the scents of asphalt and gasoline and grass, and he feels the inexplicable urge to put his head out the window and let the air wash over his face. He'd passed Baltimore a little while ago, heading for DC, but he's taking the back roads and there is little traffic to disturb his introspection. He has a list of bases in his head, pieced together from the agent in New York and the files in Philadelphia. The New York base he had stumbled upon by sheer luck, after heading to Brooklyn to try and trigger more memories. Brooklyn was unrecognizable, but he'd picked up a strange scent near Red Hook that led him right into some fucked-up Hydra lab. He'd wanted to burn the place to the ground but didn't, trusting Steve and Sam to clean up his mess the right way, whatever that was. He hadn't killed anyone, either. He's trying to be...good, he thinks, trying to be anyone but the soldier. He doesn't want to kill anyone anymore.

He'd gotten the list of addresses from one of the agents there, stolen a car, and headed for the next one, which just so happened to be in New Jersey. _Fucking Jersey_, a voice in his head tells him. He has to agree. He'd used the money he'd taken from Steve to get a room in a sketchy motel, where...noises made it impossible to sleep. The shower had been cold but he'd gritted his teeth and endured it, trying to shake memories of a cold hose and cement floors. The next base, in
Philadelphia, was only a stone's throw away, but he'd spent longer scoping it out and trying to stay unobtrusive in the city. He'd taken more supplies from the base in New Jersey, including a full set of tac gear and as many weapons as he could fit in his car and the duffel, and felt a surge of vicious pleasure when he walked into the Philadelphia base looking exactly like the soldier. They were terrified, all of them, terrified that the weapon they'd created had turned against them, that their favorite dog had teeth. You're damn right you should be scared of me.

He'd found all the information about himself and left it for Steve and Sam, not able to look at it. He doesn't need reminders of what Hydra did to him. He knows Steve and Sam are covering his tracks, are deleting anything that could identify him, and is grateful for it. He'd even thrown a small salute to the camera, a thank you for everything. He wonders, in the moments before he goes to sleep, how Steve is doing. Was he angry when he left? Sad? Did he want to come after Barnes? The questions torment him, making guilt claw at his insides before he squashes it down. No. He has to do this. Sam had understood. Sam had told him to take care of himself.

He is...taking care of himself. He is surviving. Running on foggy memories and sheer determination he has figured out how to live in this world, how to get food and lodging and transportation and how to blend in in a crowd. How to talk to people. He is not eloquent, can barely manage more than a simple food order or room request, but he is functional. He thinks back to weeks ago, after the Helicarriers, when he was lost and terrified, and feels rage at Hydra for making him so helpless. No longer will he be dependent on anyone, including Sam and Steve. He is his own person, even if that person is a goddamn fucking mess.

He arrives in DC, anxiety thrumming through him at the familiar city where so much had happened. He can barely make himself drive towards the base, the base, where he had been kept all those years, where he had said but I knew him and Pierce had said wipe him and they had taken everything, had screwed the mask to his face-

Keep it together, Barnes, he tells himself, steering wheel creaking under the metal hand. God, he's a mess. More memories have come back over the past few days, Barnes waking up screaming in dingy motel rooms as people bang on the wall and shout "be quiet!" He remembers more deaths, and torture, a never-ending reel of horrors in his head that make his hand shake and breaths come fast. He loses time, too, when it gets to be too much. He'd blanked out while driving once and nearly ended up in a ditch, an experience he's not keen to repeat. His head feels like the inside of a circus, if that circus was a horror show of torture and death complete with eerie music and his own screams. Still, despite this, his head feels clearer than it has in seventy years. He knows, at least vaguely, who he is, and he knows what is wrong and what is right in the strictest sense. He can function passably well in the real world, and he hasn't killed anyone. It's a low bar, he thinks, but it's what he's got.

He pulls into a motel near the base but far enough away that it can't be connected, paying for the room with more cash he'd swiped from the munitions base in Jersey. He secures all his belongings in the room, changing into his tac gear but putting a jacket and glove over top to mask the metal arm. Then he head out, making his way towards the base. When he arrives he stops short to see yellow tape across the front, his keen senses picking up no one inside. He pushes through the tape, shuddering as memories surface of being dragged struggling through these halls, the collar sending pain spiking through his body. Now it is still and silent, rooms bare and stripped by whoever had come through here. Police, he thinks. Maybe government. He should leave, he knows, there is nothing here, but something pulls at him. He creeps down to the lower level, tracing the path they had dragged him just a few weeks ago. When he steps through the barred door the breath rushes out of him at the sight of the chair, sitting empty and foreboding in the middle of the room. They hadn't taken it, probably didn't even know what it was for.
He takes tentative steps forward, feeling sick as he approaches. How much pain and suffering this chair had caused, not only to him but to the people who died at his unfeeling hands. This was where they stripped away his identity, where they made him into the soldier. So much suffering, from one small thing.

Sudden rage and grief consumes him and he jolts forwards, grabbing the arm of the chair with a metal hand and ripping it away. A feral cry falls from his lips as he sets into it, ripping it apart until there is nothing left but twisted scraps of metal. He heaves for breath, resting his hands on his knees as a sob is ripped from his chest. It is gone. It cannot hurt him anymore, but it doesn't matter. It has already done the damage. Barnes sinks to the floor, surrounded by destruction, and cries. He cries for himself, for what they had done for him, what they had turned him into. He cries for the people he killed, victims of a mindless weapon who didn't have a choice. It hits him, all at once, splintering him to pieces. He didn't have a choice.

***

He doesn't know how he makes it back to the motel. He feels drained but new, like lancing an infected wound. The base is gone. The chair is gone. Pierce is gone. He didn't have a choice. He knows this now, is finally starting to accept this. He is not blameless, but he didn't have a choice, at least in that regard. He eats an MRE and falls into the lumpy mattress, falling asleep in minutes.

***

He wakes up screaming. This is nothing new. After his heart rate and breathing settle he drags himself out of bed, taking a lukewarm shower and shaving before dressing in jeans, a shirt, and a jacket. He crams the hat on his head and pulls on a pilfered glove over the metal hand, knives tucked into as many places as he can carry them and a wad of cash in his pocket. The dog tags are a hard lump under his shirt, reminding him who he is. He sets out the door, not knowing where he's going but his rumbling stomach pushing him to find food that isn't MREs. He finds a small diner and ducks in, taking the booth in the corner with good sight lines to the door. A waitress comes over, smile fixed in place as she slides a menu onto the table.

"Hi, I'm Deborah and I'll be your waitress today. Can I get you started with something to drink?"

"Water," he rasps, keeping his head low under the cap.

She nods. "Alright. I'll be back in a minute, hon."

She leaves, Barnes' eyes flicking around constantly as he assesses his surroundings. He is...nervous, around people, out in the open. He relies on Bucky's memories of human interaction to get him through but it's like a robot trying to copy a human; he is stiff and awkward and has none of the grace or charm that Bucky did. Still, he is...able to communicate, at least. Look on the bright side, Barnes.

He picks up the menu, scanning the items. There are...too many options, but there is no Steve or Sam to help him and so he tells himself get it together, Barnes, and picks the simplest thing he can, the first item on the menu.

The waitress returns, setting down a glass of water on the table and pulling out a notepad. "Are you ready to order?"

He nods.

"Alright, what'll it be?"
He swallows, trying to speak, but this is apparently a bad day for Barnes' brain and the words won't come. Frustrated, he improvises, holding up one finger for the #1 option on the menu. The waitress just nods, unperturbed.

"Okay, coming right up." She takes his menu, disappearing again, and Barnes breathes a sigh of relief. Human interaction. He is managing. Well, you didn't kill her, the voice says. That's a start. Or strangle her. Like you did Steve, and Sam, because you're erratic, unstable... He rubs his temple, head aching. Shut up, he tells the voice. Shut up shut up shut up-

There is a sound and Barnes jolts, blinking to see the waitress in front of him with the plate of food. Shit. Shit. He lost time. Fuck. Fuck. He tries to slow his breathing, heart still racing. The waitress looks slightly surprised as she stands there, food in hand.

"Sorry hon, didn't mean to startle you. You alright?"

He nods shakily, unclenching his metal fist where it rests on the table. The waitresses' eyes flick to the gloved hand briefly, a sympathetic look on her face.

"Where'd you serve? I don't mean to pry, just-my son's a vet. Afghanistan."

Barnes swallows. "All over," he says hoarsely. The words are back, thankfully.

"Few weeks." His pulse is slowing, normality returning.

"That's rough. My Patrick's been back a few months and I know how hard it can be. Well, listen, how bout a cup of coffee? On the house. You look like you could use it."

He nods. "Thanks."

She slides the food onto the table. "No need, hon. You just enjoy, now."

Barnes feels something almost...warm, at this small act of compassion. Humans are so much more than the ones who had hurt him all those years, he is finding. They are, on the whole, good.

***

On his way back to the motel he sees a poster with Steve's face on it, decked out in his Captain America uniform and helmet. Barnes studies it, the sign reading The Captain America Exhibit, at the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum Now! An exhibit, dedicated to Steve. He feels a tug of curiosity, a desire to see what exactly people say about Steve, about Captain America. He doesn't know anything other than what Steve has told him, knows nothing but an abridged version of their shared history. If he can't ask Steve, maybe the exhibit will give him answers.

He finds his way to the museum, blending into the stream of people. There is there is Steve, small like he remembers, and then big like he is now. A voiceover speaks, narrating his life. The biggest display is mannequins of the-the Howling Commandos, a mural behind with his own face staring out at him from Steve's left. He-he remembers, the Commandos-bunch'a gum-flappin' idiots-and the war, remembers the wolf and Dum Dum and Monty and Gabe and Morita and Dernier and it comes over him in a wave, the grief for friends he barely remembers. He turns away, coming face to face with a large display dedicated to him, his face tired and worn in the picture in a way that is more familiar. He reads the biography, short and un-detailed but undeniably real in a sense. He was a person, a real person, whose face is plastered in a museum for posterity. How had Hydra looked him in the eye every day, knowing who he was? It takes a certain amount of evil, he thinks,
to do that. To tell someone they are nothing when they are written down in history for all to see. Was it a joke? he wonders. Did they laugh, when they talked about how he didn't even remember who he was? They had known, they had known who he was and they didn't care. Barnes is the only Howling Commando to give his life in service of his country. It is true, he thinks. They took everything from him.

There is a clip playing, beneath the display. On it, Steve and Bucky stand side by side, eyes bright and bodies shaking with laughter. There's a flash, here and gone-we're in France!-and as Barnes stares at it he wonders how his face had ever conjured up a smile. He doesn't think he can, now. He's not sure he knows how. In the film Bucky's throat is smooth and unscarred, his right ear intact and hair short, a blinding grin on his and Steve's faces. They look-they look so young, and innocent, though Barnes knows Bucky had already been turned into the wolf, can see the sharp teeth when he smiles. He had already lost his innocence. But they were still happy, because-they were together. They had not yet been touched by grief, that all-consuming force that swallows up happiness and hope, that shatters hearts into pieces so small they cannot ever be put back together again. It was just him and Steve against the world, invincible and immortal. Well, they may have been immortal, in the end, but they certainly weren't invincible.

He turns away, finding himself in a small, quiet movie theater. A film is playing, a familiar face on the screen. Peggy, he remembers. Dark hair and red lipstick, a hand on his cheek, stay safe, James-

He wonders if she's still alive. If the Commandos are still alive. He needs-he needs to know. He pulls out his phone, finding the internet icon and typing in Dum Dum Dugan. He's just started to learn the wonders of the internet, and the Bucky Barnes inside him who used to love science and technology thrives in this modern world. He scrolls, finding a death date. Dugan is gone. He thinks he should feel something, but the emotions are buried with his faded memories, out of reach. He types in the others, one by one, finding all of them dead and gone. But Peggy, Peggy is alive. She is out there, somewhere, and suddenly he needs to see her. He needs for her to look at him with those sharp eyes and find everything inside him he didn't want to admit, to break him open with cutting words but soothe him with soft hands and a sweet voice. In his memories, she is the only one who ever tells him the truth without holding back, is the only one not afraid to knock him down a peg and scold him. He needs her to look at him and tell him what she sees, to lay him bare in blistering truth. He needs to see her.

He hesitates, looking down at the phone. It's a Starkphone, so it never needs to be charged, and so far he's only used it to text addresses of bases to Steve and Sam and Google things. But this is something he can't look up, doesn't know how to find out otherwise. Taking a breath he types out a message before he can back out, using only his right hand since the screen doesn't respond to the left.

Peggy. Address?

He waits anxiously, finger tapping on his thigh. Only a minute later there is a response, an address in DC. Barnes exhales. It is so close. He types the address into a handy thing he's found called Google maps, getting up and exiting the museum as he heads in that direction.

***

He slips into the nursing home, evading the staff and wandering the halls until he finds the room labeled Peggy Carter. He slips inside, seeing...Peggy, but not Peggy, sitting in bed reading a book. She is old, wrinkles lining her face and hair gray, but he recognizes her, can trace her features under the age lines and it is her, it is Peggy, and he remembers-
She looks up, sensing his presence.

"Who's there?"

He takes off his cap, stepping into the light. Peggy's eyes widen and she sets down the book, gazing at him in wonder.

"James?" she breathes.

He swallows, moving closer until he is by her bedside. A hand reaches out, wrapping around his, and her eyes are wet with tears.

"It's been so long," she says. "So long."

He squeezes her hand, feeling emotion rise up. "Peggy," he chokes out. "Peggy-" He sinks to his knees by the bed, resting his head on their joined hands. He feels Peggy's other hand find his head, stroking through his hair in shaky motions.

"It's alright," she says. "I've got you." She puts her fingers under his chin and tilts his head up, sharp eyes searching his. "What have they done to you?" she whispers, gaze filling with sorrow.

He closes his eyes briefly, overcome by emotion. When he opens them Peggy is still staring at him, assessing.

"Steve isn't here," she says, a statement rather than a question.

He nods. "I-I left."

Her head tilts. "Why?"

He searches for the answer. "Because-because I had to. I'm not-I'm not Bucky. And I'm going after Hydra."

