The realization dawned on him, irritating as fuck. “You’re not here,” Bucky said, stabbing a finger at Steve. “Fuck you, you’re not real.”

Steve tilted his head and gave him a truculent one-eyed stare. “Well, maybe not. So what?”

Thanks endlessly to Lim who is more or less my second brain where writing is concerned; thanks also to Monicawoe for encouraging my tendency to supernatural craziness and to Alby for her perfect balance of squeeful voice and critical eye: also for showing me new angles of my story through her exquisite art.

See the end of the work for more notes.
The shelling didn’t stop for three days. Bucky clawed out some dirt from the bottom of the foxhole with his fingers and curled up tight in the dugout he’d made, clutching his rifle to his chest with his filthy hands. His mouth was flooded with the taste of metal and bile, and his tingling face felt blurry, like his bones were dissolving, softening beneath his skin. His empty stomach churned acid—he’d thrown up all the pink mush that passed for rations—but he still managed a cigarette every now and then, when his hands felt steady enough to light the match.

The blasts were shaking his head apart from the inside—little chips of bone flying around his skull and cutting into his brain—when Steve said, "Buck, come on: we’re not going to win the war from down here.” Bucky opened his eyes and yeah, that was Steve, all right: all ninety-eight pounds of him, crouched down in the foxhole wearing green fatigues and a helmet that was three sizes too big. He was carrying an M-1 carbine and—Jesus Christ, had they actually sent the little punk over here to fight? Bucky stared up at him, equal parts horrified and dismayed—

There was a shrieking whistle among the explosions and—fuck, this was gonna be close! He shoved Steve down into the dirt as the shell exploded, rattling his teeth in their sockets and sending a cascade of white-hot shrapnel and rocks and mud and blood and worse raining down over them. Steve ducked below him into the muck, covering his head with his skinny arms, but when he lifted up again, he was…. Something was…. Bucky frowned.

Steve’s fatigues were wrinkled but they were clean. Impossibly clean.

The realization dawned on him, irritating as fuck. "You’re not here," Bucky said, stabbing a finger at Steve. "Fuck you, you’re not real." Steve tilted his head and gave him a truculent one-eyed stare. "Well, maybe not. So what?"

"So what?" Bucky repeated, incredulously. "So everything. Fuck me, I’ve fallen out of my fucking tree—— and there was a shout, a hubbub, and Dum Dum came scrambling low over the ripped-up ground and fell into the foxhole beside them, panting and clutching his hat to his head, binoculars swinging from his neck. "Barnes!" Dum Dum shouted, and then he went on, incoherently: "Jesus fuck, you’ve got a shot! A clear—I’ve been watching those motherfuckers and—you— I can’t but you—hurry!" and Dum Dum grabbed his arm, tugging him up—Christ—toward the top of the foxhole. The world swam in Bucky’s vision and his stomach clenched with terror. He wanted to lash out, break Dum Dum’s fucking neck: because that sonovabitch bastard was trying to get him killed.

And then Steve said, all calm, like they were taking a nice stroll together up Second Avenue and not sitting in a fucking frozen shithole, "You can do it, Buck. He can’t make that shot but you can,"—which was bullshit, because his heart had constricted to a pinprick, he was a dead man, no blood pumping: choking, and he couldn’t stop his hands shaking, and he couldn’t see, and he’d fucking pissed his pants—and so whatever talent he might have shown as a marksman back in the nice safe training camp in Wisconsin was completely irrelevant to this situation in his fucking opinion.

But Steve was looking at him with the stubborn confidence of a guy who’d tried to enlist in the goddamned army no fewer than five times, convinced that if they only took a really good look at him, they’d see how valuable he could be to their fucking operation. The balls. And now here he was—if he was here at all, which he wasn’t.

"Barnes!" Dum Dum was shouting, field glasses raised to his eyes. "Gunner! 11 o’clock!"

Steve’s blue eyes burned into him. "You can do it," Steve repeated, sincere and quiet, and suddenly it was like all the trembling went out of him. His hands stilled. He lifted the gun.
"Attaboy," Steve said softly, as Bucky laid the long rifle over the dirt lip of the foxhole. He stared through the scope, and it was as if someone turned down the sound of the shelling as easy as you’d turn down the radio. He could see now what Dum Dum was so worked up about. The Krauts were shifting positions, moving their artillery forward—but that meant having to disassemble and reassemble the barrels, baseplates, and bi-pods, and the Kraut mortar squads were struggling—those Nebelwerfers were heavy motherfuckers—bent over and grunting, heaving.

Their backs made perfect targets. Bucky breathed in and out, watching them. He felt very calm.

