Reconstruction Site

by EmilianaDarling

Summary

He is the Winter Soldier.

He is James Buchanan Barnes.

He’s not one and he’s not the other, and he’s not sure if that makes him anything worth saving.

[In which the Winter Soldier leads Steve Rogers and Sam Wilson on a wild goose chase through Eastern Europe so that he can learn more about the man who actually thinks he can be saved. This fic takes place chronologically second in the series but was written first.]

Notes

Note: This story now has a podfic!

I have about a million things to do and so many other fics to write, but after seeing The Winter Soldier I actually couldn't physically stop until this was fic written.

Thank you so much to aubreyli for the inspiration and avelera for the cheerleading, and to all of you guys for taking the time to read this!
It’s been thirty-six days since the Winter Soldier was last taken in for maintenance.

Thirty-six days, and from what he can tell (from stolen files splattered with flecks of red-brown blood) that’s ten days longer than he’s ever gone without a full wipe. Without being broken down into basics, into building blocks. Into the creature of singular determination and ruthlessness and destruction he’s been for as long as he can remember.

There has always been a mission before. An objective and a trajectory and no possibility of deviation, no alternate path other than the one laid out for him by his handlers.

This is no mission now. No orders to follow, no targets to take down, no authority to obey. He is a defector without any allegiance, uninhibited by the threat of pain or a physical inability to disobey. He can feel the programming breaking down in his head, and there are no restraints holding him down anymore.

He is a guided missile gone off its flight path, uncontrolled and hurtling towards some unknown target.

The Winter Soldier has toppled regimes, assassinated leaders and brought entire countries to their knees. He has tortured and maimed and murdered without question, annihilating men and women and children for no other purpose than completing the mission. He has pushed the limits of even his own physical endurance, has risked worse fates than death without ever considering fear as an option.

The Winter Soldier has been uncompromising and eternal for seventy years, a brutally effective precision weapon to be used and implemented as his controllers saw fit.

He is not the Winter Soldier. The words still drift up from the back of his mind, sneak into his frame of vision without him noticing, but the title doesn’t fit anymore. Not in the ways that matter.

He has been compromised.
He is a defector.
He is a ghost.
For the very first time, there is no mission for him to follow.
For the very first time, he does not know what to do.

He hides out in a run-down motel paid for with stolen money, sitting in the dark and replaying everything over and over again in his head. The flying sparks, the thick black smoke, the world plummeting around them as they fell out of the air.

The blond hair and the bright blue eyes and a face like a word on the tip of his tongue.

The longer he goes without a wipe the more he remembers and the worse he gets, all of the pent-up energy and barely-restrained rage building up inside him until he feels like an explosive about to be detonated. Unstable and erratic, the technicians’ words coming back to him along with a hundred other memories; weaving between the tanks as they crashed into Budapest, slitting a well-dressed family’s throats while one of Reagan’s speeches played in the background, polonium-210 and rocket-launchers and bullets and blades, endless shrieks of pain and cries for mercy blending into a single endless scream inside his head.

And that man – Captain America, his mission, tall and broad and hard to kill even then – standing on the street, stock-still with his mouth fallen open. Looking at him as though his knees might give out at any moment.

He tries to push it away, bury it deep, but no matter what he tries he can’t forget the sense of bone-deep loss that no part of him knows how to explain. Can’t forget but I knew him and Pierce’s too-rigid expression and his own face staring back at him in black and white.

A blown-up picture in some museum doesn’t make him Bucky Barnes. Doesn’t make him anything more or less than a discarded weapon, still deadly-sharp and stained with other peoples’ blood.

The look on Captain America’s face, though. The resignation, the defeat, the terrible sadness that had stoked the throbbing emptiness in his chest. That had made him frenzied and furious in his confusion.

Your name is James Buchanan Barnes. I’m not gonna fight you.

Captain America had chosen to go down without a fight. The most tenacious mark the Winter Soldier has ever faced, who made it out of a dozen situations that should have killed him against all reason, had let his shield fall from his hands. Had been willing to let the Winter Soldier do anything to him as long as it meant he didn’t have to hurt the man he believed to be his friend.

‘Cause I’m with you ‘til the end of the line.

It had been incomprehensible. World-ending.

It had almost been enough to make him want to be the person that Steve Rogers sees when he looks
He needs to learn more about Captain America.

For some reason, this strikes him as infinitely more important than learning about Bucky Barnes. Bucky Barnes, whose face he shares and who might very well be the answer to a question he never thought to ask, does not matter in the way that Steve Rogers matters.