Peggy's fingers tighten on his chin. "You two are idiots. God know how I fell in love with you both." She sighs. "But I understand. You need to figure yourself out first, revenge trip and all that. Just-" Her gaze is intense. "Don't push Steve away because you think you aren't worth it. I know you, James Buchanan Barnes. I know that's what you do. You did it during the war, and you're doing it now. Don't bullshit me. You are Bucky, whether you want to be or not. He's a part of you."

Her voice softens. "And you don't have to be the same person you were. No one ever is. That doesn't mean you aren't still Bucky. I've changed over the years, and I'm still Peggy. Steve's changed. Everyone changes." She smiles softly. "You're not as different as you like to think. I can still see you, underneath everything." She cups his cheek. "You are still James Barnes. My James. Nothing can change that."

He exhales, something settling into place. He is-he is James. He may not be Bucky, not yet, but he can be James. It is easier, lighter, but more than Barnes. He is Peggy's James, rather than Steve's Bucky. Someone who's been through war and torture already rather than the innocent Bucky of Brooklyn.

"As for Hydra," Peggy continues, eyes filling with anger, "I hope you burn them to the ground."

James thinks he smiles, the slightest baring of his teeth. "I will."

***
After he leaves Peggy he goes back to the motel, head pounding and heart aching with everything they had talked about. Peggy is almost like him now, he thinks. She forgets, sometimes, and loses time. But she is still the same, had still been able to see straight into his heart better than he could. He is starting to understand who he is now. He is Bucky and he is James and he is Barnes, all tangled together and mixed with the soldier and the wolf. He doesn't have to be one or the other. He can be both. He can be all. That is what it is to be a person, he thinks. People are complex, are never just one thing. If he is a person, then maybe it is okay to feel fractured, to feel like there are multiple selves in his head all striving for dominance. Maybe they don't have to compete. Maybe they can all just be.

He changes into soft pants and a shirt, taking time to feel all the changes in his body. He runs his right hand over the metal arm as he holds it up, marveling at the beauty of the intricate plates. It is beautiful, for all the pain and death it has caused. He thinks of what Peggy had said. Even if it was used for bad, he has a choice of how to use it now. It is his, whether he wants it or not. Hydra may have given it to him, but it is his. The scars, too, are his, are proof of what he has been through and survived. He hates them, but they are his. His body is his own. He repeats it, like a mantra. His body is his own.

He falls asleep quickly, the ghost of Peggy's touch on his face.

***

He wakes up screaming, images of white walls fading from his mind. When he is showered he packs up his stuff, climbing into the car again and pulling away. The next base is outside of Roanoke, Virginia, only a few hours drive according to Google maps. He turns on the radio as he drives, fiddling with the dials as unfamiliar music greets his ears. Some of it it okay but some is positively horrible, and he eventually settles on a station proclaiming itself to be alternative. The drive passes quickly, James listening to the music and running through his list of bases in his mind. He doesn't know what to expect for each one, since he was only ever kept in DC. Even there he had no sense of his surroundings, didn't even know the name of the city. How well they had kept him ignorant and helpless, he thinks. It only sparks more rage and his hands tighten around the wheel, foot pressing down on the pedal. He wants to burn them to the ground. In a non-lethal way, of course. Maybe. He's working on the good guy thing, and he's pretty sure the first rule is not killing people. Pretty sure. He's still figuring it out.

***

He gets a motel on the outskirts of Roanoke, unloading his things into the cramped room before selecting what he needs for the mission and heading back out. When he reaches the address it's in the middle of nowhere, a large building set into the woods with only one road in and out. He parks the car a little ways down the road for an easy getaway just in case and strips, shifting into the wolf. He trots forward, scouting with his enhanced senses and using the foliage for cover. He smells and hears multiple people inside, more than any base before, and maps their positions approximately. It makes him uneasy but he knows he has to do this. He makes his way back to the car, enjoying the feeling of running as the wolf. It is freeing, relieving the knot of tension that always sits in his chest. He really should do this more often, he thinks.

When he gets back to the car he shifts and changes back into his tac gear, metal arm on full display. Knives and guns are strapped to his body, the weight familiar and comforting. He creeps back towards the base, aiming a handy grenade launcher he'd taken straight at the door and blowing it up. He strides forward through the explosion, the room in chaos. Bullets ping off the metal arm as he whirls and strikes, using agents as shields to stay their fire. The other agents just shoot them, and James counts those deaths as on them, rather than him. Honestly. He moves
through them, panting with exertion as he finds himself overwhelmed. Shit. This was a bad idea, James, shoulda fucking called for backup -

It's even harder because he is trying to be nonlethal, and the bastards keep shooting at him even when he kneecaps them. He starts getting sloppier about preserving life, shooting through shoulders and knocking people out with blows from his metal fist. They'll live. Probably.

He's almost through them when the bullet rips through his side. Fuck. He has a sudden thought: Why the fuck is he trying not to kill Hydra? They're fucking Nazis. He killed Nazis in the war. Good guy, James, the voice whispers. Fuck you, he returns. Nazis.

He turns, shooting the agent who shot him through the head. Yes. Good guys shoot Nazis. He's a good guy. Way to go, James. He's figuring shit out. He's trying to be nonlethal, but if a few Nazis die... accidentally, who is going to blame him? It's not like killing for Hydra. He's doing good, now, is on the right side. This is war.

He fights with renewed vigor, tearing through the agents. He feels the pain of his wound distantly, ignoring the warm wetness spreading through his jacket. Another bullet grazes his thigh and he stumbles, flinging a knife into an agent's chest. Finally the men are down, more than half of them without fatal wounds, which James takes to be a success. He staggers, suddenly feeling weak. He looks down to see the stain spreading through the black jacket, a neat hole on the left side of his abdomen. Fuck.

He doesn't bother tying up the agents or clearing the base, stumbling out of it as the world starts to spin slightly, hand pressed to the wound. He makes it to the car, smearing blood everywhere as he climbs in. He manages to start the car and put it in gear, gripping the steering wheel with his metal hand as his right presses against the wound. He drives until he gets to the motel, thanking his lucky stars that no one is around to see him stagger into the room with tac gear, a metal arm, and a gunshot wound. He makes it to the bathroom, grabbing a towel and slumping to the floor, leaning back against the cabinet as he presses the towel to his side. He fumbles for his phone, blood smearing the screen as he tries to type out a message.

Apple valllry motel roomsix ROanoke vrgnia justSam shot hlp

He hits send and the phone slips from his grasp, hitting the floor. His head feels fuzzy and his limbs gradually get heavier, eyes closing as darkness swallows him up.

***

He comes back to consciousness to a voice, speaking in slightly panicked tones.

"Barnes. Barnes. Come on, man."

A hand touches his shoulder and he cracks open his eyes, Sam's face swimming in his vision.

"Hey man. You with me?"

He tries to nod but his head is too heavy. "Ye-" he slurs.

"Okay. Good. That's good. I'm gonna take a look at this wound, okay?"

Okay. Okay, Sam. He tries, but he can't say it, the world blurring around him and his head swimming. Sam peels his hand and the towel away from his side, squinting at it.

"Alright, we're gonna have to take this off." He tugs on the leather tac jacket. "Also, how the hell
James reaches across with his metal arm, grabbing the seam and ripping the jacket off clumsily.

"Alright, that works," Sam says. He peels the jacket the rest of the way off, part of it sticking to the wound painfully. James doesn't flinch as Sam pulls it off, tossing it into the corner. Hands prod the wound, James' eyes blinking heavily as he fights to stay awake.

"Damnit," Sam swears. "The bullet is still in here. I'm gonna have to dig this out. Some more Lidocaine..." Between blinks James sees Sam take out a syringe, positioning it near the wound. "Okay, little pinch," Sam mutters, and slides the needle into his side. "-eel that?" Sam asks. James thinks he lost time.

James shakes his head slightly, just a small twitch.

"Okay, good." Sam takes out tweezers and begins to dig in the wound, James watching blearily. The world is spinning and he is drifting, floating away on a heavy fog, limbs heavy and head light and he thinks there is something he is supposed to be doing but he can't think of it, can't think of anything, he is so tired-

"-arnes. Stay with me."

He blinks open his eyes, not knowing when he had closed them. Sam is in front of his face, one hand on his cheek.

"There we go. We're almost done. Listen, I'm counting on your healing factor, or I would be dragging your ass to a hospital right now. You probably need a blood transfusion, but unfortunately I don't think there's anyone else with your blood match because of all the...weird shit. So don't you dare die on me, Barnes."

James nods against his hand, struggling to stay awake. Sam withdraws, taking out a needle and sutures and bending close to James' side again. He starts to sew, no pain registering in James mind as he watches with detached fascination. Sam finishes quickly, tying it off and taping a bandage over it. Then he sits back, sighing.

"Okay. That's the best I can do. We'll just have to hope for the best. Can you move?"

James raises an eyebrow, or at least tries to. He is not going anywhere right now, he knows that. He is trying to stay awake but the world is spinning and black spots appear before his eyes and Sam is speaking but it swirls away as James falls into peaceful darkness.

***

He wakes again to Sam shaking his shoulder, face inches from his. He blinks, the world clearer and his head less muddled. His side burns with aching fire, a slightly lesser burn on his thigh. Every muscle hurts and his neck feels stiff from the awkward angle he'd slept in. Sam is speaking, voice low and even.

"-an, how're you feeling?"

James opens his mouth, throat dry. "Like I got shot," he rasps, and Sam chuckles.

"Yeah. You sure did. How'd that happen?"

James blinks blearily. "Base. Too many of them." Suddenly he realizes he just left the base without
clearing it or telling Steve and Sam where it was. This is a shitshow. "Fuck," he swears. "Goddamnit. I didn't even clear it."

"What's the address?" Sam holds up his phone. "I'll get Steve on it."

He rattles off the address, Sam typing it into his phone. James looks around to see the bathroom clean of blood, the smell of bleach stinging his nose. He's only in his underwear, another bandage over the graze on his right thigh. Sam must have done that after he passed out, he thinks. He looks down, seeing the bandage on his side soaked through with blood, though it seems Sam has cleaned the blood from around it.

"I need to change that," Sam says, following his gaze.

James squints around, taking in the light filtering through the blinds. "How long?"

"It's morning. You passed out last night and stayed out for a good twelve hours." Sam sighs, scrubbing a hand over his face. There are dark shadows under his eyes. "You scared me, Barnes. You could've died."

James swallows, feeling guilty. "Sorry."

"I know you don't want to see Steve, but you gotta stop taking on more than you could handle. We've got plenty of resources to take out large bases if you just tell us where they are."

James sighs, biting his lip before nodding. "Okay."

Sam looks relieved. "Good. Now, I'm gonna change this bandage and then let's get you off this floor and into an actual bed. You need to stay put until this is healed. You're not gonna go running off if I leave occasionally to get food, are you?"

James raises an eyebrow. "No." He doesn't actually think he could walk more than two feet right now, though he's not telling Sam that.

"Good. At least you got some sense."

James huffs, raising his right hand and extending his middle finger. Sam bursts out laughing and James feels the hints of a smile on his lips, something warm growing inside him.

***

Sam stays with him the whole day, occasionally grabbing food or checking on the bullet wound. James talks sometimes, wondering how only days before he could barely string two words together. Now he's up to...maybe five. Eight at most. It's a work in progress.

"How is...Steve?" he asks hesitantly, wanting to know but at the same time not.

Sam shoots him a cautious glance. "He's okay. He misses you, but he respects your choice."

James nods, digesting this information. "Where is he?"

"Right now? Probably finishing up with the base and going back to our room." Sam winces. "I should tell you, we got rooms here. I was already here and we figured it'd be stupid to get a room far away. Is that...is that okay?"

James just nods. That's okay. They're still letting him make his own decisions.
"Does that mean you're okay with seeing Steve?"

James hesitates before shaking his head. It's-it's too soon. He still needs to figure himself out first. "No," he says. "It's just...too much."

Sam nods. "I understand. You don't have to see him. Can I ask, what's different about me? You don't seem to have a problem seeing me."

"It's..." James searches for the words. "Different. You know me...now. He knew me...before. I don't-I don't know...who I am. I need to figure-figure it out."

"Yeah," Sam says softly. "Yeah, that makes sense. Listen, you don't have to be anyone you don't want to be. Whoever you are now is okay. Steve doesn't expect you to be the same person, you know."

He nods. "I-I know. It's just...everything-everything is Steve. In my memories. I don't know who-who I am." He closes his eyes. "It's just...too much."

"Okay. That's okay. That's actually really healthy. You shouldn't base who you are around someone else, so I'm actually glad you understand that. You take as much time as you need to figure yourself out, whoever that is."

James opens his eyes, glancing over at Sam. "Thank you," he says quietly, meaning it. Sam has done so much for him.

Sam's face softens. "No need. I've got your back, Barnes."
Chapter 26

Evening gusts shall take away all my fear,
The stars will shine and fill my eyes with cheer,
The universe holds everything so dear
But you my love...How much I want you here

Lonely nights upon horizons I face
To hold you again in this sacred place
I howl forlorn into the moonlit space
Where once we lay in our loving embrace

Weeping willows shall whistle in the glen,
As I lay silent with paper and pen
You left me, but I forgive you, again
The tree my witness, return to me, then...

We grow our roots beneath this willow tree
In sun and rain we will together be

This Willow Tree by Darren White

Steve paces in the small motel room, anxiously flipping his phone through his fingers, cool night air blowing through the cracked window. Sam had told him that Bucky was alive and kept him updated on his condition, but he can't help worrying. When he'd gotten that text his heart had stopped and he'd thought no, not again, I can't lose him again. When they'd gotten to the motel he'd barely restrained himself from crashing through the door to get to Bucky, only stopped by Sam's warning look and a promise that he'd keep him in the loop. It's killing him, not being able to see Bucky or help him when he's literally just rooms away, and he wants to know how he's doing, if he's eating, or showering, or sleeping enough? How does he look? Does he remember more? What-

The phone buzzes, interrupting his downward spiral. It's from Sam.

All good. Barnes is asleep. Will be back soon.