"Barnes," Dum Dum gritted out, agitated, pressing him to fire—but Bucky ignored him and just breathed in and out, waiting for the wind—and when he fired, he fired not once, but five times, hitting not just the gunner but the whole unit: squad leader, ammo bearer, everyone. Blam blam blam blam blam—and then he felt Steve’s hand on his shoulder, the murmur of the little punk’s voice in his ear, "There’s gotta be at least three more units, to support fire and movement" and of course Steve knew about all about tactical combat formations. Bucky himself had lugged back all those heavy goddamned books like a swain making up to a girl: *An Introduction to Military History, The Machinery of War, Heroes of the Western Front, On War, War and Your Fucking Mother*—Steve was a nut on the subject. Bucky nodded wordlessly at Steve and, tracking left, spotted a movement so faint that…

"Right. That’s right," Steve whispered, and Bucky squinted and pulled the trigger.

2012.
His eyes burned with noise. Everything was wrong, and he had a constant, queer, listing feeling, like the first time he’d been on a boat: the floor wasn’t supposed to move like that. Everything since he’d opened his eyes was a lie, and they’d tried to fool him by putting an old ball game on the radio, without understanding that—he hardly had words for it. That the entire proportion of the room was wrong, for one thing: too big for one person, and the ceiling too low, pushing down on him. That the very color of the light was off, making the world feel like an alien planet. The first time someone showed him to the toilet he burst out laughing: helplessly, choking it back so they wouldn’t hear him. He could never explain it anyway.

"Hey, come on," Bucky said, perched on the long bathroom counter, legs dangling, "a guy might need two basins. One for each hand. One for a friend. You could wash your underwear!"

Steve leaned back against the bathroom door and closed his eyes as Bucky went on, consideringly: "Maybe one’s for washing up and the other’s for something else: do they both got water coming out of them? Maybe it dispenses soda pop or—ha! Champagne." Bucky’s voice was strong in his ears, but in his mind, the picture of Bucky was vacillating between Bucky-at-home and Bucky-in-uniform—and then, unbidden, Bucky bloodied and crumpled like a rag doll, his head staved in like those of the Kraut mountaineers they’d found collapsed at the base of the Stelvio pass. Steve pressed his fingers to his eyelids until that image went away.

"Don't you do that, all right?" Steve muttered. "I can’t stand you doing that."

"Okay, sorry, pal," Bucky said, and Steve opened his eyes. Bucky was looking curiously at the row of flat white switches on the wall beside him: there were seven of them in all. He began flicking them, and lights flashed across the room, and some kind of engine started up in the ceiling and then stopped, and then a row of spotlights blared into being above the mirrored vanity: round bulbs, very Hollywood,

"You’re a star, baby!" Bucky grinned, waving his hands theatrically. "Back in vaudeville!"

Steve bit his lip hard to stop himself laughing—or crying. "You’re such a jerk," he muttered.

"Captain America and his amazing troupe of all-female showgirls! Verified disease-free by the U.S. Army Department of the Interior! Meanwhile that girl they've got shadowing you," Bucky said, suddenly, pointedly, tapping his nose. "The Black Widow, they call her. With a call sign like that, what do you think her training’s in?"

Steve was trying not to think too much about Natasha. "She's all right."

The backs of Bucky's battered leather shoes thump-thumped against the cabinet. "She’s here to eat you alive, pal. Says so right on the tin. So you just watch yourself: you’re in over your head with her. You’re over your head here, period. The dames here, they make Madame Brigitte from French Street look like Jane fresh off the farm."

Steve's stomach lurched. Nerves, he supposed. He'd never been great with dames to begin with, and here—well, Buck was right, the ladies of the 21st century were… Well, they were rather…

"Nobody's got any goddamned clothes on!" Bucky said.

"Shh!" Steve hissed, glaring. "Goddammit, Buck—you can’t say that."

"Sure I can. Besides, you know you agree with me," and that was hard to argue with, since he was pretty sure that Bucky was entirely in his mind. Pretty sure, anyway, because just this week there’d been time travel and an alien invasion of New York and a giant green creature called The Hulk. Thor
the God of Thunder and his brother Loki.

Ghosts would at least be a compensation. Everyone he loved was a ghost of some kind.

"I do not," Steve protested, but his heart wasn’t in it. "Besides. I gotta live here now."

"Right," Bucky chided. "That’s why you’ve locked yourself in the toilet, hiding."

"I’m not hiding. I’m—" and then a voice from outside, one of his many handlers: Captain Rogers? Is everything all right? "—washing," Steve said, a little defensively, and went to the basin beside Bucky. He turned on the tap and then said, more loudly, calling through the door: "Just washing up, be right there!" Then he frowned, cupped his hands, and took a sip.

"Water," he confirmed, for Bucky’s benefit.


1944.