He goes to the library and steals rather than borrows books about him. *The Man Who Defined a Generation: Captain America and his Howling Commandos* and *Captain America, 1943-1945: A Historical Account of America’s Hero* and *Behind the Star-Spangled Man: A Biography of Steve Rogers*.

He reads them in the same brusque, perfunctory way he used to read the dossiers before missions. He skims over the words quickly but thoroughly, taking in data, looking for patterns, drawing conclusions in order to find the most effective method for neutralizing a variable. His eyes can’t help but skitter awkwardly over all of the pictures that feature a too-familiar man with dark hair, the man whose smile is warm and cocky in a way that looks actively unnatural on his own face. A few times, he has to actively repress the urge to destroy photographic evidence of his existence while reading them.

The books don’t tell him enough, though. They tell him about names and dates and places and events, careful historical analyses using reference texts and first-hand interviews and the substantive body of academic research to draw conclusions and paint whatever picture each author wants to see. They are for education and entertainment, not reconnaissance. There is nothing in them that tells him what to do next.

Instead, he covertly investigates the locations the books make reference to. The apartment building that Rogers and Barnes used to live in, Rogers’s old art school and the business complex that stands where *Larry’s Super Service Garage* used to be, the place where Barnes used to work before he signed up for the military. He goes to Coney Island and *Goldie’s Boxing Gym*, to the houses Rogers and Barnes used to live in before they moved in together in 1938. He tries to find even a hint of what Steve Rogers used to be like before he joined the army, before he became a national symbol, before he was put on ice and taken out of the game for seventy years.

All of it only leaves him frustrated and torn-up, his non-metal hand twitching and flexing as though it wants to wrap around the handle of a gun again. As though he wants to curl his fingers around the hilt of a dagger and carve his way out of the pit he’s fallen into.

That’s when he realizes he has to get closer.
It’s easy enough to track Steve Rogers down.

He reaches out to the few contacts he can threaten into usefulness without endangering himself, then obtains a fake passport and flies to Moscow as soon as he has a rough lock on Rogers’s position. Once there, he slips through the familiar streets like a ghost, keeping his eyes peeled for a flash of blond hair, for a lopsided smile he doesn’t remember Rogers giving him but still seems to edge at the corners of his mind nonetheless.

He investigates the HYDRA bases within city limits that are the most likely to be compromised after the events in Washington: the ones with strong ties to the United States, the ones that likely haven’t been able to survive the sudden influx of liberated information. He puts money into the right hands and knives against the right throats, and soon enough it pays off.

When he first lays eyes on Rogers, the man is standing on the street a few blocks away from Gorky Park wearing an almost-too-American baseball hat and a pair of glasses. He’s talking to another man, one with dark skin and friendly eyes – the one with the wings, the one he sent crashing down off the helicarrier with a kick to the chest. They don’t notice him blended into the crowd with a hood pulled up over his head, ostensibly against the still-chilly spring air.

Neither of them would make particularly good spies, the Winter Soldier decides absently as he stares at the two of them in unconcealed fascination. From a distance, he drinks in the sight of Captain Rogers like a man dying of thirst who has just been offered water. The lines of his face are as cool and crisp as the Winter Soldier remembers, the set of his jaw just as determined.

When he sees Rogers reaches into his pocket and pull out a cell phone, the Winter Soldier comes a little closer.

“… that's what we’re telling you, Nat. The intel you gave us led us here.” Rogers pushes the glasses up his nose awkwardly, as though he is unaccustomed to wearing them. He is silent for a little while, clearly listening to the person on the other end of the line speak.

Nat, the Winter Soldier thinks. Natalia Alianovna Romanova, the woman who was with him on the bridge. Something in his brain itches, like a scab that he could scratch at and bring fresh blood welling to the surface. He dismisses it for now, narrowing in on Rogers again.

The man is pacing slightly, his breath fogging in the air in front of him. There’s no snow on the ground and it’s very much springtime, but the cold clings a little longer in this part of the world. He watches as Rogers shrugs his broad shoulders, as though the woman on the other end of the line can see him.

“Well, the trail at home’s gone completely cold, so other than finding out more about the people who did this to him, I don’t know what else you might suggest.” There is a momentary pause before Rogers rolls his eyes in response to something Natalia has said, giving his companion – Sam, maybe? There was no file on him – a long-suffering look.

“Ha ha,” says Rogers dryly, narrowing his eyes at his friend. “Very funny, both of you.”

Sam doesn’t look particularly sympathetic, barely suppressing a cheeky smile.

“If she’s suggesting we take the afternoon off to go visit St. Basil’s, tell her I agree wholeheartedly.”