Steve exhales. He's been waiting here alone all day, after he had dealt with the mess of the Hydra base that Bucky had left. There had been dead and injured agents everywhere, and the whole place had been a lab for experimental weapons. Steve had called it in but had a bad feeling when the FBI agents had looked at him strangely after seeing knives embedded in bodies and several crushed throats, no injuries that would be consistent with Steve's shield. Steve stayed mum, not giving them anything, and he can only hope that the Hydra agents are similarly reticent. He's counting on them not wanting word to get out about the Winter Soldier, and little interrogation of each one from the FBI before sticking them in a prison. Besides, Sam texted that Barnes agreed to tell them the locations of bases he couldn't handle himself, so hopefully once they actually start hitting some it will throw suspicion off. Hopefully.

The door opens, revealing Sam. He looks exhausted, having only stopped by the room once in the morning to change out of his bloodstained clothes and stayed up all night watching Bucky. But he
smiles when he sees Steve, no trace of worry or distress on his face. Steve hopes that's a good sign.

"Hey man, how you doing?"

Steve sighs. "Okay. How's Bucky?"

Sam actually grins. "You know what, he's doing good. Other than having a bullet wound in his side, he's a damn sight better than he was before. He's talking, communicating, and he definitely knows what's up. Dude, he's got a sense of humor. It's incredible."

Steve feels his heart flutter. "It's Bucky. He's in there. He's remembering."

Sam hesitates. "Steve, I hate to say this but that kinda thing...that's why Barnes left."

Steve blinks. "What?"

Sam takes a breath. "He's trying to figure out who he is, and he doesn't need you trying to tell him who you want him to be." He shrugs. "He's learning how to be a person again, but that person isn't necessarily Bucky. When that person starts coming out, he needs someone to just accept whoever that is. There's too much...expectation, with you. I think it's just confusing him."

Steve digests this. He knows—he knows Sam is right, but it still hurts. He knows that as hard as he's been trying to accept the fact that Bucky is different now, might never be Bucky again, he's still been subconsciously holding onto the belief that Bucky is in there somewhere, if he only looks hard enough. It's not fair to who Bucky is now, he knows that, and he feels guilt settle in his gut. He'd thought he'd done a good job of masking his feelings and assuring Bucky that it was okay if he was different, but apparently not. Bucky still felt crushed by expectation, and so of course he'd wanted to run away from Steve. It makes perfect sense, in a heartbreaking way.

"Oh," Steve says softly, sitting down hard on the bed. He puts his head in his hands. "Did I fuck up, Sam?"

Sam's hand finds his shoulder and squeezes. "Nah man. You did everything right. It wasn't you putting those expectations on him, it was himself. He started to remember you, and I think that was just too much. Emotional entanglement, remember? He just needs to get his head straight before he can deal with seeing you." Sam squeezes again. "It's not your fault."

Steve nods, hand finding Sam's on his shoulder. "Thanks, Sam."

"Hey, what are friends for?"

***

They spend another day in the motel, Sam checking up on Bucky occasionally and dressing his wound. It's strange, Bucky being so close and yet so far. Their rooms are only a few doors away, and Steve would only have to walk a few yards to get to Bucky. But he can't, because that's not what Bucky wants. So he runs and reads and eats and waits, heart aching as he wonders how Bucky is doing.

***

The next day Sam declares Bucky at least fit to move without danger of dying, and Bucky vanishes again into the wind with a text stating the address of the next base in Raleigh, North Carolina. Steve is glad he's letting them handle this, as the thought of him trying to fight with a still-healing gunshot wound is terrifying. Sam straps on his new wings, red and silver with tech upgrades thanks
to Tony, Steve puts on his uniform, and they storm the base with prejudice.

***

Sam watches Steve eat an entire pizza in under five minutes in their dingy motel room, mouth open in shock.

"Never mind, my mom's gonna love you," he says. "You're like her dream guest, she can keep shoving food at you and you'll keep eating it. Now that's a superpower right there."

***

A couple days later Bucky clears a base in Nashville, Tennessee, sending them a text afterwards. They clean it up and call it in, noting an increase in fatal wounds. It seems Bucky has cottoned on to the fact that killing Hydra is okay, and Steve feels nothing for their deaths.

***

"Sam, we can't go to the beach."

"Why not? We're literally an hour from Myrtle Beach. Barnes will send us an address eventually but in the meantime you need to have some fun. No one can be sad on the beach, Steve."

"I'm not quite sure that's true."

They end up going to the beach, where Steve's pale skin fries to a crisp, serum notwithstanding. Sam cackles and takes a photo of Steve's sunburnt torso with his new phone, courtesy of Tony, and Steve manages to forget his worries for a few hours and enjoy the warm sand and the crash of the ocean.

***

"Awww, really?" Sam groans. "They had to have a Hydra base in Tampa? Disney, man. Disney. Why can't we be riding Space Mountain instead of shooting people?"

"You been?"

"Hell yeah. Highlight of my childhood. I'm guessing you haven't."

"Yeah, I was a little busy."

Sam points a finger. "We're going, I swear. When all this fuckery is done, I'm taking you to Disney."

Steve chuckles. "Deal."

***

They're sweating in the hot Texas sun, Steve wondering how on earth Bucky is faring with the metal arm. Bucky is letting them hit this base, with an added note to bring backup. Hence why Clint is with them, eye purpled and leg still in a cast but grinning as he fingers his bow. Nat had pulled him out of somewhere in Europe, beaten and bruised, and tossed him to Tony before continuing on her deep-cover mission. When Steve had asked Tony if he had any backup Tony had flown Clint down with instructions to keep him, please. They're positioned on a rooftop opposite the base, settling Clint into his sniper's nest before they enter.
"So," Clint says offhand. "Where are you getting your information, anyhow? The data dump? I thought it was all still encrypted."

Steve hesitates, looking at Sam. "We have a...source."

Clint just nods. "Okay, cool. As long as we're blowing up Hydra, I'm good."

Steve makes a split-second decision to trust Clint. "I'll tell you everything after we hit this base. I promise."

"Alright, that's good with me. Let's get these bastards."

***

Clint shakes his head, drinking down his fourth coffee. "Man, that's some shit. Brainwashing. Been there, done that. Not fun."

Steve blinks. "Right. Loki."

Clint nods. "Yeah. Took me a while to deal with that. Can't even imagine what Barnes is going through. But it gets better. And hey, he's getting revenge on Hydra. That's gotta feel pretty good."

"Yeah."

"I feel like we should start a club. Brainwashed snipers. And then he and Nat are in the brainwashed Russian assassin club. We should get shirts and everything. 'I was brainwashed and all I got was this stupid t-shirt.'"

Steve starts laughing despite himself, the concept so ridiculous and yet horrifying. He likes Clint, he thinks. The man has the ability to give you perspective on anything, and make light of even the toughest subjects. It's a skill Steve knows from the war, when they used dark humor to cope with the horrors they saw everyday.

***

Clint returns to the tower as Steve and Sam continue their road trip, only a private jet away if they need him. The next base is in the middle of New Mexico, surrounded by desert, and looks to be a testing site for weapons of mass destruction. Bucky has already cleared it, giving another little salute to the security camera. He looks...good. He appears healthy, his wound healed and weight back to normal, some color in his face offset by dark shadows under his eyes. Nightmares, Steve assumes. He's in different tac gear, his old ones presumably ruined and bloodstained. These are standard black and looser than the first, though Bucky has ripped off the left sleeve to expose his metal arm. He is graceful and deadly, killing where needed but not for the sake of it, accepting the surrender of those who do and restraining them for Steve and Sam. He's making progress, Steve thinks.

***

"Okay," Sam says, "tell me you know this song." He turns the radio up, fingers tapping on the steering wheel.

"Uh.." Steve replies.

"Come on, man! Seriously? It's classic rock. We still have two hours ahead of us, plug in my phone and find my playlist. You're about to get schooled."
When did we go to Coney Island? Bucky texts.

Steve stares for a moment, surprised at the contact. 1934, he texts back. You made me ride the Cyclone.

He waits for a reply, but there is none. Still, it's a start.

They're in Seattle, stopping by Sam's sister's house to visit. Her eyes widen when she sees Steve, barely sputtering out a "Captain Rogers. It's an honor."

He shakes her hand. "Please, call me Steve."

Sam steps past, wrapping her in a hug and lifting her off her feet. "Hey, sis."

"Sammy! It's been way too long."

"I know, I know. I missed you too."

"Come in. We're almost ready for dinner. Hope you're hungry."

Sam grins. "Oh, that won't be a problem."

Steve leans back in his chair, shaking with laughter. "You did what?" he gasps.

Molly nods. "No, it's true. And he got away with it. No one had a clue."

"Dude, you're embarrassing me in front of Captain America," Sam gripes. "Not cool."

Molly swats his arm affectionately. "You know I live to embarrass you. It's what sisters do."

Sam rolls his eyes. "Well then it's going down. So Steve, there was this one time, we were twelve-"

"No! Not that story!"

"Oh you bet Imma tell this story. So, as I was saying..."

Did you once use our train money to buy hotdogs? Bucky texts.

Steve smiles. Yeah. We had to ride back in the back of a milk truck.

There is no reply, but Steve is starting to expect that.

"Honestly," Sam says. "North Dakota. There's like, nothing here. We are literally in the middle of freaking nowhere."

Steve shrugs. "He said to bring backup, so it must be a big one."
Clint grimaces. "Nothing good ever happens in North Dakota."

"I feel like there's a story there," Sam says, eyebrow raised.

"Oh, there is. There is."

***

The shots come from somewhere above them in the tree line, the agents around Steve collapsing to the ground. He looks around, but Clint is on the other side and he can see Sam flying in the opposite direction. Hope springs in his chest and he raises a hand, snapping off a salute.

***

"Shit." Steve looks at his shoulder, where a bullet had carved a deep graze.

"Here, let me take a look." Sam peels the fabric of his suit away, peering at the wound. "Eh, not that bad. For you, probably healed in a day. I'll stitch it up though."

"Thanks, Sam." He sighs. "That base was a lot bigger than we expected."

"Yeah, who knew Hydra was partial to North Dakota. That must've been a huge blow to them, though. I mean, shit, that base had everything from experimental science shit to weapons to records. They're gonna be hurting after this."

Steve smiles tightly. "Good."

***

_Did I have a knife with an engraving?_ Bucky texts.

_Yeah. The Commandos gave it to you for your birthday. It had a paw print engraved on the handle._

There is no response.

***

Steve starfishes on the bed, reveling in the softness.

"I'm gonna marry this bed," Sam groans from where he's sprawled over his own.

"I thought you like to sleep on rocks?"

A pillow hits him in the face. "I swear to God, Steven Grant Rogers-"

***

Sam swoops above him, shooting at the agents and dodging fire. He looks like an angel of death, red and silver and graceful. Steve hurls the shield at an oncoming agent, catching it before spinning and kicking out. A shot cracks behind him and he whirls to see an agent topple, gun in hand. He would have killed him. Steve takes a breath, throwing off a salute.

***

_Was there a cat named Lucy?_ Bucky texts.

_Yeah, Steve responds. She was a stray. You used to feed her milk and whatever scraps we had._
There is no response. Steve doesn't expect one.

***

On the security feed Bucky is imposing and dark but his eyes spark with life. He bares sharp teeth at the agents in a terrifying smile, body language casual.

"Hey fellas," he says nonchalantly, before the smile turns to a snarl and he launches forward, a whirlwind of death.

Steve can't stop the broad grin that breaks across his face.

***

"Well, we're not in Kansas anymore," Sam comments as they pass the sign reading Welcome to Missouri!

"I got that reference."

"That came out in what, thirty-nine? You saw that, right?"

Steve nods. "Yeah, we went to the theater when it came out. Bucky wouldn't stop singing the songs for a week."

Sam chuckles, then grows quiet. "Tell me more about him. What was it like, growing up together?"

Steve smiles slightly, lost in memory. "It was...rough, actually. Some of my best memories are from then, but we didn't exactly have it easy. I was always sick, and then my mom died when I was eighteen. I moved in with Bucky, and his family had always kinda looked out for me, but—" He shrugs. "It was the Depression when I was growing up, and then we were just poor. I did commissions but didn't make much and Bucky worked at the docks, and a lot of times we didn't even have enough for food. He'd always try to give his share to me, and pretend he was fine even though I knew he was hungry. And when I was sick and couldn't work he picked up extra shifts just to afford my medicine, sometimes only sleeping a few hours a night. Then I was always out fighting, as well, or getting beat up by bullies, and Bucky would have to wade in and pull me out. But he never—he never treated me like I was fragile. He was protective, sure, but he never treated me like I was made of glass like everyone else. That's why we were friends, at first. Then we were lovers, but nothing really changed. He'd still yell at me for being reckless and I'd yell right back because I was a stubborn punk." Steve snorts. "Still am. But, I don't know...even though those years were hard, and at the time I wasn't always happy, I'd give anything to go back." His voice turns soft and sad. "Life was...simpler, then. We were just trying to live through each day, and we knew that no matter what, we always had each other."

There's a moment of silence. "Yeah," Sam says softly. "Yeah, I get that."

***

"Who knew there were so many Hydra bases in Ohio?" Sam grumbles. "Cursed state, is what it is."

"You said that about Florida. And Texas. And North Dakota."

Sam scowls. "Stop calling me out, Rogers. Listen, they're all cursed states. Florida is first, obviously, then Texas, then North Dakota, then Ohio. There's levels of cursedness, Steve."

Steve raises an eyebrow. "Sure. Whatever you say."
"I hate you."

***

*Sam has good music,* Bucky texts.

Steve barks out a laugh, tilting the screen to show Sam.

Sam grins. "Finally, someone appreciates my musical taste. I forgot all my songs were still on my phone when I gave it to him."

"I appreciate your musical taste," Steve protests.

Sam raises an eyebrow. "Dude, you thought Earth, Wind & Fire was 'okay.'"

"I said I liked them!"

"*Okay,* Steve. You said they were *okay.* I'll never forgive you."

***

Steve doesn't flinch when the shots ring out, dropping the agents around him like flies. He barely pauses to shoot off a salute before continuing to fight. It's a pattern, now. Bucky sends them the address, then comes to help out, disappearing before they see him. It's progress, Steve thinks. It feels like they're back in the war, Bucky watching Steve's back.

***

"Oh my god," Sam says, as Steve rakes the pile of potato chips towards him. "You are the worst. I had no idea you'd be so good at poker."

Clint cracks his knuckles. "Alright, time to get serious. I'm about to kick your asses."