It was a normal enough thing to take a buddy, nearly everyone did, but Bucky kept to himself so as to spend more time with Steve; he knew he'd never have a better buddy than Steve. "You’re gonna survive this, you know," Steve told him, a little breathlessly; he was jogging to keep up with Bucky during the everfuckinglasting scramble to push forward, take a little more territory, and dig in before you got your ass blown off. Steve seemed dwarfed under his pack, though, his too-large helmet sliding sideways. Still, he radiated confidence—Christ, where did the little punk get it from? "I’m serious, Buck; you’re gonna survive this," Steve said, panting; he was clambering after Bucky, who had veered uphill, alone, through the scrub, ducking and trying to find some high ground where he could set up his rifle and pick some of these bastards off.

He slid up through the rocks and grass, found a vantage point, and swung his rifle around. "And even if you don’t," Steve said, crawling up beside him in the dirt—and Bucky wheeled on him, glaring, because there was such a thing as too much fucking honesty, pal. "Look, even if you don’t, your life’s not wasted," Steve said with that goddamned awful sincerity of his. "You’ll have been part of something bigger. Your death won’t be pointless. My father’s death wasn’t pointless," and there it was: the hidden engine that drove everything Steve did, Bucky’d known it practically from the first, when Steve had pulled a cracked photo of his soldier-father out of his pocket: Steve was a great one for carrying mementos around. "They wouldn’t let Pa in at first, you know," (Bucky knew; he’d heard this story a million times), "not until the third wave of recruitment." Steve trailed off thoughtfully. "Maybe they’ll let me in next time," and that was Bucky’s greatest nightmare: he could stand for Steve to be here just so long as he wasn’t.

He didn’t think he could bear to see Steve learn what he’d learned during his first three days of real war: that all deaths were pointless, and all lives too. You came over here thinking that you were going to be some kind of hero, only to learn the hard lesson that every soldier before you had learned: that you were worthless, your life was worthless. You were there to be killed, until they killed enough people that someone, somewhere said it was enough.

"Don’t think like that," Steve said sharply. "You can’t think like that," and Bucky muttered, "...yeah, okay," and turned back to his gun sights. He sensed more than felt Steve climb up beside him, and then the little punk was whispering, "There. Yes. A little to the left. That’s it: you’ve got him on the ropes, pal. Now finish him off."
2012.

"It’s a scam, right? I mean, you know that, right?" and Steve closed his eyes and let himself float in the cool, clear lake water. He had to be careful about answering; he’d been caught talking to himself once already, and isolated though this place seemed, there were cameras everywhere. Hidden in the cabin was a bank of monitors that showed you everything going on outside; he had to assume there was a second set of monitors somewhere focused entirely on him. This rustic cabin by a lake was a lie like everything else — a scam, just like Bucky said.

"Egg-zactly," Bucky said with satisfaction, "not to mention that they’re talking outta both sides of their mouth on whether they want you to feel at home here or not. Because the fact is, pal—" Bucky poked his chest in the old familiar way, and Steve opened his eyes. Bucky was looming over him, beautiful, hair haloed against the sun, "—that they ought to have de-mobbed you by now. War’s over, buddy. They should give you your goddamned discharge, a couple of medals, and seventy years of back pay—however many millions of credit cards or whatever it is they use for currency around here. Five bucks for a lousy cup of coffee! But they haven’t, have they?"

Steve’s throat tightened. "They said… They offered…"

"They said, they offered you—nothing. Bupkis. They offered you a goddamned parade and a lifetime of indentured servitude. What a man wants is his own bankbook and a lease to a decent apartment near the train. Instead they’ve got you on a leash with these credit cards where you don’t even know where the bill goes. Put up on Stark’s dime or—in this place. What even is this place?" Bucky fumed. "It’s like Fort Hood—they sent me to Fort Hood, you know." (Steve knew; Bucky’d told him the story more than once.) "Situational training, they called it—fake Gestapo villages, nothing like the real thing but who knew that then? We didn’t know anything then. That’s where I learned to shoot, though—you’re not the only one who fought Hitler. I shot him in the head. It exploded. Straw," he added meditatively, as if Steve could have doubted it. "Anyway it just goes to show how well they know you, sending you here. Before the army you’d seen three trees in your whole goddamned life. Relax, they say. Go fishing. Fish is a thing you get in Bushwick."

Steve gave in and muttered, "I’m not here to fish, I’m here to study their briefing books—"

"You’ve studied the briefing books, horror show that they are. Now they’re just keeping you isolated. You oughta—" and Steve tensed, then began to teeter in the water, because he knew what Bucky was gonna say: knew it. He splashed upright and found his feet in the weedy, slippery lakebottom, "—go find Peg," Bucky finished, and there it was: said out loud, or almost. "You know where she is: now pack your bags and get yourself to the airport. They’ll sell you a ticket for England. Besides," Bucky added, with some bitterness, "at least then we’ll know if you’re a free man or not," which was ridiculous: he wasn’t free and they both knew it. "Let’s see how far you get."