Throughout the conversation, the Winter Soldier has been edging closer – but there’s something about Rogers’s expression that makes him halt in his tracks. He looks exasperated, unimpressed, with just a tiny bit of sneaky amusement thrown in – and for a strange, disassociated moment, it occurs to
him that Steve really shouldn’t be so big. He’s too broad, too tall; all barely-concealed brawn where he should be too-loose dress shirts hanging off boney shoulders. Jutting ribs all-too visible beneath pale skin.

He blinks, coming back to himself in a too-sudden rush that leaves his throat dry and a horrible churning in his stomach. He takes a shaky step back, then another, and then he’s vanishing back into the crowd and around the corner as though he was never here in the first place. As though he isn’t far too conscious of what almost feels like someone else’s voice echoing in his head.

He takes a few hours to regroup, ghosting through back alleys until his heart rate returns to normal, until he can think in a straight line again. After that, he goes into a nondescript hole-in-the-wall restaurant and shovels cabbage soup into his mouth mechanically, staring at the wall and planning out his next move.

He tells himself that he doesn’t just want to sneak glimpses of Captain America while the man idles around Moscow like a tourist, investigating slim leads and growing more and more disheartened by the minute. He wants to see him engaged, to see him on the move. To take in everything there is to know about him in every conceivable situation.

This is why he drains the rest of the bowl, throws a few roubles on the table, and decides to kill two birds with one stone by catching a train to Kiev and putting a bullet in the head of a former HYDRA operative.

The operative is no great loss, strategically or morally or by any other measurable scale. Dr. Bogachyov once beat him so badly after hitting a snag in a mission that his broken ribs had ached for a day and a half even with his accelerated healing. The man is old and frail now, with almost no hair and blue veins visible through his semi-translucent skin, but it’s still satisfying to blow his brains out all over his lab equipment.

He makes sure to leave an easy trail, doesn’t stop the doctor’s assistants from running out the door. Makes it just sloppy enough to look like he’s frantic, coming unhinged, going on a mission for vengeance of his own creation.

After he runs, all he has to do is double back and wait for Rogers and his friend to catch up.

--

It only takes a few hours for Rogers and his friend to come running, an impressively short time considering they had only been following dead leads until now.

He tracks their movements, watches them from rafters and second floor windows and rooftops, greedily taking in every word he can catch and every glimpse he can steal. Rogers doles out orders as though he was born doing it. **Sam, check and see if there’s any contact information in those files and we need to narrow in before the trail goes cold** as though his is the only authority that matters.

There’s something familiar about the resolute confidence in his voice, and the way Rogers holds himself as he speaks makes something twitch in the recesses of the Winter Soldier’s mind. Rogers’s back is ramrod straight, his eyes slightly narrowed as he looks around the abandoned laboratory. He’s looking right ahead, leading the charge in this investigation as much as he ever did during raids,
when he would plough in with his gun drawn and his shield raised high, big and broad and wrapped up in red, white, and blue.

Rogers doesn’t waste any time, collecting evidence and gathering intel before he and his friend head out again at a jog, and the Winter Soldier can tell without even looking that they’re following the trail he’s left for them. A trail of clues and hints and indications that should lead them to a HYDRA outpost in the Baltics, to another operative the Winter Soldier wouldn’t mind putting a bullet into.

He trails them like a silent shadow, keeping to the back roads and hovering on the periphery but never so far as to let them slip away, to let Rogers slip away. He follows them to interrogations and train stations and restaurants and motel rooms, and there’s something incredibly satisfying about watching Rogers dance, watching him run. About drinking in the details without the other man realizing, knowing more about him than Rogers knows about him for a change.

It takes him over three-hundred kilometres to realize that the fledgling sensation bubbling up in his chest is excitement, and it’s such a surreal notion that he almost misses the train Rogers and his friend are on, has to fling himself onto the passenger car while it’s already in motion and discreetly break in from the outside in order to avoid being left behind.

--

After the splinter cell in Estonia he leads them to an experimental cryogenics research facility in Lithuania, then on to a former KGB controller now living in Warsaw.

The last one is more complicated, since Antonia Valentina Denisova has been hiding her involvement in the secret police for years under the cover of being a member of the Soviet civil service. He doesn’t want Rogers to lose the trail, to think that he’s started killing at random instead of for revenge, and he’s careful to expose a paper trail that makes her involvement in a number of prolific KGB operations as clear as possible without making it look too staged.

He probably wouldn’t have made the effort except for the fact that Denisova once ordered him to detonate an explosive inside a primary school under the pretence of an attack by a separatist group, a mission that resulted in the deaths of over forty students and two teachers. He hadn’t even thought twice about it at the time, had quickly and cleanly carried out his orders before returning to HYDRA for reprogramming.