Steve smirks, popping a chip into his mouth. "I'd like to see you try, son."

"Hey! No eating the currency!" Sam protests.

***

He catches a glimpse of white fur through the trees, but it disappears before he can do more than blink in surprise. He goes back into the cabin, smiling softly. Looks like he's not the only overprotective one.

***

*Europe?* Bucky texts.

Steve blinks. Looks like the revenge tour isn't ending here.

*Need transpo?* He responds.

*Yes.* There's a pause and then three dots signal Bucky is typing. *I don't think the metal arm would get through TSA.*

Steve starts laughing. Sam was right, Bucky does have a sense of humor now. He types out the address for Tony's private airstrip in upstate New York, carefully omitting his name in case it's too
hard for Bucky. *Time?* he asks. They're in Maine right now, so it shouldn't take too long to get there.

*Two days. Noon? To Vienna.*

Steve texts Tony, getting an affirmative reply a minute later.

*There will be a quinjet waiting for you then,* he responds.

The three dots move for a long time before there's a reply. *Thank you.*
Bucky touches the quinjet down in a wooded area on the outskirts of Vienna, leaving his stuff in except for his money and climbing out into the late summer heat. It's annoying, having to wear long sleeves and a glove to cover the metal arm, and the scarf wrapped around his throat does nothing to make him less hot and sweaty. He'd gotten his first scarf from a thrift store in Colorado when he went to buy more civilian clothes, realizing its utility for hiding his scars. Since then he's started collecting them, finding the lightest fabrics to make them less stifling and enjoying the various patterns he finds. He's started putting his hair up as well, watching videos on the internet to learn how. It's grown longer, and he can now fit all of it into a loose bun at the back of his head, no annoying strands hanging down and sticking to his face with sweat. He always makes it fairly loose so that the hair covers his ragged right ear, another product of his time with Hydra.

He remembers now, most of it. He had picked up a notebook in Florida and started writing down everything he remembered, trying to piece it together, and now he's filled three of them. The writing at the beginning was sloppy and disjointed, with angry scribbles and stabs through the paper, but over time his flowing script had come back and the sentences became longer, more coherent. Now he remembers almost everything, and he only writes down small new memories that crop up, his nightmares, and his rambling thoughts occasionally. He'd started asking Steve over text about the small things he remembered, the memories foggy and confusing, and it has helped to slot them into place in his reconstruction of his life.

It is his life, he knows that now. He is Bucky. He doesn't know when exactly he changed from James to Bucky, it crept in gradually, but he realized one day that although he is different now he is still the same person. He owns Bucky's memories. They belong to him. The emotions have come back, no longer viewing the old Bucky's memories through a distant haze but connecting with them, feeling them, living them. He is Bucky and he is the soldier and he is the wolf all at once. He has been many different people over the years but he has always been himself. He has always been a person.

He thinks—he thinks he is almost ready to see Steve. He knows who he is now, no confusion over handlers and Hydra and Steve. When he thinks back to those first days in the tower he cringes, remembering how compliant and messed up he had been. He'd thought Steve was his handler, for God's sake. He doesn't know if he can face Steve after that. The shame is too great. But he knows he has to, knows that Steve needs him now just as he had needed Steve in the beginning. They need
each other. Even though he carries the guilt and weight of years of murder and torture, even though
he's different from the old Bucky, the part of him that Hydra had never been able to truly
erase stretches out for Steve like a flower towards the sun. In whatever form, in whatever world,
Bucky will always follow Steve. It is ingrained in his soul, something so deep they had never been
able to scrape it out no matter how much they had tried. So he will find his way back to Steve,
whatever it takes.

***

He walks the streets of Vienna, marveling at the beauty of it. He comes upon a large outdoor
market, rows and rows of stalls and vendors and everything one could imagine, the scent of fresh
food making his mouth water. He buys Austrian falafel from one of the stands, dripping with white
sauce and making his mouth tingle with spice. Food is one of the things he has been discovering,
better than anything they'd had back in Brooklyn and certainly better than Hydra. He's put on
weight, no longer half-starved and weak but healthy and fit, more filled out than he had ever been
under Hydra. He's made it his mission to try as many different foods as he can, each new one an
experience that leaves him feeling exhilarated. The freedom to do what he wants, wear what he
wants, eat what he wants is incredible, though it had been terrifying at first. Now he takes pleasure
in making small choices and doing things for himself simply because he wants to, not because it
serves any purpose. He buys a red scarf because he likes it. He eats ice cream because it tastes
good. He buys fuzzy socks and pink hair ties because they make him feel good. It's so simple, and
yet so huge.

As he wanders the market he comes upon a smaller stand selling fruits, bright and fresh and
mouthwateringly sweet. He rolls a couple plums in his metal hand, testing their ripeness. There's an
older woman behind the counter, grey eyes warm in a wrinkled face, and he catches her attention as
he gestures to the plums, dredging up the German he had learned during the war.

"Sind sie gut?" Are they good?

The woman nods, smiling. "Ja. Sie sind reif." Yes. They are ripe.

He smiles slightly. "Ich werde fünf haben." I will have five.

She packages them up, Bucky handing her Euros he'd swiped from a base in America.

"Du bist ein Amerikaner?" The woman asks. "Ich erkenne den Akzent." You are an American? I
recognize the accent.


She smiles. "Dein Deutsch ist sehr gut. Wo hast du gelernt?" Your German is very good. Where did
you learn?

"Ich war vor ein paar Jahren für eine Weile in Österreich." I was in Austria for a while, a few years
ago. In a prison camp, most of the time, but it's where he'd first picked up German. And it really
was only a few years ago if he's only counting when he was awake.

"Ah ich sehe. Für Geschäft oder Vergnügen?" Ah, I see. For business or for pleasure?

He shakes his head, hesitating before speaking. "Das Militär." The military.

"Oh. Ich wusste nicht, dass hier Amerikaner stationiert sind." Oh. I did not know Americans were
stationed here.
He shifts uncomfortably. "Ich war...auf der Durchreise." *I was...passing through.*

She seems to accept this. "Also, was bringt dich zurück nach Österreich?" *So, what brings you back to Austria?*

"Etwas, was ich tun muss. Dann gehe ich nach Hause." *Something I have to do. Then I'm going home.*

***

He explores the city the rest of the day, taking time to just relax and enjoy himself, eating more food as he wanders. The 'gelato' here is the best thing he's ever tasted. He tells himself Hydra isn't going anywhere. He has time. When evening starts to approach he buys a sleeping bag and pillow from a nearby store, bringing them back to the quinjet and making himself a nest in the corner. He's started to have so many possessions that he can't carry them all, and the quinjet is perfect for use as a home base. This way he doesn't always have to worry about getting a hotel, as the ones in Vienna are too fancy and expensive for his comfort. Tomorrow he'll find somewhere to shower but for now this will do. He checks to make sure everything is order, his notebooks safely stored in his backpack and his phone within reach, a lifeline to Steve. He strips, carefully stacking his clothes and shifting into wolf form. His dog tags swing around his neck, clinking softly. He curls up on the sleeping bag, tucking his nose into his tail and closing his eyes as sleep overtakes him.

***

He jerks awake, dream fading quickly as he takes in his surroundings. It is always better sleeping in wolf form, the nightmares less intense and no waking up to his own screams. He has made his peace with his wolf form finally. When he is in wolf form he is still a person, he has realized. There is no difference between the two, wolf and soldier. He is not the wolf, not the animal Hydra told him he was. He is simply Bucky.

He reluctantly shifts, dressing in comfortable jeans and a long-sleeved shirt with a jacket overtop. The base is near the heart of Vienna and he needs to blend in to get close, so he can't risk putting on any tactical gear. He hides as many knives as he can on his person, a gun tucked into his waistband and a glove over his metal hand. He shoves his favorite scarf in his pocket, a faded grey on one side and grey stars on a dark blue background on the other. It's very patriotic, and perfect for taking down Hydra. And really, if he's being honest with himself, it reminds him of Steve. He wraps a plain blue one around his throat, intending to change it out to clear the base. He ties his hair in a loose bun at the base of his neck and crams a baseball cap on his head, sliding on the two Euro sunglasses he'd got yesterday for good measure. He's pretty sure no one would recognize him as the Winter Soldier right now, not even Hydra, and it gives him deep satisfaction to know that.

Then he exits the quinjet, making his way into the city. Luckily, unlike America, people wear more layers here even in summer and his outfit gets no strange glances the way it did before. Well, at least less strange glances. He reaches the base, taking time to assess it from all angles and use his senses to count the number of agents. A fair amount, but not too many for him to handle. The problem will be that this is a busy area, and gunshots will not go unnoticed. He needs a solid exit plan, and a way to conceal his identity from the authorities that are sure to get here before Steve and Sam can. He withdraws his phone, shooting off a quick text with the address and that he's about to hit it. Then he finds a good spot in the alley with no cameras and takes off his sunglasses and cap, letting his hair down and changing out his scarf, drawing the American flag up over his face until only his eyes are visible. He breathes through the memories of the mask, reminding himself that it is only cloth over his face. He takes off the jacket as well, leaving it, the cap, the
other scarf, and the sunglasses in a pile to pick up afterwards. They will do just enough to change his appearance from security cameras so that he can flee the area without being marked. Hopefully.

Drawing the gun from his waistband he moves to the side door, silently counting before smashing through. They're caught unprepared, and he takes five down before the rest have even moved. There's shouting, and bullets ping off his metal arm, Bucky moving through the agents with practiced skill. He's only got minutes, he knows, before the authorities arrive, so he wastes no time on dramatics and clears the base with ruthless efficiency, downing the last agent just as he hears the sirens. He exits quickly, jogging to his pile and switching out scarves, pulling the jacket on and putting his hair up again. He shoves the cap and sunglasses back on and slips away just as the first vehicle pulls up to the main street, blending into the crowd.

***

As soon as Bucky makes it to the quinjet he fires it up, flying towards the next base in Stuttgart. There's several bases in Germany, which makes sense given that's where Hydra started. Once again he lands a ways away from the city in a wooded area, gathering the duffel with clothes and toiletries and making his way into the city. He books an actual hotel, much nicer than the ones he had been staying in in America. There he takes a long, hot shower, shaving and brushing his teeth for the first time since the previous morning. It's only mid-afternoon, and he is starving, so after dressing in new clothes and a grey and black patterned scarf with a silk-like texture he wanders the city, stopping to get food from a cafe. Then he makes his way to the base, only intending to scope it out and come back later tonight. It's a large, multistoried office building fronting as a law firm, and he can see agents in business suits milling around on each floor. It's right in the middle of the city, like the last one, and there's probably over a hundred people in the building. Not chances he wants to take.

He texts Steve, sending him the address. It will look better if known Avengers take it down, anyway. A vigilante killing people in the middle of the city probably won't go down well with the people, whether it's Hydra or not. He knows Steve and Sam have been covering for him, taking credit for all his hits, but there's no way they can take credit for the one in Vienna or this one, if he were to hit it. It's too visible. He worries at his lip. Maybe it was a mistake to hit the Vienna one, when he knew that the authorities would get the security tapes first. Now he's definitely on their radar. But does he care? They can't link him to anything, and to the world James Barnes is dead. Maybe someone will make the connection to the Winter Soldier because he used his left arm to block bullets, but even if they do it tells them nothing except that the Winter Soldier has turned against Hydra. His face had been hidden and he left so quickly they'll never trace him. So what does it matter? As long as Hydra is taken out, he doesn't care. Still, it worries at him and he decides to leave all bases in civilian areas to Steve and Sam.

***

The next three bases in Germany he leaves to Steve and Sam, all of them too big or too visible for him to attempt himself. Then he doubles back, going down the map and hitting bases in Hungary and Serbia before moving to Turkey. It might have been easier to head for Russia first but he's trying to put that off as long as possible, not ready to face the place where he'd been molded into the Winter Soldier. He hits a base in Istanbul, taking a day just to walk the city and take in the sights. It's beautiful, and although he doesn't speak Turkish he manages. The city is large and beautiful, full of culture and life, and he uses the liras he took from the Hydra base to try dozens more foods, each better than the last.

Then he keeps going, venturing into Syria. He gets functional yet beautiful handcrafted scarves from a kind street vendor in Aleppo, stopping to admire the beauty of the city. The scarves are
what many men wear here, especially military, tighter around the throat with a smooth section able
to be pulled up around one's face, the rest of the scarf ruffling out around it. He buys four colors,
blending in better with the local people than before and keeping his scars more well-hidden. He
switches them out for the America one to hit the base outside Aleppo, the feeling of constriction
around his face getting easier to bear.

After that he cuts over into Libya and Algeria, only passing two bases off to Steve and Sam. After
a sweep downwards into South Africa that ends with a nasty bullet graze on his right shoulder he
makes a long flight up into Uzbekistan, the language switching to Russian and making his anxiety
spike. There's only one base here, remote and small, and he takes it down with ease. Then, finally,
it's time to head into Russia.

He lands outside Volgograd, steeling himself as he ventures into the city. Russian swirls all around
him, the crisp fall air making his scarf and jacket acceptable and no one looking at him twice. He
takes time exploring the city to settle his nerves, trying to appreciate the culture instead of focusing
on the reminders of Hydra.

He sees a small shop with various knitted wear including thick scarves, venturing in. A middle-
aged Russian woman greets him, an intricate scarf wrapped around her own throat.

"Здравствуйте. Как дела?" she asks. Hello. How are you?

"Хорошо спасибо. А ты?" he replies. Good, thank you. And you?

She smiles. "Я в порядке, спасибо. Вы ищете что-нибудь в частности?" I am well, thank you.
Are you looking for anything in particular?

"Шарф." A scarf.

She nods, leading him over to a section with rows of beautiful, thick scarves.

"Они красивы," he says. They're beautiful.

The woman's eyes sparkle as she smiles warmly. "Спасибо. Я делаю каждый из них
вручную." Thank you. I make each one by hand.

That is...impressive. He fingers a thick grey one, the material soft to the touch. "Сколько для
этого?" How much for this one?

"3 000 рублей." 3000 rubles. She takes it off the rack. "Вы хотите попробовать сначала?" Would
you like to try it on first?