But getting away was just one problem: by far the easier problem. The other was— "Look," and Steve was braced by the hard sympathy in Bucky’s voice, "there’s only a couple people alive who could even pick you out of a lineup when you’re not wearing the outfit, and Pegs happens to be one of them. Lots of us were destroyed by bullets or bombs. The shell she got hit with was time, but she’s still our Peg. You’ve got to go see her, at least," and Bucky was right; of course he was right. He had to man up. Lots of couples had been destroyed by the war.

Steve pushed his wet hands over his face, his hair, sluicing water through them, and muttered, "You’ll come with me, right? I need you to come with me."
"Sure. Hold your hand or any other part of you that needs holding, like always," and Steve laughed and let the lake water drip down his face.

1944.

Bucky'd been holding the line for days and nights and days, sunrise sometimes twice in a row, or maybe that was an explosion somewhere, when Dum Dum came up behind him and all but yanked the rifle out of his hands, knocking his elbows out from under him. Bucky fell back on the ground; he was sweating, heart pounding. His vision telescoped: he felt like he was looking down a long, dark tunnel, and battied a hand before his eyes. "Christ, Barnes, get the hell outta here," Dum Dum said, and jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "You're no use to anyone like this. Fall back and get some shuteye before you start seeing things," and Bucky blinked at him a few times and then glanced over at Steve, who looked up from the book he was reading and shrugged.

So Bucky lurched up, stumbling, and fell back, moving through a field of stars that could be bullets or fairy-dust or just pinpricks in his vision. He went to his knees at the base of a tree growing beside the ruined walls of a stone cottage—protected on two sides, he hoped—and curled up tight in the dirt, knees up, helmet jammed down. Beneath him, the ground shook from shellfire—and then Steve pressed up against the back of him: warm, boney, the familiar poke of knees and nose. Bucky tried to pretend that he was home: that they were safe. It was December and freezing cold in their apartment. That was the radiator banging. That was a car backfiring. That was…

Steve's hand slid onto his hip. Bucky breathed steadily as Steve shifted and leaned in to whisper against the back of his neck, "Ssh, it's okay, nobody's watching,"—reading his mind again. Goddamned unnerving was what it was, but Steve had always been able to do it. Steve always knew what he needed: knew before he knew, most times.

Steve's hand slide over the buttons of his wool trousers, and Bucky’s mind drifted to the first time, years ago. After a fight—there was always a fight—and Steve was standing barefoot in the kitchen in his trousers and suspenders, his blood-stained shirt soaking in a sink full of water and washing powder. Steve had been pressing a cold cloth to his eye—and he was so goddamned pretty, even with that nose and the split lip and the shiner. So pretty—and then Steve looked at him and must have seen the thought dancing inside his skull. He himself wouldn’t have had the guts, but Steve was never lacking for the kind of crazy-ass courage that got you beaten up, or jailed, or killed—and so Steve came to the edge of the bed. He pulled the macramé tassel on the lamp chain. The bulb clicked off.

A moment later Steve was shoving himself awkwardly onto Bucky's lap in the darkness—not like a girl would, flirty and ass first, but with his knees apart, straddling Bucky in his worn brown pants. Steve was short, but he was strong and hard-muscled, and he shucked his suspenders off with a little shimmy, then gripped Bucky's arms like they were going to wrestle.

They didn't wrestle. Steve reached down between them and unbuckled Bucky's belt, then unzipped his own fly—and Bucky was breathing so hard and so fast that he was dizzy with it, white spots prickling in front of his eyes. Steve pushed at his shoulders and he flopped backwards, onto the bed, and then Steve had Bucky’s cock in his hand and was doing things that were—Christ, Steve was—working his cock with such expertise, better than that lady on West 27th Street.

Now Steve was doing it again—here, in the dirt in the middle of the war—his hand pushing aside the flaps of fabric at his fly. Bucky sighed, drifting a little, as Steve’s calloused hand gripped him, squeezing him from base to tip in the familiar way, fond and affectionate. "You've got a gift, buddy,
"you know that," Bucky muttered a little breathlessly, and he could feel Steve’s lips brushing the back of his neck, curving into a smile. "Sure I know," Steve murmured gamely. "I also juggle and play the kazoo," and Bucky half-laughed, half-sobbed and imagined himself pressing back into Steve’s arms—even as his own hand moved, subtly jerking, in the dark.

2012.

The taxi service said they wouldn’t come out so far as the lake, so Steve said, "Fine," and hoisted his pack onto his back. He walked the long dirt road from the cabin to Route 6 and turned north, and ten minutes later the sleek black car roared up from behind and jerked to a stop in a cloud of dust. Steve saw a flash of red hair at the wheel and knew who it was: Natasha Romanoff, The Black Widow.