It bothers him now, though. Memories of little kids shrieking in pain and wailing for their dead friends that don’t stop until he puts a bullet in her brain.

He doesn’t torture her, doesn’t draw her death out into something long and painful, and part of him is obliquely proud of that fact even as he steals away and waits for Rogers and his friend to catch up with him.

To Tblisi after that, then back up to Russia, and the whole time he watches Rogers as though his life depends on it, gathering facts and information that he lists and categorizes in his head like he might for a high-profile assassination.

Rogers likes butter on his toast in the mornings, but never enough to make the bread soggy. He tries to help people even when he doesn’t speak the language, even when he’s scrambling across Eastern Europe in search of a ghost that’s always just out of his sight. He carries a tired-looking woman’s
groceries in Kaunas, helps a man with his stalled car in Pruszków.

Half of the time, Rogers is so in sync with Sam Wilson that the two of them act without speaking, each of them rushing off to complete silently agreed-upon tasks whenever they arrive at one of his execution sites, and for some reason that in particular is enough to make the Winter Soldier’s eyes narrow, to make his metal hand clench and unclench as though it’s actually a part of his body and not a weapon at his disposal.

And every time they don’t catch up with him, though, Rogers gets this look on his face. It starts to make the Winter Soldier more uncomfortable the more he sees it. Determination and disappointment and longing that almost makes him want to step out of the shadows, to let himself get caught if it means getting that punk-ass look off Steve’s sorry face.

The words mission and friend repeat over and over again in his mind, merging together until they’re a single shrieking dissonance inside his head.

He lets the trail go cold in St. Petersburg for a while to give himself a chance to regroup, to let Rogers and his friend settle, to observe them from a closer distance. The chase doesn’t seem as fun when he can’t stop dreaming about falling, bitterly cold wind rushing up all around him as he plummets down into endless abyss.

When he can’t stop seeing Rogers’s hand reaching out for him, telling him to grab my hand and trying desperately to pull him back to safety, back to solid ground.

--

In St. Petersburg, he stops trailing after Captain America.

Instead, he starts looking – really looking – for Steve Rogers.

He follows Rogers to a coffee shop one day, observing him from across the street as the man buys himself a cup of strong black coffee (no cream and no sugar because that was the way that Bucky always took it, because Steve never wanted to compromise, to be anything less than Bucky always was) and sits outside on the patio.

When Rogers pulls out a battered-looking sketchbook out of his shoulder bag and starts drawing, he can actually feel his breath catch in his throat because he knows this, knows this intimately and right down to his bones, right down to the way Steve holds the pencil in his hand and sits slumped in his seat with his knees spread open, staring down at the page in idle concentration, he knows this, and –

— the air inside their apartment building is hot and sticky, summer in Brooklyn making sweat soak right through his white button-up, the fabric under his arms and in the small of his back wet and heavy. His sleeves are already rolled up and his shirt is halfway unbuttoned but it doesn’t seem to make much of a difference, the fabric still clinging to his skin unpleasantly. Bucky swipes the back of his hand over his dripping forehead and actually feels the engine grease smear there, lets out a muttered little curse as he reaches the top of the stairs and pulls out his key, unlocks the door, and walks into the apartment that he and Steve have been sharing since Steve’s mom died two years ago.

It’s a small apartment, only one bedroom that they alternate using, and Steve glances up at him from his place on the couch when the door opens. He’s all sharp angles, knees as knobbly as ever in shorts to combat the heat, and his hand is frail and delicate wrapped around the pencil. He shoots
Bucky a wry smile when he steps through the door.

“You smell like sour milk,” Steve informs him bluntly, wrinkling his nose. Bucky throws his keys at him. They land ineffectually on the couch cushion beside him, exactly where he had been aiming, but it’s the sentiment that counts.

“What d’you go around sniffing sour milk for?” asks Bucky, and Steve rolls his eyes.

Regardless of how badly he may or may not reek, Bucky slumps down onto the couch next to him, tipping his head back against the not-so-comfortable cushion and closing his eyes. “Long day.”

“Yeah?” asks Steve, going from ‘smartass’ to ‘interested listener’ in about two seconds flat. “What happened?”

Bucky shakes his head.

“Nothing, really. Mr. McGillicuddy keeps coming in and complaining that his Chevy’s carburetor’s shot, but there ain’t nothing wrong with it. The man just likes to complain.” Bucky raises his head off the couch slightly, turning to Steve and waggling his eyebrows suggestively. “Not that I mind getting a look at Mrs. McGillicuddy three times a week, but I could really do without her husband’s yakking.”