He hesitates, looking around. There is no one but her in the store, and she looks harmless and kind.
Slowly he nods, taking off his ragged black scarf and accepting the grey one. The woman's eyes
flick to his throat and widen slightly but she says nothing, looking away quickly out of politeness.
The scarf is soft around his throat, less irritating than some of the others are on the thick scar
tissue, and it hides the scars completely from view, tight to his chin. He nods, taking it off again.

"Идеально." It's perfect.

The woman smiles. "Замечательно." Wonderful. Though his throat is still bare her expression
doesn't shift and her eyes remain on his face, warm and bright. He relaxes slightly, putting his scarf
back on. This is the first time he has shown anyone else his scars. It is strangely cleansing, to have
no negative reaction from this kind stranger. She doesn't know what he has been through, where the
scars came from, what he was turned into. All she sees is a person, who happens to have scars, and
she doesn't care. It is...freeing. He can be whoever he wants to be, here.

He pays for the scarf, bidding the woman a good day and continuing through the city. He feels comfortable now, the Russian voices no longer bothering him and curiosity sparking to explore. He eats pirozhki from a street vendor, buys an adorable tiny nesting doll that makes him smile, and books a modest hotel room on the outskirts of the city. After a dinner of borscht and pelmeni he returns to the hotel room and shifts into wolf form to sleep, not wanting his screams to wake anyone up. If the maids wonder about the white fur on the sheets, well, what can they do? He falls asleep in minutes, full and content.

***

He jerks awake, growl fading in his throat. The room crystallizes as he calms, early morning light filtering through the curtains. He gets up, stretching and shifting into human form as he makes his way to the bathroom, taking a shower and trimming the growing stubble on his face. He brushes his teeth, by now used to the sight of his sharpened canines in the mirror, eyes drawn to his scarred throat as always before tracing the scars on his shoulder. Sometimes it still strikes him, how different he looks. Especially after reconnecting to his old memories sometimes Bucky wakes up expecting his left arm to be flesh, or to feel the tip of his right ear when he tucks his hair behind it. He expects to look in the mirror and see short hair and a smooth throat, blunt teeth smiling widely in a face unlined by pain. But it is...okay, that he looks different. Or maybe it isn't okay, but he's learning to be okay with it. This is him now, for better or for worse. These scars are part of him, just like his metal arm. The wolf is part of him. And maybe these things were born out of pain and fear and destruction, but that doesn't mean they have to be now. They can be whatever he wants them to be, because they are his.

***

He makes his way towards the quinjet, grey scarf bundled around his neck and hair up in its bun, jacket and glove covering his metal arm. When he gets there he changes into his tac gear, stowing as many weapons as he can on his person. Then he sets off through the countryside to the remote base, far enough away from anything that he doesn't have to worry about the authorities. Once he's established the perimeter and assessed it he enters with a bang, blowing the door off its hinges and immediately firing, shots returning within a few seconds and Bucky shielding himself with his metal arm. He clears the base fairly easily, relieved not to encounter any familiar faces or run into any trouble. It's just like the others, he reminds himself. There's nothing special about this base just because it's in Russia.

But he thinks the next base is special. It is the last one left, and it must have been where he was kept. It's outside Moscow, only accessible by a lone road that will soon be snowed over, but he has the quinjet and flies as close as he dares, not knowing what to expect. He thinks, almost hopefully, that the base had been abandoned after the fall of the Soviet Union and his transfer to America. He has no desire to clear it, every inch of concrete where he was held burned into his memory, white walls haunting him in his dreams. Still, he steels himself, gearing up and trudging closer to the base. The thick concrete walls make it impossible to sense how many people are in there if at all, so he's going in blind. Hesitating, he pulls out his phone, texting Steve. He's been sending addresses ahead of time recently, to make it easier for Steve and Sam to know where they're going next. He trusts them to wait until he has cleared it or told them to, and so far they have upheld that trust. Better safe than sorry, he thinks as he types.

At base. May need backup. TBD.

Steve texts back a second later. Okay. Will be close by.
Feeling more reassured, Bucky aims his launcher at the heavy doors, blasting the keypad locking mechanism. There's no sound from inside, and he takes that as a good thing. Using his metal arm he wrenches open the stiff doors, entering into a long dark hallway. He scans around warily, checking behind corners, but there is no movement. The base is still and silent. Still his body thrums with tension, anxiety coiling in his gut. He turns down a familiar hallway that makes his skin crawl, every soft footstep seeming loud and finite as he approaches the training room he knows so well. He takes a deep breath before pushing through the doors, heart stopping in his chest.

"Good morning, soldier," Karpov says in Russian, sitting behind the bulletproof glass opposite Bucky. He is older, face lined and hair grizzled, but his voice is the same, and Bucky is frozen in place with shock and fear. "I've been expecting you," Karpov continues. "I was retired, but I heard about how you were taking down Hydra bases and I knew you would come here eventually. It's been a long time, hasn't it?"

Bucky feels sudden rage overtake the cold shock and he snarls. "I'm going to rip your throat out, you goddamn son of a bitch." Karpov seems to be alone, but something makes him wary. This is too easy.

Karpov frowns slightly, switching to accented English. "You have forgotten your place, soldier."

"No," Bucky spits. "I've remembered it."

Karpov sighs. "We can fix that." He reaches down and presses something and the doors behind Bucky slam closed, Bucky whirling as his heart races with panic. This is-this is not good. He surreptitiously reaches in his pocket as Karpov leans down again, withdrawing his phone just enough to tap the call button next to Steve's name before sliding it back into his pocket, muting the volume using the buttons on the side. Karpov straightens up, a red book in his hand that makes Bucky's blood run cold. Karpov leans forward with a satisfied smile, flipping open the book with careful fingers. Bucky looks around wildly for an exit but knows that they built this room to contain him. There's no getting out.

"желание." Longing. It strikes him between the ribs, cold and icy. A shudder passes through him.

"No," he chokes out. "No." He can't-he can't do this again. He doesn't want to. He can't-

"ржавый." Rusted. His limbs seize and his chin trembles, pain spiking through his head.

"Stop," he grits out, knowing it's hopeless, sending a silent apology to Steve.

"Семнадцать." Seventeen. He drops to his knees as a scream tears from his throat, fighting against the darkness he can feel pushing at his mind.

"Рассвет." Daybreak. His breaths heave and he tries to get up, dropping back to his knees and smashing his metal fist into the ground as his mind fractures.

"Печь." Furnace. Metal fingers claw into the cement, leaving gouges and he grits his teeth, feeling himself slipping as the world goes grey.

"Девять." Nine. He is Bucky. He is Bucky. He is Bucky. He is-

"добросердечный." Benign. He is Bucky. He is-he is Bucky. He is-

"возвращение на родину." Homecoming. He is...Bucky? He is-
"Один." One. He is-

"грузовой вагон." Freight car. He is the soldier, and there is nothing else.

The soldier stands slowly, mind blank and focused. His handler enters the room, satisfied smile on his face as he approaches the soldier.

"Good morning, soldier."

The soldier knows this, knows the response. It is all he knows. "Ready to comply."

Karpov studies him for a moment. "Come. We will make you new."

He turns, the soldier following obediently. They exit the room, walking down hallways that are...familiar. He knows this. He is the soldier. This is where he is kept. Karpov is handler. But why-why does something feel wrong?

He shakes himself internally, focusing once more. He does not ask questions. He is not allowed to ask questions. He is the soldier, and he only obeys.

They are almost to the room-the room where...they are almost to the room when there is a crash from the entrance to the base, Karpov's head whipping around. He glares at the soldier, though the soldier doesn't know what he has done. He waits for orders, still and silent. Karpov jerks his head, the soldier following him back they way they came on silent feet. When they get close to the main room again Karpov places a hand on his right shoulder, nudging him forward.

"Protect," Karpov orders.

The soldier withdraws a gun-where did he get the gun?-and keeps moving, shielding Karpov with his body. They reach the doors and the soldier pushes through with the metal arm, two hostiles spinning around at their entrance. They look...horified, which is not out of the ordinary upon seeing the soldier but for some reason seems wrong. He aims his gun at them, his focus sharpening.

"Bucky," the man in red, white, and blue breathes.

What. What. Who-who the hell is Bucky. What-

"Kill them," Karpov orders, backing away from the soldier.

The soldier fires. The man-blonde hair and blue eyes-raises a shield, the bullets pinging off harmlessly. The soldier switches tactics, drawing a knife and lunging forward. The man parries his blows, only defending but not striking the soldier.

"Bucky," he says again. The soldier feels a shudder go through him and he lashes out with the metal arm, catching the man across the face. He goes down, the other hostile raising a gun and taking aim behind the soldier, towards Karpov. The soldier steps in front of the gun, intending to block the shot, but the man hesitates.

"I don't want to hurt you, Barnes."

What. What. Who-who the hell is Barnes? Why are they-why are they calling him different names? He doesn't-he doesn't have a name-

The soldier shakes himself, lunging towards the man and knocking the gun away before gripping
him by the chin and flipping him across the room. The man hits the wall and slides to the floor, unmoving.

He feels the other man come up behind him and whirls, the man matching him blow for blow. The man strikes to disable, not to kill, but for some reason this enrages the soldier. He shoves at the man and in a moment of weakness the shield comes crashing into the side of his head, sending him staggering as the world spins.

He is-what-what is going on, where is he, why is he-what-

He raises a hand slowly, touching his temple. It comes away red and he stares at it in stunned confusion, something-something wrong, this isn't right, he is-there is something he's supposed to know, he is-this is wrong how did he get here, what is happening-

"Bucky?"

He looks up, seeing-seeing Steve, he knows him, it's Steve, but what is going on, why is he looking at him like that, what is he doing here, there were words, Karpov spoke the words and then-and then-

"Kill him," Karpov says, and he-Bucky sees him across the room behind Steve, visible over his left shoulder and the soldier-Bucky-pulls out the gun and raises it towards Steve, no, stop, what are you doing-

"Bucky, please," Steve says. "It's me. It's Steve."

Bucky meets his eyes, blue and wide. He fires.

The shot whips over Steve's shoulder, hitting Karpov straight between the eyes. He crumples to the ground, dead.

There's a moment of silence. The sol-Bucky's arm drops, the gun slipping from his hand. He sways and sees Steve take a step forward, saying something, but the world spins and he falls into darkness.

***

Bucky wakes up slowly, head pounding and aching fiercely. He cracks open his eyes, squinting against the light as pain spikes through his temple and he groans, hand coming to his head. He is-he is laying on something soft, a bed, he realizes, the sound of someone else breathing in the room, familiar scent greeting his nose. Sam. He exhales, relaxing slightly. It's just Sam. But wait, why-why is he here?

Suddenly the events of before rush back and he sits up, hand pressed to his head as it throbs with the motion, black spots dancing in front of his eyes. He stares at Sam in horror, scanning him for injuries.

"Hey man," Sam says, watching him warily. "You back with us?"

Bucky swallows, guilt settling into his stomach as he takes in the finger-shaped bruises on Sam's chin and remembers throwing him against the wall. He could have killed him. "Oh god," he croaks. "What did I do?"

Sam's face softens. "It wasn't your fault. What do you remember?"
Bucky closes his eyes. "Everything. God, I knew this would happen. All he had to do was say the goddamn words."

"That's gotta be pretty terrible to go through again. How are you feeling?"

Bucky opens his eyes to raise an eyebrow at Sam. "Like I got my brains scrambled and then Steve hit me on the head real hard," he says dryly.

Sam chuckles. "Yeah, I bet you got one hell of a headache. But like, are you okay? You just got mind-controlled again. That can't have been fun."

"Definitely not fun." Bucky turns serious, biting his lip. "I'm...okay. As much as I can be. As long as-as long as it can't happen again. Did you get the book?"

Sam frowns. "The red one? With all the weird shit in it?"

"It's red, with a star, but I don't know what's in it. That's the only-the only way they can control me, anymore." He scrubs a hand over his face. "If they get that..."

"Don't worry, it's safe. They'll never get their hands on it."

Bucky exhales. "Thanks, Sam. And I'm sorry for..." he gestures at Sam's bruised face.

Sam waves a hand. "Don't worry about it. Like I said, it wasn't your fault. And you snapped out of it. Didn't hurt me or Steve too bad and killed the Hydra guy, so I count that as a win."

"Karpov. He was my handler in...maybe the eighties? They didn't exactly tell me the date."

"1980 to 1991," Sam says. "If you wanted to know."

Bucky blinks. "Oh. Yeah that-that helps."

There's a moment of silence. Finally Bucky gathers his courage and takes a deep breath. "Is-is Steve here?"

Sam nods. "He's just outside. Didn't know if you wanted to see him."

Bucky closes his eyes briefly. "I want to."

"Okay. Let me get him in here." Sam shoots off a text, the sound of the door opening only a second later. Steve comes into the room, staring at Bucky with eyes full of warmth and wonder but tinged with apprehension. Bucky feels something inside him loosen, settling into place. Steve.

"Hey Buck," Steve says, giving a small, pained smile. Bucky can tell he's dying inside but trying to put on a brave front and it's so Steve, and Bucky's heart aches with love and grief and guilt and he vows to never leave Steve again.

"Hey pal," he replies softly, and Steve's face lights up. Then Bucky is sliding off the bed, both of them moving as Bucky crashes into Steve, wrapping him in a tight hug and burying his face in his shoulder. "I'm sorry," he chokes out. "I'm so sorry."

He feels Steve's chest hitch against him, body trembling with sobs. Bucky grips him tighter, running a hand over Steve's back the way he always used to, and Steve falls apart into his embrace.

"It's okay," Bucky whispers, feeling tears slide down his own face. "It's okay. I've got you."
The scarf!

Another scarf!
I've actually been to Vienna and gotten amazing falafel, dried fruit, and gelato as well as an overpriced hat from Naschmarkt. And my friend got hand-fed fudge from a very flirty Austrian boy. In conclusion Vienna=Absolutely incredible, 11/10 would recommend. I have not been to any of these other countries except for Germany so apologies for any inaccuracies.