"Well, well, well," Bucky drawled, "now isn’t that a coincidence. Maybe she likes fishing, too."

Steve snorted. "Fishing for something," he muttered, and walked down the gravel shoulder to meet her. The heavy black door swung open and Natasha’s high-heeled boot stepped onto the blacktop, followed by the rest of her. She was wearing what appeared to be black leather longjohns. "Not a word," Steve cautioned, and Bucky shrugged, pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket, and lit one. "I ain’t saying nothing," Bucky said.

"Well, hello," Steve said to Natasha. "What brings you to this neck of the woods?"

Natasha smiled, unfazed; he didn’t want to think about what it would take to faze her. "Coming to see you, actually," she replied, and shoved the car door shut with a heavy clunk. "Fury thought you might be wanting some company about now: a friendly face."

Steve glanced over at Bucky, who wasn’t looking particularly friendly at the moment. He was wreathed in a cloud of smoke and general hostility, and Steve knew why: he was wondering if Natasha had been personally watching the security monitors or if she’d just been dispatched by the person who had. "Oh. Well, you should have written first. Or—telephoned," he amended, and from the way Natasha smiled, he knew that wasn’t quite right either. Internet, maybe: oh, the hell with it. "I’m just on my way out," Steve said, and let that sit there, waiting to see what she’d do.

"You should call SHIELD," Natasha suggested. "They’ll get you to wherever you need to go."

"I think I can manage," Steve said, forcing himself to smile back pleasantly. "I mean, my Nana got all the way from Ireland to New York by herself, and she was only fifteen and spoke Gaelic."

Natasha’s smile didn’t falter, but she was obviously considering how to reply. "Wherever you’re going, it’ll be a long walk and hitchhiking isn’t so much a thing anymore," she said carefully. "And in case it wasn’t in the briefing book: the U.S. hasn’t been great about maintaining its public transportation network." She tilted her head to one side. "Can I give you a lift somewhere?"

Now it was Steve's turn to think about what to say. If he accepted, they’d know where he was going, but then again—Bucky interrupted, "Don’t be a dope: they're gonna know anyway. You've been caught, so save your shoe leather and get in the car," and so Steve sighed and let his pack slide off his shoulder. "Okay, sure," he said. "Can you take me to the airport?"

Natasha barely blinked, but Steve thought he could see both relief and concern on her face. "Well, you really are going to have to call SHIELD if you want to get on a plane," she said, though Steve still didn’t understand what the hell he needed SHIELD for. "A credit card won't cut it," Natasha explained, "you'll need more ID than that. Security’ll be tight—they’ll want to see a driver's license
or a passport,” and beside him, Bucky muttered, "Ihre Papiere bitte." Natasha went on smoothly, "But I can get you anywhere you want to go—SHIELD has its own planes, its own runways even. You can skip the metal detectors and the strip search," and her lips twisted wryly, as if that were a joke—and then she saw his face and grew serious again. A rare miscalculation; one that she wouldn’t make twice.

Bucky ground his cigarette under his heel. "Well, I’m glad I gave my life for something."

Natasha was already recovering. "Where—is there somewhere particular you're trying to go?"

"England." Steve nearly choked on the word. "I've got a friend there I want to see."

"Oh," Natasha said, a little blankly. "All right; I'll call it in—they'll have a jet waiting for you."

"That's great," Bucky drawled. "Ride first class with the sicherheitspolizei," but Steve just said, "Thank you," and folded himself into the front seat of her car.

1944.

That day, Private 2nd Class Patrick Kelly—called Mickey for unknown reasons—had half his skull shot off, and Bucky screamed and scrambled, crab-like, away from him, not wanting to watch him die in a rapidly spreading puddle of his own blood. And that, right there, was the end of his squad, and there were only a few, exhausted guys left in the whole platoon. In any sane world they'd've been pulled back to regroup, but no new orders had come through and nobody knew what the fuck was going on. Tuesday at the front.

Steve pushed his helmet back and said, pragmatically, "Look, average life expectancy out here is about seventeen days, so you're beating the odds in a big way, Buck," but it was hard not to feel like his luck was running out. Those of them who were still alive were superstitious to the point of blasphemy. They all had talismans—Dum Dum had his hat, and Gabe had an old wooden crucifix that his Nana had given him. And Bucky had Steve: he was sure that, if death were coming for him, Steve would push him out of the way or something. Steve would save him somehow.

It was some kind of second sight, anyway, even if "Steve" was maybe the name he was giving to his own unconscious intuitions. Steve would grab his arm, making the hairs on the back of his neck stand up, and shout, "Incoming!" and Bucky would throw himself into the dirt before the shells fell. Once Steve knocked into his shoulder, pushing him out of the way of a whizzing bullet, and once, he’d come back to himself—half-asleep, standing up—with Steve's hands gripping his face, Steve's eyes inches from his. "I love you," Steve said, shaking him desperately. "Do you hear me? I love you. Now hurry. Run. Run and don't stop," and so Bucky took off blindly, clutching his rifle and always on the verge of falling forward, and he ran until the force of the explosion picked him up and hurled him up and onward, smashing him down onto the ground.