“Bucky,” says Steve, warningly but not seriously, and Bucky raises his hands in the air in defeat.

“I know, I know, she’s married and all,” Bucky says, before shooting Steve a devious smile. “That doesn’t mean a man can’t look, right?”

He catches the pencil when Steve throws it at him, laughing out loud at the look on his friend’s face. He can feel the stress and tension of the day beginning to melt away, something comfortable and welcoming settling easily in its place. He grins at Steve fondly, something warm and protective flickering to life inside his chest, before he cranes his neck to see what Steve’s working on. “What are you drawing, anyway?”

Steve turns the sketchbook around and shows him without a fight, and Bucky lets out a low whistle at the sight of it.

It’s a sketch of one of the little old ladies who lives in their building, the lines of it rough but accurate, and Bucky can see where Steve’s been working on filling in the shading. In the picture, the woman – Mrs. Thompson? – is looking out of a window, leaning her chin on her frail, wrinkled hand and staring out into something that isn’t shown on the page. There’s a little smile tugging at the corners of her mouth, a hint of something mischievous in her eyes.

Bucky’s met Mrs. Thompson before, and he can’t say as he’s ever seen her anything less outright hostile. That’s Steve, though. Always finding the good parts of people as long as they’re there to find.

“I helped her bring her groceries up this morning when I got home from delivering papers,” Steve explains, shrugging his bony shoulders. “She invited me in for tea.”

Bucky pointedly doesn’t comment on the fact that Mrs. Thompson lives on the seventh floor, that bringing her groceries up six flights of stairs was probably just as hard for Steve as it would have been for her. His eyes drift over to the corners of the page that aren’t taken up by the main drawing, to the places where blank white space has been filled in with half-finished lines and shapes. There’s a sketchy face in profile that he can tell at a glance is supposed to be him, and that makes something warm swell up in his belly.
“That ain’t half bad,” he says quietly, shooting Steve a little grin.

Steve smiles back, lopsided and sweet

until suddenly

it isn’t.

until Steve’s face is filling out and his jawline his getting stronger and his eyes are widening in fear, in desperation, and he reaches out a far too thick arm, reaching for Bucky, but suddenly they’re not sitting on a couch in their apartment at all and

he’s looking up at Steve’s face, terror pounding through his body like a heartbeat and his arms ache from holding on, the cold metal making his fingers burn

“grab my hand!” Steve shouts, desperate and reaching, and the wind is whistling around them as the train speeds onward and he thrashes in the wind, lungs burning and scared, so fucking scared he reaches up, can almost feel the touch of Steve’s hand in his, and then –

— and then he’s falling, falling so fast he can’t even draw breath to scream, and he wrenches himself out of the memory so violently he almost plummets out of the second story window for real, shaking so hard he can barely stand and clinging to the wall with clammy hands, and he can still feel the wind howling around him as he falls down, down, down into the endless chasm.

As soon as he can stand he bolts so hard he thinks Steve might catch a glimpse of him, barrelling through the streets of St. Petersburg, frantic to get back to somewhere he can actually fucking breathe.

--

It’s too much, the sense of disjointedness he gets when he sees his own face reflected in shop windows as he walks down the street. The wrongness of it, the disconnect, the certainty that his hair should be shorter and his eyes should be brighter and his face should be so, so much younger than it is.

At the same time, though, that’s all wrong too. Doesn’t reflect the memories seared into his brain with the pounding throbbing agony of electricity, the lessons carved into his skin with razors and burnt there with white-hot metal. There is a part of him that thinks any part of his face being on display is too much, that all of him needs to be covered up in masks and goggles, unknown and eternal and still ruthless, still sharp. That the new softness around his face and the uncertainty in his eyes is nothing but vulnerability, nothing but weakness, nothing but a way to get himself killed.

Neither extreme is right, neither option fits, and it’s all he can do to keep doggedly following Steve. To watch him and learn him and keep taking it all in, to cling to the edge and keep waiting for something, anything about himself to start making sense.

--
He starts hating Sam Wilson, after a while. The one with the wings and the shining smile and the loyalty that burns so bright it almost hurts to look at.

Ever since he led them to St. Petersburg, Steve and Sam have been sharing a room. It has two beds and it’s ostensibly because of lack of space in the hotel, but it still makes him feel rankled and uneasy nonetheless.