More scarves because they're amazing and these are some of the ones I picture Bucky having collected from his travels.
Like a noble wolf  
A dark smooth coat  
Darker Cracks  
In your armor  
Inviting me to touch your heart  
The grooves that hide your face  
Look as if tears  
Have dried there for all eternity  

I am reminded  
Of the softness of your beard  
How I loved to play with it  
Curling it in my fingertips  
Of the way you would look  
When you wanted to tell me  
Of the deepest secrets  
You held inside your sensitive soul  

Others saw you as a wolf  
Protecting me from a world of harm  
While you hurt inside  
For all the injustice that those  
You could not protect  
Would suffer  

The tears disappear  
And I see your wise smile  
Always knowing  
Always kind  

When I would not relent  
You would please me  
By saying how much you  
Loved my persistence  
I want to take you in my arms  
As I hold this memory  
In my hands  

*Wolf Moment* by Romantic Poetess  

Steve doesn't know how long he cries into Bucky's embrace but eventually the sobs subside, Bucky still stroking up and down his back the way he used to when Steve got asthma attacks. He's here
and he's real, warm and solid against Steve but Steve can't make himself let go in case Bucky leaves again. Please, stay with me, he wants to plead. Don't leave me again.

"I'm not goin' anywhere," Bucky murmurs, as if reading Steve's thoughts. "I'm right here. I'll never leave you again, I swear."

"Promise?" Steve croaks into Bucky's shoulder.

"Promise," Bucky says. "I'm with you till the end of the line." He pulls back slightly, eyes red and puffy but still beautiful, he is so beautiful and Steve never wants to look away. Blue eyes search his, clear and familiar and then Bucky leans in, pressing his lips to Steve's.

Steve kisses back, melting into Bucky as Bucky's hand comes up to cup the side of his face, warm and gentle. It is Bucky, it's him, and though everything has changed Bucky still kisses the same, lips soft and slightly chapped and with their eyes closed they could be back in the war, sharing kisses in the quiet of the woods.

Finally they break apart, Bucky's forehead coming to rest against Steve's as their breaths mingle between them, eyes still closed. Bucky's thumb rubs softly over Steve's cheekbone, fingers pressing lightly behind his ear. Steve's hands are resting lightly on Bucky's waist, feeling the rough material of his jacket.

"God I missed you," Steve breathes.

Bucky takes a shuddering breath, voice wrecked. "I missed you too. I'm so goddamn sorry, Steve."

Steve shakes his head slightly against Bucky's. "No. You don't have to apologize. It's me who should be sorry."

"What the hell for?" Bucky grumbles, and Steve can't help smiling because it's so Bucky.

"For...pressuring you," Steve replies. "For expecting you to be something you're not."

There's a pause, and Steve feels his anxiety quicken before Bucky speaks. "You're a goddamn idiot, Rogers. You didn't do anything wrong. I was just...my head was real fucked up. Still is. For once in your life, stop blaming yourself."

Steve chuckles wetly at the familiar chiding, hands tightening on Bucky's sides. "Okay. Okay, Buck." He'll do anything if it means Bucky will stay.

Bucky pulls back, their eyes opening as they stare at each other. "So," Bucky says finally. "What now?"

"I don't know," Steve replies. "What do you want to do?"

"Well," Bucky says, a glint of humor coming into his eyes, "first I'd like to get out of this tac gear and eat some goddamn food. I'm starving."

Steve smiles. "That can be arranged."

***

Sam goes out and gets food, bringing back enough to feed ten people, or in this case, two superhumans. Steve watches Bucky dig in, unable to take his eyes off him. Bucky looks even better in person than he had on security cameras, filled out and with color in his cheeks, eyes clear and
bright though still haunted. He's *Bucky* again, his mannerisms and speech suggesting that he remembers if not everything then quite a lot. He's so different from the broken, confused person he had been those first few days in the tower, unable to even string together a sentence and still thinking Steve was his handler. Steve thinks that though it hurt, the time away has done wonders for Bucky. He even smiles slightly at times, making small jokes with Sam and giving Steve soft looks every so often. It's incredible what a few months have done.

Bucky is now dressed in Steve's spare sweatpants and a long-sleeved shirt, the visible scars on his throat reminding Steve of the damage that has been wrought not only to Bucky's body but to his soul. When he'd gotten the call and heard Bucky's screams through the phone his whole world had gone upside down, Steve rushing into the base without thought to find Bucky. And when he'd seen him, dead-eyed and pointing a gun at him, it was like a knife to the chest. He hadn't known what to think, hadn't known what exactly Karpov had done to him but all he knew was that he was forced to fight Bucky again and he didn't know if either of them was going to make it out. But here they are, Bucky no longer under Hydra's control and *here*, not leaving Steve. They're together, and that's all that matters.

***

After they've eaten they contemplate how to get back to the quinjets they'd left by the base. Steve and Sam had stolen a car to get Bucky from the base to their hotel and wrapped him in a blanket to sneak him in without anyone noticing the combat gear and metal arm. Steve had returned the stolen car, so they need another way to get back to the base.

Sam holds up his phone. "Rental car company not too far, if we want to do that."

Steve frowns. "But how will we return the car?"

"I don't know. Unless we want to walk the whole way. It's like, five miles."

Steve turns to Bucky. "You good to walk that far?"

"My legs aren't broken, Rogers. I can walk fine," Bucky says dryly.

Steve just smiles at his snark. "Okay. If you're okay with it, Sam, then we can walk?"

Sam sighs. "Alright. Just know I am not a supersoldier. I know you guys could probably run there in five minutes but I definitely cannot."

"Don't worry Sam, we won't leave you behind." Steve claps a hand on his shoulder, grinning.

***

They walk along the rough, deserted road a a steady pace, Bucky's arm bumping into Steve's shoulder every so often. He's wearing one of Sam's hooded sweatshirts, which he used to conceal his metal hand and help to cover his scars when they were in the city. Steve could tell he was uncomfortable with his scars being so exposed, constantly tugging at the drawstrings in a vain effort to cover them. He wonders how he's been covering them usually. There was, of course, what looked like an American flag scarf that Bucky had wrapped around his face to hit a few Hydra bases, but he can't see him wearing that regularly. Or maybe he does, who knows. For as much as they've fallen back together like no time has passed, Steve has no idea what Bucky did for those months besides taking down the bases. He intends to ask, at some point, to get the whole story. But not now. Now it's too fresh. They're still a little wary around each other, raw around the edges from months of separation and hurt. Their light conversation is only a front, he knows, and at some point
they're going to have to talk about the deep issues, but not now.

The walk passes quickly, a comfortable silence falling among them. They're all tired and overwhelmed, not ready to talk about anything until they get...wherever it is they're going. Finally they reach the quinjets, Bucky glancing at the base with a badly concealed shudder.

"So, where to?" Steve asks, unsure what Bucky's plans are.

Bucky shrugs, looking at Steve. "Home."

***

They're going back to the tower, Tony already informed. Bucky had been...okay with going there, not flinching at the name 'Stark,' and Steve hopes that's an improvement. Steve lands the quinjet on the airstrip, Bucky already landed right before them. He and Sam gather their stuff and get out, a car waiting for them already courtesy of Tony. They load their stuff in, waiting for Bucky, who seems to have considerably more stuff, hefting bags with his metal arm and piling them on top of theirs. Sam slides behind the driver's seat and Steve takes the passenger seat, seeing Bucky stretch out in the back with a pillow he must have gotten somewhere. He looks exhausted, and it suddenly hits Steve that Bucky has just gotten mind controlled again, knocked out, and then flown a quinjet for eight hours straight. He wonders how Bucky is even keeping it together, and now he worries that he hasn't yet processed everything that went down in that base. He seems...too okay, almost. Steve had been too happy that Bucky was back and acting like Bucky to think about the fact that Bucky was too okay with everything. Too snarky and offhand, almost like he's putting up a front. He knows at some point, it's going to come crashing down, and he has to be prepared for when it does.

Before they've even pulled away Bucky is asleep in the back, hair falling over his face in gentle waves.

***

A scream cuts through the silence and Sam jolts, the car swerving until they screech to a halt on the side of the road. Steve turns to see Bucky sit up suddenly, gasping and shaking, eyes wide and terrified. Steve waits, giving him time, and gradually Bucky's breaths slow. Bucky leans back against the door, pressing a hand to his forehead and closing his eyes as his chest rises and falls shakily.

"Buck, you okay?" Steve asks. Sam is silent next to him, a steady presence.

Bucky makes a small sound of distress before swallowing, expression flattening. "I'm fine," he snaps, eyes still closed.

Steve wants to say something but has the feeling Bucky just wants to be left alone right now and so turns around, nodding to Sam. Sam puts the car into gear again and pulls away, Steve glancing in the rearview mirror to see Bucky curled up in the seat with his hand still over his face, but his hand moves slightly and Steve sees Bucky's expression crumble with anguish, front dissolving.

***

Bucky doesn't seem to sleep the rest of the way, staying silent and still in the backseat with eyes far away and haunted. They drive through the city, lights twinkling in the darkness. It's currently 2 a.m., and even Steve feels exhaustion pulling him down from the long, traumatic day. When they reach the underground parking lot to the tower Bucky gets out, shooting Steve a small smile that's
more like a grimace. They get their stuff, trudging into the elevator wearily. Sam gets off at his floor, waving them off with a tired "night." None of them have been back in months, and it's almost surreal when Steve and Bucky step through the doors and see the apartment again, looking the same as when they'd left. Steve heads straight to the bedroom, dropping his bag carelessly and already stripping out of his jeans as Bucky steps through and sets down his own bags. Steve pulls on sweatpants, thanking whoever Pepper sent to make sure his sheets were clean and fresh as he just about falls into the bed. He sees Bucky hesitate before climbing in and cautiously pressing against Steve as if unsure. Steve brings up his hand, stroking through Bucky's hair, and he feels all the tension drain out of Bucky as he tucks his head under Steve's chin, a hand coming to his side. Steve keeps stroking his hair until he feels Bucky drift off to sleep, only then stopping and allowing sleep to take him as well.

***

Steve wakes to Bucky jolting upright, a cry falling from his lips. Instantly Steve sits up and scoots back against the headboard, unsure what to do as Bucky gasps and shakes. Then Bucky is topping over, head landing in Steve's lap and hand clutching at Steve's legs. He's trembling, eyes squeezed shut, but as Steve hesitantly runs a hand through his hair he exhales, turning his head into Steve's lap. Steve keeps stroking and after a few minutes Bucky's breaths even out, hand releasing its bruising grip on Steve's leg and eyes blinking open as he shifts his head slightly.

"You want to talk about it?" Steve asks softly.

Bucky shakes his head, biting his lip.

"Okay. That's okay." Steve continues to pet his head, silence falling.

After a few minutes Bucky finally breaks the silence, voice quiet and hoarse. "When he said the words, it was like I....went away. But I was still there. I remember every minute. But I wasn't-I wasn't me. I just-I wasn't me, and I almost-I almost killed you." His voice breaks. "I almost killed you, and I wasn't even under Hydra's control. Ten words, that's all it took, and everything I did for was nothing. It didn't matter that I have my memories. I can't-I can't trust my own mind. Anyone can control me with just ten goddamn words. They can make me not me, just like that."

Steve feels his heart break, unable to imagine the horror of having your mind able to be controlled by someone else, being shoved out of your own head and made to do things you don't want. "I'm sorry," he says helplessly. "I'm so sorry, Buck. I'll never let that happen to you again."

Bucky turns his head to look up at him. "But what if it does? What if someone else knows the words, and they make me kill you?"

Steve shrugs. "Then I'll just have to hit you on the head again. Listen, you didn't kill me any of the times you've tried, and you damn well could have. You snapped out of it. And I won't let that happen anyways. We'll get the trigger words out, somehow, or burn the book." He runs a finger over Bucky's temple. "Right now, you're you, and no one else. That's all that matters."

Bucky searches his eyes before nodding. "Okay," he whispers.

***

They stay in bed for a long time, Bucky's head in Steve's lap as Steve strokes his hair. They're both touch-starved after being apart for so long, Bucky turning to putty under Steve's hands. Finally they get up, heading towards the bathroom.
"Do you want to shower first?" Steve asks.

Bucky looks at him like he's an idiot. "The shower's plenty big enough for both of us."

"Oh." Steve blushes slightly, a warm feeling in his chest. He shuts the door behind them, starting to strip as Bucky does the same. He follows Bucky into the shower, Bucky having turned it to a blistering spray. He's awkward, not knowing where the boundaries are with Bucky now, but Bucky just sighs and pulls him closer, planting a soft kiss of his lips before pulling away.

"For gods sake, Steve," he grumbles. "It's just a shower."

Steve exhales, chuckling slightly. "Sorry. I just...don't know what's okay now."

"I'll let you know," Bucky says. He hesitates, eyes flicking away. "I don't-I'm not ready for...more than just this, right now."

Steve nods. "Okay. But, uh, kissing's okay?"

Bucky smiles, pulling him in for another kiss. "Yes. Kissing is okay." He grabs a bottle of shampoo from the rack, passing it to Steve. "Now, wash my hair."

Steve gives him a cocky salute and Bucky laughs, the sound music to Steve's soul. He pours out shampoo in his palm, Bucky ducking under the spray to wet his hair before Steve starts to work it in. Bucky sighs as Steve massages his scalp, head tipped back slightly and back to Steve. Steve can see the scars around his metal shoulder and the back of his neck, red and angry against his pale skin, the chain of his dog tags rubbing against them. He rinses Bucky's hair before using conditioner, noticing that his hair is longer and less tangled than before, brushing the tops of his shoulders. Steve's hands move down, skating over the back of Bucky's neck before lightly kneading into the join between his neck and shoulders, the way he used to for Bucky after a long day at the docks. Bucky groans, shoulders shifting under Steve's hands.

"Sore?" Steve questions.

Bucky nods. "The arm," he says by way of explanation.

"Oh." Steve looks at it again, seeing how it must pull on Bucky's spine and neck. God, he must be in pain all the time.

Steve digs his thumbs in, working at the knotted muscles for a while until they relax under his hands.

"That feels wonderful," Bucky murmurs. "I'm gonna make you do that every day."

Steve chuckles. "I'd be happy to." He removes his hands, rinsing Bucky's hair and then giving his own a quick shampoo. He grabs the bar of soap, still partial to actual bar soap than body wash, Bucky turning to face him.

"I remember I used to do this for you," Bucky says quietly, hand trailing up Steve's arm. "When you were sick."