When he came to, Steve was stroking his face—Gabe was shaking his shoulders—something was trailing down his face in a thick, wet line—Gabe's mouth was moving, but he couldn't tune into the station of Gabe's voice. A shape on Gabe's lips could have been Bucky or lucky or—

"Steve," Bucky tried, but the word vanished as it left his mouth: a ghost. He passed out.

2012.
Natasha said that she'd be happy to accompany him, which of course meant that she was there to handle him, but Steve Rogers wasn't a guy easily handled, as Bucky'd learned long ago, trailing him up streets and down alleys, groaning and rolling his eyes. No, he didn't want to go straight to SHIELD's special runway: if they were waiting for him, they could goddamned wait, because he wanted to see the airport. It was a marvel, really, something out of one of Bucky's magazines: white lights and shiny floors. Plastic curves and terrible-smelling food in enormous portions, with people lined up and zig zagging every which way, dragging their belongings in tiny, wheeled suitcases. Natasha followed him, groaning and rolling her eyes, as he walked through a store that stank of perfume and which had floor to ceiling shelves of whiskey and display cases of little glass animals, all lit up. So much of everything—here were enormous pretzels spinning in a case, there were trays of individually-wrapped slices of cake. A shop sold nothing but brightly colored handbags. The people, though—everyone looked miserable and exhausted, standing on lines or crammed into seats or sitting on floors. Perhaps they were anticipating the strip search. Steve stopped to look at a shirt that was on sale: it was four hundred and fifty-seven dollars. He laughed out loud.

"This way?" Natasha pleaded for the eighth time, and so Steve relented and followed her through a doorway and then through a maze of empty corridors, Bucky trailing behind them.

"So I think we can establish some basic principles, yeah?" Bucky mused. "If it's advertised as luxury, gourmet, designer, or deluxe, it's guaranteed to be garbage. And I don't know who the hell this Hugo Boss thinks he is, but you've got to be out of your fucking mind to pay that kind of dough for a shirt."

Steve stifled a bitter smile. "He made Nazi uniforms, you know."

"Oh, well, that's just perfect," Bucky said, jerking his arms up into the air like he wanted to punch someone. "Of course he did—Nazi bastard. Enjoy your time in the 21st century, pal: you can get some patent-leather shoes and—"

"—Steve?" Natasha was staring at him. "Did you say something?"

"No, I—no," Steve replied. And then, unable to help it: "That store back there. Hugo Boss…"

Natasha seemed taken aback. "You want to go back?"

"No."

Something was clawing at the inside of his chest; he had to stop it from bursting out. Bucky'd turned away and was staring out the window at the airstrip. "Let's—just get to the plane, all right?" he said and set off.

The plane was a jet halfway to a spaceship. There were four big leather seats around a polished wood table, two on each side. Natasha took a seat across from him, and Bucky fell into the chair next to her, crossed his legs, and put his head on his hand. Steve looked at him—Christ, he missed Bucky so much his teeth ached. He wished they could just be alone for a little while—talk everything through.

A stewardess appeared. "Would you like a drink before takeoff?"

"Yes. Yes, I would," Steve said, and the taste of whiskey in his mouth was almost a kiss.

1944.

They pulled back the remains of his unit and sent him into the platoon commander, a tall guy named
Blythe who'd never seen any actual combat, it was said: just sat here in a tent behind a desk with a telephone. Blythe wanted him and Dum Dum and Gabe to creep behind enemy lines and grab a German—kidnap him, take him prisoner. "We need intel, gentlemen," Blythe said, like he was saying, "We need a quart of milk and a half a dozen eggs."

"Sure, sir, no problem. I'll just sneak up and tap some Kraut on the shoulder and say, 'Pardon me, Heinrich.' Ask him if he'd like a change of shithole and a friendly chat," Bucky didn't say. What he said was, "Yes, sir; I'll try my best."

"Good man, Barnes," Blythe said. "Take your team out at sundown; maybe catch some rest first," and then a host of shivering angels appeared and directed him to a tent with a roof and a cot. Steve was there, too, grinning like a maniac. "Goodnight, sweet prince…" Steve said with a wave of his arm, and Bucky sat, fell, kept falling. He was asleep before his head hit the cot.

A moment later, something shook him and kept shaking him; Dum Dum, looking down at him like the ugliest mother in the history of the world. "Time to wake up, princess."