It’s instinct, pure and raw and ruthless. Something that grows and festers inside him without his permission. Some days, it makes him so angry that Sam Wilson can talk to Steve, can touch him and laugh with him and spend time with him as though it’s as easy as breathing. It leaves him silently seething and watching Steve even more carefully than usual, almost prepared to swoop in and drive a knife through the guy’s neck if he tries anything funny.

Distantly, he can remember Bucky Barnes going through something similar when he watched that woman – Agent Margaret Carter? Peggy? – getting close to Steve during the war. It had been mean-spirited and selfish then, too, because he was always the one dragging Steve along on dates and trying to convince him to find the right girl, but somehow actually seeing him be so taken with a dame was something else altogether.

It didn’t help that Bucky Barnes had genuinely liked Peggy; had thought she was tough and no-nonsense and good for Steve all-round, that he could see him marrying her someday, Jesus Christ.

Bucky had always been the one who went on dates, who got dames to spread their legs, who would tell Steve all about it the next morning, ignoring the pinched expression on Steve’s face as he did so. It had been fine enough for him to sleep around, to have a little fun, to try out the waters and see what it was like and see what he could get away with.

Seeing Steve move toward the same thing during the war made something ugly and possessive burst inside Bucky Barnes’s chest like a grenade going off, made him want to drag Steve back to a time when it was just the two of them against the world, two little lost kids full of bravado and bluster and not much else.

It’s different now, though. The Bucky of the Winter Soldier’s memories had compassion and decency to act as a buffer: Bucky had been relieved for Steve to finally be healthy, had been glad that his best friend had actually found someone who could maybe make him happy one day.

He doesn’t have that, now. All he has is razor-sharp anger and a hatred so focused it feels as though he’s seeing the world through a sniper scope, narrowed-in and focused and Sam Wilson with an enormous target on his back at all times. It’s not even sexual – or maybe it is, it’s impossible to tell, he has no idea what any of it feels like anymore. He just knows that Sam gets to spend time with Steve Rogers where he doesn’t, gets to talk and smile and sleep in the same room with Steve Rogers and he doesn’t, and it makes him grind his teeth and grip his gun far, far too tight.

The Winter Soldier makes an appearance, after that. Leads Steve Rogers and Sam Wilson on a chase through the streets of St. Petersburg, doesn’t attack them at all but just keeps running on rooftops and darting through buildings. Keeps just out of their reach until he’s able to disappear just close enough to his old hidey-hole to know that they’ll find it: the makeshift bed, a few pieces of clothing, the print-outs of three new HYDRA targets in Moscow.

Moscow has hotels with more than one room available, and it’s absolutely ridiculous that he sleeps better because of that fact.
After a week back in Moscow, he tracks down the hotel that Steve and Sam are staying in and crawls into Steve’s room through the third floor window.

It’s an old building, full of squeaking floorboards and everything worn down, and he has to be careful when he slips inside. Even more careful than usual, because Steve is military and not an idiot and prepared for a confrontation and he really, really doesn’t want Steve to wake up right now.

This is his area of expertise, though. He and Captain America might be evenly matched out on the street in broad daylight, but slipping through the dark without being seen is his specialty.

The street outside is dark, only about half of the streetlamps equipped with working bulbs, and even with more than a lifetime’s worth of covert missions and black operations it’s possible that the Winter Soldier has never been so carefully and intentionally quiet. The room itself is dark, too, but his night vision is too good for that to be a problem. He steps down on the floor with such care it feels as though he’s barely putting any weight on his foot, stilling into perfect rigidity when Steve makes a mumbled noise in his sleep.

Steve isn’t awake, though. Only settling. After a moment the Winter Soldier relaxes, straightens up. Surveys the room and allows himself to takes a proper look.

Steve is curled up on his side under the covers, coiled around himself a little like he used to during the winters when it was so cold his chest would rattle every time he coughed, and he’s so ridiculously big and broad that it looks as though he’s doing the world’s worst job at making himself invisible. He’s frowning in his sleep, his mouth tense and his brow furrowed.

For a very stupid moment, he almost wants to reach out and tuck some of Steve’s hair behind his ear. It’s too short for that now, of course. The Winter Soldier gives his head a shake, taking a few careful steps before lowering himself gingerly into the chair across from Steve’s bed. He keeps his eyes fixed on Steve, watching the steady rise and fall of his friend’s chest in the dark.

It’s all wrong, because he really should be able to wrap his whole body around Steve. To draw his back up against his chest and sling an arm around his waist and feel the smallness of him there, the fragility.

In a strange way, the dysphoria over Steve’s size is almost familiar too.