"Yeah. You'd dunk me right in the tub and wash me, even though I'd always protest I could do it myself."

Bucky hums, finger still making patterns on Steve's arm. "You were a stubborn punk."
"Were?"

Bucky rolls his eyes. "Are." He frowns. "Not as much, though, I don't think. You're...different."

"Yeah. I've changed a lot."

"Not bad different," Bucky adds. "I think it's...good. I need different."

Steve just nods, Bucky looking lost in thought. Steve begins to soap them up, fingers tracing every inch of Bucky's skin in an effort to memorize all the changes. He fingers the dog tags on Bucky's chest, thinking of the journey these tags have made and the significance they hold.

"You took them," he ventures. "When you left. I mean, they're yours, but...why?"

Bucky glances down, blinking slowly. "I don't know. To...remind myself, I guess. Who I was. And...something to remember you by. A promise, that I was coming back."

"I'm glad you did," Steve says softly.

Bucky swallows "So am I."

Steve's hand keeps moving, mapping the planes of Bucky's chest. He traces the seam of the metal arm and Bucky flinches slightly, eyes flicking to his.

"Does it...bother you?" Bucky asks, sounding vulnerable.

Steve shakes his head. "No. Of course not. It's you." He bends forward, pressing a kiss to the seam. Bucky inhales sharply, eyes locked on Steve as straightens up again.

"You really don't care?"

"No. I care that it hurt you, but I don't care what you look like now. I think you're beautiful, no matter what."

Bucky almost looks like he's going to cry. Instead he pulls Steve forward for a bruising kiss, breaths hitching. When he pulls away he rests his forehead against Steve's, water sliding down their skin in rivulets.

"I love you, Steven Grant Rogers," he whispers.

"I love you, James Buchanan Barnes," Steve breathes back.

***

When they're showered and dressed in comfortable clothes they wander to the kitchen, making copious amounts of eggs and coffee as Steve texts Sam that they're up. Sam arrives minutes later, looking significantly more rested and immediately making a beeline for the coffee. They all sit at the table, shoveling food into their mouths and sipping their coffees in comfortable silence.

Suddenly the elevator doors open and Clint walks in, not even seeming to notice them as he walks straight to the coffee pot and picks it up, drinking directly from it. Bucky turns to Steve, an expression of bewilderment on his face before he turns back to Clint.

"Who the hell are you?"

Clint looks up, finally registering Bucky's presence. He just nods, like this is an everyday
occurrence. "Oh hey Barnes. I'm Clint."

Bucky squints. "Am I supposed to know you?" His face closes off in trepidation. "Did I try to kill you?"

Clint chuckles. "No. Though I'm a little insulted you don't know me. Clint Barton? Hawkeye? Super amazing sniper with a bow and arrow?"

Bucky blinks. "Oh, you're the arrow guy."

"Uh, yeah. We kinda worked together on some of those bases. Granted, it was from afar and I never saw your face, but..."

"I remember," Bucky says. "You're good."

Clint grins, setting down the coffee pot and hauling himself up onto the kitchen island, swinging his legs as he picks up the pot again and takes another gulp. "Thanks, man. So are you. We gotta have a friendly competition one day, firing range, see who's the better shot. Oh, also we're starting a club, brainwashed snipers. You and Nat are in the brainwashed Russian assassins club."

Bucky blinks, looking thrown. "You-?"

Clint nods. "Yeah, this alien dude took over my mind and made me kill people for a while. Wasn't fun. But Nat hit me super hard on the head and now I'm good."

Bucky actually laughs slightly. "That's...exactly what Steve did yesterday."

"Cognitive recalibration," Clint proclaims, gesturing with the pot. "That's what Nat called it. She smashed my head into a railing."

"Steve hit me in the head with his shield," Bucky offers.

Clint winces. "Ouch. Well, here's to no longer being brainwashed." He raises the pot and Bucky actually raises his cup with him in a toast, a small smile on his face.

***

"Yeah, make a fist, then swoop, good, and then extend these fingers-"

Steve walks into the living room after his run with Sam to see Bucky and Clint on the couch, Clint trying to teach him sign language. He hadn't even known Clint was hard of hearing until he'd seen him take out his hearing aids, small ones designed by Stark that are almost invisible if you aren't looking for them. He and Bucky are getting on like a house on fire, probably because of their shared experiences and because Clint is such a genuinely nice person but also hilarious and a mess at times.

Bucky looks up, seeing Steve. "Hey," he says, smiling widely, eyes sparkling in a way that makes Steve's heart flutter.

Steve smiles back. "Hey."

Bucky pats the couch next to him. "C'mere. Clint's teaching me sign language."

"I see that," Steve replies, moving to plop next to Bucky, sides touching. "How's it going?"

"Dude, I can't believe how fast he's picking this up," Clint says.
Bucky shrugs. "Side effect of...whatever. I retain information easily."

"Huh. That's handy. Also, the fact that you can turn into a wolf is batshit crazy but awesome. I need to see this at some point."

Bucky rolls his eyes. "Fine. At some point."

Clint's phone chimes and he pulls it out, squinting at the screen. "Hey, Nat is on her way here. It okay if she comes up?"

Bucky frowns. "Nat?"

"Natasha Romanoff. You did try to kill her. Twice. But hey, you're both in the brainwashed Russian assassins club. She doesn't hold a grudge."

Bucky nods warily. "Okay."

"Great." Clint texts back, sliding his phone back into his pocket. "So, where were we?"

"Basic signs," Bucky says, nudging Steve until he sits sideways on the couch, Bucky sitting between his legs and leaning back against his chest as Steve's arms wrap around him. Clint perches on the other end of the couch, no trace of surprise on his face.

"Right," he says. "So, to say 'thank you' you raise your hand to your mouth-"

***

Nat waltzes through the elevator doors, hair longer and curled again but still its bright shade of red. Steve, Bucky, Clint, and Sam all look over, Bucky still resting against Steve's chest and Sam in the armchair, Clint perched on the couch as he tries to teach all of them swear words in sign language.

"Hey fellas," Nat says, coming to a stop by the couch. She nods to Bucky. "Barnes."

Bucky nods back. "Sorry for shooting you."

Natasha's mouth quirks up in a smile. "It's alright. Been there, done that."

"Brainwashed Russian assassins club," Bucky says, deadpan. "Did you get hit on the head too?"

Natasha actually laughs. "No. Took a bit longer than that."

Bucky nods, head brushing Steve's chest. "Yeah," he says softly. "Me too, the first time."

Natasha smiles again but it's softer, more open. "I think we're going to be very good friends, James."

***

Dinner that night is a group affair, Steve, Bucky, Sam, Clint, and Natasha all gathering around the kitchen table to eat bowls and bowls of spaghetti and garlic bread. Bucky is slightly hesitant but open and engaged, eyes bright and exchanging quips with ease. Looking around the table, Bucky next to him, the sounds of laughter filling his ears, Steve feels less alone than he has in years.

***

Though Bucky seemed to enjoy the company, after Nat and Clint return to their own floor Bucky
seems to slump, exhaustion lining his face. Steve thinks it's still hard for him to interact with people and act normal, that's he's still putting up a front. He'd seemed confident and outgoing with Clint and Nat but now Steve can see the toll it took to maintain that illusion, Bucky's eyes worn and shadowed. At least his walls seem to be down in front of Steve and Sam, letting them see his true self. Steve sits on the couch, patting his lap in invitation. Bucky immediately grabs a blanket and flops down, sighing as Steve runs his fingers through his hair.

"You don't have to be okay all the time," Steve says softly. "Not even in front of Clint and Nat. They understand."

Bucky shifts. "I know. It's just...I want to be. Okay. I don't know. Sometimes I think if I can fake it it'll, I don't know, make it true?"

"I get that." Steve brushes a strand of hair out of Bucky's face. "But it's okay to not be okay." He looks up at Sam, who's reading in the armchair. "That's what Sam keeps telling me, anyway."

Sam glances up. "Yup. Look at that, you actually listen to me. But it's true. No one's okay 100% of the time, that's just bullshit. And, Barnes, maybe you're only okay ten or twenty percent of the time, that's still alright. We're all fucked up in our own ways, so you can bet we understand. There's literally not a single person in this tower without serious trauma of some kind. You just happen to have some of the worst."

Bucky seems to digest this. "That...actually makes me feel better," he says with a small huff of laughter. He quiets. "Thank you."

"No need to thank me," Sam says gently. "You just do what you need to do for yourself, okay?"

Bucky nods against Steve's lap. "Okay."

***

Bucky fiddles with the sleeve of his shirt, looking hesitant as he stands by the bed.

"What is it, Buck?" Steve questions.

"Just...do you mind-it's easier to sleep, when I'm a wolf."

"Oh." Steve blinks. "Of course. I don't mind at all."

Bucky looks relieved, starting to strip out of his clothes. He shifts, jumping up onto the bed and cautiously lying down next to Steve. Steve stretches out a hand, stroking the soft, thick fur on his head as Bucky's eyes close. He's beautiful, Steve thinks, in whatever form he is in. His white coat is glossy with health, long fur mostly covering the scars on his neck but the missing tip of his right ear more noticeable than in human form. Steve shifts closer, Bucky's fur soft and warm against him. A cold nose tucks under his chin, Bucky nosing at his throat as he sighs and Steve drifts off to sleep in minutes, warm and happy.

Chapter End Notes

Clint here is comics Clint more than MCU Clint because fuck you Marvel. Erasing his hearing loss was really shitty, especially since I wear hearing aids and would really love actual representation, so I'm putting that in here because again, fuck you Marvel.
(I like Marvel on the whole but some things are...not good and their portrayal of Clint was one of them.)
Chapter 29

Whisper, wolf
Cry as you first open your eyes
As you see the world for the very first time
The world breathes to you
It welcomes you in
Whisper, baby wolf

Whisper, wolf
Fumble and fall through your youth
Shoot for the stars with your eyes
Energy as of the stars
A soul made of sunlight
Whisper, young wolf

Whisper, wolf
Changes are coming for your world
Feel your paws start to ache and grow
Confusion of the world around you
It seems to breathe a different way
Whisper, growing wolf

Whisper, wolf
You've grown through your troubles
Though their echoes torment you so
She looks at you differently now
And you are so misunderstood
Whisper, adolescent wolf

Whisper, wolf
Walk through the chapters
Howl softly to the night
Lay your head beside her
As you dream and wander ever still
Whisper, lost wolf

Whisper, wolf
Trust was not always there
Some wolves were made to run
More beautiful things await you
Though the pain blinds you so
Whisper, heartbroken wolf

Whisper, wolf
Speak softly to the world
You see a familiar face today
Though it is not your own
You look to their soul
Whisper, father wolf
Whisper, wolf
They grow as they follow
As they are led through the night
Guidance is provided where it once was empty
The pack is stronger now
Whisper, proud wolf

Whisper, wolf
For today is the day of farewells
You wonder if your efforts were enough
The moon seems to look to you
And it looks to say that it loves you
Whisper, sad, sad wolf

Whisper, wolf
That old pain comes back again
She's in a better place now
You feel lost in the woods again
Though you know you are not alone
Whisper, crying wolf

Whisper, wolf
Your pack gathers around you
For today is the day of your final goodbye
Though it is not you crying this day
You rejoice for the opportunity
Whisper, dying wolf

Whisper, wolf
For you are home now
Your troubles are finally behind you
You are with her again
The cubs grow in the steps of your paws
Whisper, sleeping wolf

Whisper, Wolf by Paul T. Shannon Jr

Bucky wakes slowly, a warm body beside him. Steve. He breathes in his scent, familiar and calming, wrapping him up in memory and love and Steve. Early morning sunlight shafts through the curtains, bathing the room in gentle hues and crowning Steve in gold, soft strands of hair falling over his forehead and face smooth and peaceful with sleep. Bucky watches him through wolf eyes, watches the steady rise and fall of his chest and the puff of air through parted lips, long eyelashes fluttering against smooth skin like butterflies' wings. He is beautiful, Bucky thinks, has always thought, even when Steve was small and skinny and no one else seemed to notice. Steve has always been beautiful, has always been blonde hair and blue eyes and a soft mouth, slender hands with bruised knuckles and graphite smudges, has been fire and determination and goodness that shines out of every pore and makes Bucky want to follow him to the ends of the earth, if only to keep him safe. He is the sun, bright and beautiful and scorching in his intensity, but Bucky will gladly burn. He has been cold too long. If Steve is the sun then he is ice, melting into rushing water as spring arrives and the flowers bloom, life returning to barren lands and making them anew. They are life and death, fire and ice, day and night, whole galaxies wrapped into two parallel souls intertwined for eternity in love and grief and tragedy, a beautiful tapestry of dark and light so
tightly interwoven that it is impossible to tell where one ends and the other begins. But they are only human, in the end, at the core of their souls, and perhaps that is the most beautiful tragedy of all.

***

"Morning," Sam grunts, raising his mug to his lips. Steve and Bucky slide into the chairs opposite him, plates piled high with food and the smell of coffee wafting up from their steaming mugs.

"Morning," Steve and Bucky reply in unison. The elevator doors open and Clint shambles through, making a beeline for the coffee pot and grabbing it as he hefts himself onto the counter again.

"Can you, like, sit in a chair like a normal person?" Sam asks in exasperation. "Or actually get a mug instead of drinking out of the carafe?"

"Nope." Clint takes another sip. "Also, who the hell calls it a carafe?"

Sam throws his hands up, muttering something about goddamn superheroes, can't be normal a day in their lives-

Natasha waltzes in, stealing a piece of bacon off of Steve's plate as she passes and leaning against the counter, shoulder pressed to Clint's leg in a casual display of affection. "So, any plans today?"

Steve shrugs next to Bucky. "Nope."

"Hmm." Natasha jerks her chin at Bucky. "Want to spar?"

Bucky blinks, caught off guard. "Sure."

Natasha smiles, catlike, eyes glittering with anticipation. "Training floor. Two hours. Be there or be square."

***

Natasha twists, legs locking around Bucky's throat as she flips him to the floor. He goes limp and she smirks, releasing him, both of them breathing heavily. "It's 3-3 now," she pants. "Best four out of five?"

He grins. "You're on."

***

Bucky kisses Steve, soft and sweet, legs tangling under the blanket and tea going cold on the coffee table.