"Oh, please go fuck yourself," Bucky groaned, and after Dum Dum took off his hat and whacked him in the face with it a couple of times, Bucky protested, "C'mon, I said please."

He and Dum Dum and Gabe got double rations, and some of the hot brown liquid that passed for coffee, and god, this crap was so much better hot than cold. Then they were cast out of paradise: rotated back to the front with the rest of their unit, and then, once it was dark enough, past it; out into the dark past the haphazard row of foxholes where everyone else was sheltered. They stayed low, moving from rock to tree to rock, listening more than looking; trying to find some isolated bastard taking a piss, someone who’d strayed and could be picked off. And they got someone—it was Steve who found him, actually: who stood up suddenly in the scrub and pointed, then put a finger to his lips. Bucky stopped the others with a hand and set off toward where Steve was standing.

A Kraut was hunkered in the grass, and Bucky went at him, full blast—dragging him up, smashing his head against a nearby tree, pressing the barrel of his handgun to his head and dragging him back fifty yards, hand clasped over his mouth, smothering him—only belatedly realizing, once Dum Dum and Gabe were there and wrestling the guy to the ground—that what they had in their possession was a 16 year old German kid who’d been taking a shit.

"Who'd you expect to find? Hitler?" Steve rolled his eyes, and he maybe had a point. Anyway the kid was a Nazi—a runner, they found out, once he’d stopped blubbering and pulled his pants up and Bucky’d given him a cigarette. And he didn’t know a lot about the German front lines, he insisted in wide-eyed terror, hyperventilating, just where they were and what their routines were, and so on. This was quite enough for Bucky and, he imagined, it was going to be plenty enough for Colonel Blythe—except there was more that the kid wanted to tell him. The thing that the kid really wanted to tell him—to tell Bucky in particular, because Bucky had nearly killed him and then hadn’t, which made him some kind of god—was that the entire German high command (his hands were grabbing fervently at the lapels of Bucky’s jacket) was shitting themselves because there were these tanks with blue weapons that—

"What?" Bucky frowned, shook his head; his German wasn’t that great.

—blue weapons that were blowing German soldiers into nothingness. Oblivion. Das Nichts.

Well bully for the blue weapons, then. "Blue?" Bucky repeated dubiously; who the hell would paint their weapons blue? "Are they partisans? Or Russians?—Sind sie Russkies?"

"Nein!" the Nazi kid insisted. "Nicht Partisan, nicht Sowjeten—Hydra, der wissenschaftliche Teil
dem Führers Schutzstaffel. Sie kämpfen ihren eigenen Krieg, und die Waffen die sie haben—die werden nicht nur uns töten, sondern euch auch—sie werden uns alle töten!"

Bucky frowned, trying to put this together—but Steve was tugging at his arm, muttering, "We’ve got to move—hurry—now, Buck—" and a second later, Bucky felt the ground rumble under his feet and the hair on the back of his neck stood up the way it did when the shelling was about to start—and them this far out of cover. Bucky yelled, "Incoming!" and took off at a run toward the line of Allied foxholes, dragging the shocked Nazi kid with him. Dum Dum and Gabe were right behind them—and the first shell exploded with a boom not 20 feet ahead of them, sending the ground flying up in sprays of dirt and rocks and knocking them all sideways.

"Up!" Bucky screamed, lurching up and grabbing the German kid by the collar. "Get up! Move, move!" and then they were all running, ducking, dodging and weaving toward the Allied line. When they got close, Bucky shouted for all he was worth, nearly shredding his voice, "Barnes approaching! Hold your fire! Hold your God damned—" because passwords were for suckers: nobody ever remember the password, and even if you did, the other guy would have forgotten it, or the password would have been changed, and you’d end up yelling, "Jesus Christ, don’t shoot me—I’m from Brooklyn!" which was as good as a password anyway.

They flung themselves into the nearest foxhole to the vast surprise of the guys who were already in it: two other members of the 107th whose real names Bucky couldn’t remember, but who everybody called Mutt and Jeff. "Barnes!" Bucky gasped, identifying himself. "I’m with Dugan and Jones—and this kid’s a Nazi, he’s—" our prisoner, he was going to say, except for the deafening shriek of an incoming shell. They all fell down and took cover before the blast hit.

It was close, and Bucky’s ears were still ringing when he lifted his head, stuffed with cotton, face tingling—but Steve was in front of him and talking, audible where nothing else was. "They’re making a push," Steve informed him. "If we’re quick, we can stop them," and then he was turning and hefting his rifle, which looked like it weighed a hundred pounds in his skinny arms.

Bucky followed suit, bracing his gun on the edge of the foxhole. A unit of German soldiers was racing over the hill, coming toward them, and Bucky began firing—and then Dum Dum was beside him, firing too—everyone was firing, the night suddenly white-bright with the blinding flash of rifles and shredded by machine gun fire, and the whole world was gripped by madness as it always was when battle erupted. Bucky’s world exploded in a frenzy of bullets and smoke.