Regardless of how big he is, though, Steve is utterly helpless right now. The Winter Soldier could take out one of his knives and stab him through the heart, could pull out a gun and shoot him so full of holes his enhanced healing wouldn’t stand a chance. Could bludgeon him, beat him, take all of his anger and confusion and fear out on that face from the past that shouldn’t be here, that shouldn’t be with him, that shouldn’t be a part of whatever kind of life he might manage to scrape together from now on.

He stares at Steve, asleep and unaware and so vulnerable it almost hurts, and is horrified to realize that there is no part of him that wants to do Steve any harm.

He wants to kiss Steve instead. Wants to push him down into the mattress and tangle metal fingers in his hair, pull him into a hard kiss and keep him there, and he has no idea whether it’s Bucky Barnes
or the Winter Soldier who wants it to happen.

He leaves as quietly as he entered, feeling stone cold and frozen solid, stealing back into the night and pointedly not looking back over his shoulder as he goes.

--

If the dreams were a problem before, they only get worse as more of his memories come back to him.

At night, he stays huddled in the abandoned railways station he’s made camp in, tossing and thrashing violently as the images course through him. As he remembers so much it doesn’t make sense, so much that he can’t put it all in order.

— he’s thirteen years old and they’re at his house, and when Bucky turns the corner he blinks at the sight of his momma hunched over by the coat rack, trying to sneak a bagged-up sandwich into Steve’s jacket pocket. When she looks back and catches Bucky’s eye he just nods, yelling at Steve to hold up a bit, pal, there’s something else I wanna show you before we head out and leading them back into the living room so that she has a few more moments to finish up. Because he understands taking care of Steve, even when the dumb bastard refuses to be taken care of, and neither of them is going to let Steve waste away while the economy’s so bad, when there are people in tent cities and Steve’s mom has to fight for every hour she works at the hospital –

— it’s 1963 and there’s a mission in America, one that requires him to blend into the crowd and not rouse any suspicions until it’s too late. The Winter Soldier speaks twenty-one languages but today when he opens his mouth it’s English that comes out, all rounded vowels and the accent so easy to fake, and while he’s standing in a throng of people and some guy crashes into him he says hey watch it, there and the woman in front of him turns around with a laugh, saying my, there’s a New York boy if ever I heard one with a drawl in her voice and that doesn’t make sense, he doesn’t understand what she means –

— he’s sixteen years old and Steve is blushing so hard his whole face is bright red, and Bucky blinks because apparently this is what happens when you have a spare key and don’t bother knocking before you enter your best friend’s bedroom. Steve’s hand is still stuffed guiltily under the covers and Bucky can see him opening his mouth to apologize, to ask him to leave, to demand what the hell he’s doing charging in without knocking, and Bucky… just doesn’t want to hear it. He closes the door quickly behind him, raising his hands palm-outward in front of him as though placating a spooked animal.

Hey, he says, real quiet and calm-like, hey, it’s all right, don’t worry about it as he walks toward the bed and sits down next to him. Steve starts to protest, but Bucky cuts him off by reaching under the covers and taking Steve in hand. His dick is small, just like him, but in that moment Bucky is shocked to realize that he wants Steve something fierce. Wants to make him feel good, wants to make his frail little body shake apart in Bucky’s arms. He wants Steve more than he’s ever wanted any dame, and the thought is so terrifying he can barely breathe. Steve groans weakly when Bucky starts to move his hand, protests dying on his lips as he collapses against the headboard, and Bucky gives him his best impression of a shit-eating grin and whispers what are friends for, right? as he gets Steve off with his hand, and after it’s done neither of them says anything about it but Bucky thinks about it sometimes when he’s with a dame or when he’s alone, thinks about what it would be like if he could have Steve like that all the time –
—he’s chasing his mission through the streets of Washington, D.C., can practically feel the crunch of Captain America’s neck in his ruthless metal grip. He hacks and slashes and almost has him a dozen times before his mask falls to the ground, before Captain America is looking at him with shock and incredulity plain on his face. Bucky? he asks, disbelieving and hopeful all at once, and the Winter Soldier can feel the stability of the earth falling away beneath his feet, can feel bitter cold rushing up to meet him until he’s falling again, always falling, plunging back into the abyss and there’s a wailing horrible sound in the air and it’s screaming, he’s screaming, he’s SCREAMING –

He wakes up violently, abruptly, flying to his feet and snatching up the knife he keeps under his pillow to fend off phantom attackers, eyes blown wide and blood pounding in his veins and his flight or fight instinct screaming to fight kill burn destroy FIGHT –

He always goes back to sleep drenched in sweat after those dreams, shaking hard with his face contorted in pain and fear and his eyes burning with something alien that he doesn’t recognize, something that leaves his cheeks wet and his chest aching and his mind too hollowed-out and empty to understand it.