***

Bruce holds out a hand. "Hi, I'm Bruce. We kinda met before but, well..."

Bucky takes his hand and nods, wincing. "I remember."

"Oh. Right." Bruce wrings his hands together. "So, how's everything...going?"

Bucky's gaze finds Steve across the room, he and Sam laughing at something. "Okay," he says softly, smiling. "It's going okay."
Bucky wakes up screaming, immediately falling into Steve as he trembles, gentle fingers beginning to stroke his hair.


For the first time, Bucky believes it.

Tony stops in front of him, looking uncomfortable. "Uh, hey."

"Hey," Bucky replies warily. There's an awkward pause. "I'm uh, I'm sorry," Bucky says. "About your parents. I understand if you-if you don't want me around."

Tony's head snaps up. "What? No, of course not. It wasn't your fault. I don't blame you at all." He takes a deep breath. "Really, I'd like to apologize for ever making you think I would blame you."

"Oh." Bucky blinks. "You don't- you don't hate me?"

Tony shakes his head. "No. I could never hate you." He extends a hand, expression anxious. "Friends?"

Bucky exhales, something loosening inside him. He takes Tony's hand. "Friends."

Bucky's metal fist crashes into the wall, a frustrated scream ripped from his throat. He staggers backwards, chest heaving as he chokes on a sob. Steve is there suddenly, a tentative hand on his shoulder and he turns, pressing his face to Steve's chest as he sobs, feeling raw and flayed open.

"I just want it to stop," he chokes out, tears soaking Steve's shirt.

A hand runs up and down his back soothingly, Steve's heartbeat fast but steady against him.

"I know," Steve says in a heartbroken whisper. "I know."

Bucky is sprawled across Steve and Sam's laps in wolf form, their hands stroking through his fur. Clint and Natasha are on the floor with their backs against the couch, Nat's head on Clint's shoulder; Tony is on the next couch, asleep, mouth open and snoring slightly, Pepper curled beside him and Bruce on the other end. The credits are rolling on the tv, music playing softly and subtitles on for Clint. Bucky closes his eyes, feeling safe and loved and, just maybe, happy.

"Can you move your seat up?" Bucky asks testily.

"No," Sam replies flatly.

Steve sighs from the driver's seat. "Honestly. We've only been driving two hours."

"That's two hours too long, Steve," Sam gripes.
"My legs are literally going numb," Bucky complains.

"Hey, I called shotgun. You snooze you lose, Barnes."

Bucky growls. "I hate you."

"Yeah yeah I know." Sam turns, shooting him a grin. Bucky tries to keep a straight face but eventually breaks, rolling his eyes as he smiles.

He kicks the back of Sam's seat in revenge.

"Hey!"

***

Bucky watches as Sam swoops overhead at Tony's airstrip, doing barrel rolls and whooping as he flies past. Finally he lands in front of Bucky, grinning.

"Alright Barnes, hit me with your best shot."

Bucky hefts the paintball gun, smirking. "Oh I will."

Sam takes off into the air as Bucky fires, painting the pavement with color as Sam dodges and twirls, firing back with his own gun. Bucky laughs as paint spatters against his metal arm, drops flying in his face.

***

Steve goes to touch his face unexpectedly and Bucky flinches, startling backwards as his pulse jumps.

Steve freezes. "Sorry. Bad day?"

Bucky nods, trying to breathe through the panic that's been thrumming through him all day, making him jittery and on edge. "Yeah. Sorry."

Steve's face softens. "You got nothing to be sorry for, Buck. I understand."

Bucky sighs, scrubbing at his face. "I just-"

"I know." Steve opens his arms in invitation, standing still. Bucky falls into them, strong arms wrapping around him in a gentle embrace. He is safe. He is safe. He repeats it in his head, trying to make his fucked-up brain understand it. *He is safe.*

***

*Want to go to the range?* Bucky signs to Clint.

Clint brightens, grinning. *Yes.*

***

"Aww, come on," Clint whines. "That was a technicality."

"Nope. I win, Barton," Bucky says proudly.

"I demand a rematch."
Bucky raises an eyebrow. "Alright, you're on."

***

A hand touches his side and Bucky skitters backwards, metal paw clicking on the floor and a snarl ripped from his throat, panic whiting out his vision.

"-ucky, Bucky, it's just me. It's Steve."

He breathes, seeing Steve crouch down in front of him. *Steve.* He exhales and moves forwards, pushing his head into Steve's chest as he trembles slightly. Steve strokes his fur, murmuring reassurances.

"It's okay. You're safe. I'm sorry I startled you."

*Safe.* He is safe.

***

Steve braids his hair, fingers scritching his scalp pleasantly. He's trimmed it but kept it long, just brushing the tops of his shoulders, and he loves experimenting with new ways to put it up. Steve ties off the end, pressing a kiss to the top of Bucky's head.

"There, all done."

Bucky turns, drawing Steve in for a real kiss. "Thanks, pal."

Steve smiles into the kiss before pushing him away. "Alright, now go kick Nat's ass."

"She'd kill you if she heard that," Bucky yells back as he steps onto the mat, facing Nat.

"If I heard what?" Nat asks innocently.

Bucky just smiles. "Nothing."

***

They sit in the quiet diner, hands wrapped around coffee cups and legs tangled under the table. Bucky has his grey scarf wrapped around his throat, both hands gloved against the chilly December air. Snow falls gently outside, blanketing the city in white; Christmas lights reflect off it, cheery music playing wherever they go. Bucky thinks of his family, remembering Christmases full of light and warmth and laughter. They are all gone now, but Steve is still here. He is home.

It is two weeks to Christmas. On this day, seventy years ago, he had fallen from a train and into the cold, changing he and Steve forever. Now they are sitting here, across from each other, warm and safe, silent as echoes of the past haunt their minds.

***

"Merry Christmas, Buck," Steve says, pulling him in for a long kiss under the mistletoe.

"Hey! Stop being adorable and come open presents!" Tony yells.

They laugh, breaking apart. "Okay okay, we're coming," Steve says, eyes sparkling with happiness. He tugs Bucky towards the tree, pressing a present into his hands. Bucky opens it, revealing a
drawing of Steve, small and beautiful, exactly like the one Steve had given him during the war. He looks up at Steve, feeling tears prick his eyes.

"To replace the one you lost," Steve says softly.

Bucky surges forward, wrapping his arms around Steve in a crushing hug as emotion wells in his chest.

***

"Steve, Bucky, this is my mom," Sam says.

She extends a hand. "Oh please, call me Darlene."

The both take it, her grip strong and warm. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you," Steve says.

"Well, I should say the same for you. I've heard so many good things from Sam. Now come in, come in, dinner's almost ready. You haven't lived until you've had a Wilson family Christmas dinner."

***

Steve takes Bucky apart as snow drifts past their window, nothing else existing except for Bucky and Steve, suspended in time.

***

Bucky curls into the corner of the couch, hands pressed to his head and right one shaking slightly.

"Bad day?" Steve asks softly.

Bucky nods, unable to speak.

***

Bucky unwraps the new scarf, mouth falling open and the beautiful pattern and soft texture.

"Happy Birthday, Barnes," Sam says.

Bucky pulls him into a tight hug. "Thanks, Sam."

***

"Happy Birthday, Buck," Steve whispers. He wraps his arms around him from behind, resting his chin on Bucky's shoulder.

Bucky turns his head, drawing Steve in for a gentle kiss. He is roughly thirty, the disjointed years with Hydra not adding up perfectly. His birthday is not quite his birthday, anymore, but it doesn't matter. He is here, and he is with Steve, and that is all that matters.

***

Clint drinks from the coffee pot, signing to Bucky with one hand. Bucky laughs, stealing a piece of sausage off of Steve's plate and popping it in his mouth. Steve doesn't even protest, reaching over to steal Bucky's bacon in retaliation.
"Oh my god," Sam groans. "Why are y'all like this. Let a man eat in peace."

Bucky throws a piece of bacon at him.

***

Bucky blinks, coming back to awareness to his head in Steve's lap, a gentle hand stroking his hair. "How long?" he rasps.

Steve's eyes are sad. "Three hours," he says softly.

***

Bucky shoots from the ledge, covering Steve as he charges, paint splattering off his shield. Natasha cackles with glee as she hits Sam, narrowly dodging a shot from Bucky. Tony simply strides forward, suit covered in paint as he shoots wildly, Clint going down as Steve tags him and shoots him in the chest.

"That's cheating!" Sam yells, playing dead on the ground. "You can't be killed with the suit!"

"Um, no it's not, everyone gets to use their superhero stuff," Tony replies from behind the mask. "Mine just happens to be better than yours."

Bucky gleefully shoots, covering both his eyes with paint. Tony trips over a log and falls, Sam cheering and Steve snapping off a cocky salute in his direction.

***

Bucky darts away, Clint's arrow between his teeth.

"Hey! Give that back!"

Bucky growls, evading Clint easily as he chases him around the training room, Steve laughing from the other end of the room. Bucky makes a beeline for Steve, skidding to a halt and dropping the arrow into his hand. Steve grins, pausing to ruffle the fur on Bucky's head.

"Thanks, pal."

"I swear to God-" Clint yells.

***

Steve's hands knead into the knots in Bucky's shoulders, drawing a blissful groan from his lips. He presses his cheek to the pillow, arms crossed under it as Steve straddles his back.

"I knew I had a reason to keep you around," Bucky mumbles.

He feels Steve chuckle above him. "Right. You only want me for my hands."

"You got me, Rogers."

Steve bends forward, pressing a kiss to Bucky's shoulder and then his neck, over the scars. "I'm sure I can think of a few other reasons."

"Mmm." Bucky can't think of a good comeback, warm and sleepy and utterly relaxed under Steve's
ministrations. Steve chuckles again, hands kneading down his back as Bucky sighs into the pillow.

***

Bucky brushes his fingers over the bruises on Steve's face, feeling guilt settle in his gut.

"I'm sorry," he whispers.

Steve shakes his head slightly, hand coming up to grip Bucky's. "It was an accident. You were having a nightmare. I shouldn't have tried to wake you."

Bucky leans forward, pressing a gentle kiss to Steve's cheekbone. "Still. I'm sorry."

***

"Happy Birthday, Steve," Bucky whispers. He leans back, head resting on Steve's shoulder as they watch fireworks light up the night sky, safe behind soundproof glass. He thinks of a small room and the smell of sweat, the sounds of soldiers celebrating drifting up from the streets below. He turns, catching Steve's mouth in a kiss as his hands creep up under Steve's shirt, everything else disappearing as he takes Steve apart.

***

Steve gets down on one knee, eyes glistening. "James Buchanan Barnes, will you marry me?"

Bucky feels a tear slip down his face. "Yes," he chokes out. "Yes." Steve surges into his arms, kissing him reverently.

***

Their marriage is a small affair, Bucky legally dead so Tony making him a new identity but keeping his name, he and Steve going down to the courthouse and signing the marriage license. The clerk gives them a strange look, both of them wearing hats and sunglasses and in Bucky's case a scarf and glove to try and conceal their identities.

"Fans, are you?" the clerks asks. "Did the names and everything, huh? Some people did speculate that Captain America and Bucky were together back in the old days."

Steve and Bucky glance at each other, struggling to keep straight faces. The clerk slides them their license, smiling.

"Congratulations. You're officially married."

***

There's a small celebration in the tower, no need for an actual wedding. Bucky and Steve have already said all the vows they need to. Their hearts have already been married for ninety years, since Bucky first saw a tiny boy with blonde hair and blue eyes being beaten up and his soul screamed protect. They are only putting it on paper, something they had always dreamed about in Brooklyn but never thought would happen. Instead of rings they exchange dog tags, Bucky's returning to Steve and Steve's coming to rest on Bucky's chest, over his heart.

***

Where is Captain America? the news reports question.
Bucky rolls onto his side, watching Steve sleeping soundly next to him. Right where he's supposed to be, he thinks, reaching out to brush a strand of golden hair off of Steve's forehead with gentle fingers. He knows Steve is going to start going on missions again soon, but he dreads it. He is going too, of course. Wherever Steve goes, he follows, but sometimes he wishes that the world didn't need Steve, that they could spend their days doing nothing but just existing. They are tired of war, both of them, but Steve has never been able to back down from a fight. He'll fight until the stars fade from the sky and the universe goes dark, until there is not a single soul left to fight for. He is too good, Bucky thinks. The world does not deserve Steve Rogers. Bucky's only consolation is that they will never have him. The world gets Captain America but Steve, Steve is his. Steve is his and Bucky is Steve's and he thinks that they would burn the world down to keep each other safe. He thinks that the only time Steve Rogers has ever backed down from a fight it was against Bucky, that Steve became Captain America for him, picked up the shield for him, and gave it up in a heartbeat for him as well, and that Steve's name has been inscribed on Bucky's soul since the beginning of time and will endure until the end, the one thing Hydra could never take from him. So soon, they will fight, but right now, right here there is only Bucky and Steve, just two Brooklyn boys at the edge of the world.

Fin.
Epilogue

I think we deserve

a soft epilogue, my love.

We are good people

and we’ve suffered enough.

*Seventy years of sleep #4* by Nikka Ursula

Steve runs across the meadow, rays of sunlight glinting through the trees and flowers blooming under his feet, dew sparkling on long grass and making spiders’ webs into glittering masterpieces in the quiet forest. A heavy weight knocks into him and he falls to the soft earth, laughing as his arms come around Bucky and he rolls them on the grass, white fur damp and grass-stained and beads of water sliding down his metal foreleg to darken Steve's shirt. Steve sprawls on his back as Bucky licks his face before settling next to him and putting his head on Steve's chest, a hand coming up automatically to stroke the soft fur. The sun warms Steve's face and birds twitter softly in the distance, the only sound to break the peaceful silence. He sighs, closing his eyes. Tomorrow they will have to go back to the city, leaving their quiet respite, but for now he just lets himself enjoy it. They will be back soon, in winter, to huddle in their cabin and kiss languidly in front of the fire, to be nothing but themselves and laugh freely in the snow, Bucky's white fur blending into the serene landscape. The rest of the time, the world needs them, but for two weeks twice a year they can run free and unburdened, paws drumming lightly against the earth and two hearts beating as one, nothing else existing except for them.

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