--

He is the Asset.
He is the Winter Soldier.
He is a weapon.
He is Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes, 32557.
He is Bucky Barnes.
He is Steve Rogers’s best friend.
He is all of them and none of them. He is the space in between. He is the moment between heartbeats when the sniper pulls the trigger.
He’s not one and he’s not the other, and he’s not sure if that makes him anything worth saving.

--

Three months after the Winter Soldier started leading Steve Rogers and Sam Wilson on a wild goose chase through Eastern Europe, he skitters up three stories and slips into Steve’s hotel room through the window one last time. It’s late, and Steve is sleeping sprawled on his back and only half under the covers.

He pads silently across the room and then, before Steve knows what’s happening, he throws himself on top of Steve’s sleeping body with the speed and brutality that made him a legend in the intelligence community, seizing his advantage and using it for all that he’s worth.

Steve startles awake as soon as he realizes there’s someone on top of him, bucking and flailing
furiously out of instinct, but he already has both of Steve’s hands pinned above his head. Has Steve’s thick wrists trapped within the confines of his metal fingers, pinning him down hard enough that he can’t move but not quite hard enough to really hurt him.

“Now you listen to me,” he says, low and intense, leaning in close so that Steve can hear every word. It means leaning over Steve’s pinned body, his scraggly hair dangling down on either side of his face. Steve had stopped struggling as soon as he realized who was on top of him, and his eyes are blown wide with almost comical shock at the unexpected turn of events.

“Listen to me,” he says again. His metal hand tightens on Steve’s wrists. “I’m not the man I used to be, and there’s a chance I’ll never be him again.”

“Bucky –” Steve begins, but he cuts him right off.

“Listen,” he hisses, dangerous but soft, and Steve obediently shuts his mouth. Steve’s blond hair is sleep-mussed but his eyes are wide awake, and for the first time he realizes that Steve isn’t wearing a shirt to bed. He clenches his jaw, lips thinning into a straight line. “I remember some things, but not all of it. From the Winter Soldier and before that, too. You can’t make the past seventy years go away, and neither can I. It wasn’t my choice but I remember it anyways, and we’re just going to have to deal with that.”

There is a momentary pause, Steve still staring up at him with that stunned expression on his face. Steve swallows hard, running his eyes over Bucky Barnes’s face as though committing it to memory, as though it is the very best thing he has ever seen. Something out of a dream, something out of a fantasy.

And then, after a long moment, Steve nods.

“I can deal with that,” says Steve slowly, surely, licking his lips and still holding his assailant’s gaze so intently it almost makes him want to squirm. He lets go of Steve’s hands in a single movement, sitting up and giving Steve a surveying look.

“Okay, then,” he says, nodding hard – and then swings himself up off Steve’s prone body so that he’s standing on his own two feet again. He turns on his heels and walks towards the door, padding as quietly as he did on the way in even though he can feel the blood pounding in his ears.

Behind him, he can hear the sound of Steve throwing the covers off, of Steve getting to his feet.

“Wait,” says Steve, his voice cracking slightly as he takes a step towards him and then hesitates. As though Steve sees him as a wary animal who might be scared away by the wrong move, and it almost makes him laugh out loud at just how dramatically their positions have been reversed over the years. “Are you –” Steve cuts himself off, swallowing hard.

He’s two hundred and ninety pounds of muscle and brawn, but for a moment Steve looks just like that skinny kid he remembers from Brooklyn. Hunched and uncertain and folded in on himself, staring at him as though he is the only person in the world.

“Are you leaving?” Steve asks eventually, his eyes darting to the window before coming back to settle on him once more. Steve lets out a shaky breath, and when he speaks there is a tremor in his voice. “Are you going to go?”

Steve stares at him.

He pauses, his fingers just barely grazing the wood of the window pane.
He hesitates.

And then slowly, very slowly, Bucky feels a tight smile nudge at the corners of his mouth.

He lets his metal hand fall to one side, turning to face Steve head on for the first time since the helicarrier all those months ago.

“Not without you,” Bucky announces, simple and straightforward, as though it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

The look of disbelieving joy on Steve’s face is enough to make Bucky smile a real smile for the first time in seven decades.

The End

End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! If you enjoyed the story, please consider leaving a comment. I would really appreciate it!

You can also feel free to join me over on my tumblr for more Captain America-related flailing. (It's hardly anything but Winter Soldier on there right now, I swear.)

Works inspired by this one: [Podfic] Reconstruction Site by EmilianaDarling

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!