He fell back to reload, only to find Dum Dum mopping his brow and reloading his own gun with shaky hands; blood was running down his cheek. "God, I hate these guys," Dum Dum muttered.

They flung themselves back into the fray, and then suddenly—"Buck," his intuition said; the intuition he’d named Steve, "over there, three o’clock," and without hesitating, Bucky swung his gun in a wide arc to the right. There were Germans coming from that direction, too, guns aimed and firing. Bucky shot three of them and had just fixed his eyes on a fourth, when—

He thought, first, he was maybe having a fit, a seizure—that strange bolt of blue lightning was—

It happened again, another blue flash from out of nowhere, and three Kraut soldiers vaporized before his eyes—flesh first, then skeleton, then nothing. Bucky gaped and let his gun drop, turning to see where the flashes were coming from. The biggest tank he’d ever seen crested the hill, its enormous treads shaking the earth all around, dirt crumbling from the sides of his foxhole. Was it too much to hope it was one of theirs? Bucky stared as its enormous guns swiveled, then fired more blue electricity at the oncoming Krauts, blasts like a ray gun straight out of Flash Gordon. The Nazis fried, writhing in the air, screaming. No bodies fell.
The shooting stopped. The battlefield went quiet; there was no one left to shoot at.

Bucky stared at the giant tank; all that was left. "What the hell is it?" he asked Steve, who was crouched beside him and gaping, too, one hand holding his huge helmet in place.

"I don't know," Gabe replied from his other side; he sounded shocked. "I've never seen…"

Dum Dum asked warily, "You think it's one of ours? Something new?"

But Bucky could tell from the horror on Steve’s face this wasn’t anything their side had cooked up. Panic rose, choking him, even before the tank’s enormous gun began to swivel in their direction—*sie werden uns alle töten*, Bucky thought wildly—*they’ll kill us all*—and then he was screaming, "Run! Get down! Jesus Fucking Chr—!"

2012.

The SHIELD jet landed on an isolated airstrip, and an empty car was waiting for them on the tarmac. Natasha immediately went to the driver's seat but Steve hesitated before getting in—something about the huge English sky and the neat fields of bright yellow and green and purple had stirred up powerful memories for him, even though his first visit had been nothing like this. He’d arrived by ship with his team of forty showgirls, the star of something that was two steps above a Coney Island animal act: *Captain America, see him lift a motorcycle and punch Hitler!*

He didn’t ask where they were going: he and Natasha had come to a curious sort of impasse where he didn’t ask any questions because he didn’t want to answer any. He wanted to go to England. He wanted to see a friend.

Natasha drove them onto the motorway toward London, and Steve tried hard to control his feelings once things started to look familiar—Christ, this was nearly as bad as New York, the familiar sights and sounds buried under blaring electronic adverts and glass skyscrapers, big strange ugly buildings, and—what was that, a ferris wheel?

"Wow, it's ugly now," Bucky said, hunching forward from the back seat. "What the hell did they do to Leicester Square? It's more awful than New York and that’s saying something. Jesus, remember the fun we had that night, though, you and me and Pegs—oh, isn't that—? Look, *there*. Around the corner—Wasn’t that where the Stork Club was?" and that hit Steve so hard that he had to look away, cover his eyes with his hand—and so he missed whatever turn it was that Natasha took, steering them down a narrow alley and then further down into an underground garage.

Then out of the car, into a fancy elevator—and Natasha's idea of accommodations seemed to be an apartment they were expected to share, together, just the two of them, with no chaperone. "You've got your own room at least," Bucky said, "though there's no lock on the door. You're a gentleman, of course," he added wryly, "but it ain't you I'm worried about. So maybe put a chair under the knob."

"I'm not staying," Steve told him.

"What?" Natasha asked.

"Nothing," Steve said.

A little reconnaissance revealed that the train he needed left from Waterloo, which was near enough. It also revealed the ongoing terms of engagement with Natasha, which was that she was going to
follow him wherever he went, stealthily, while pretending she wasn't. So he was going to have to lose her. He knew it and she knew it.

"I'm going out for a walk," Steve said, pulling on his jacket.

Natasha didn't even look up from her phone. "Have fun," she said, distractedly, waving.

"Right," Steve muttered, yanking the door shut—and then he bypassed the lift for the stairs and burst out the back door. He figured she wouldn't expect him to make a break for it his first time out—so he did, heading up the road toward the Tube, which was disgorging a crowd. He squirmed his way past muttering, "Excuse me, excuse me," glad for the cover of them. There were cameras everywhere in this world, and Natasha probably had access to all of them—but he was willing to bet that she didn't know the in and outs of the Underground like he did. He'd spent a lot of time in its bomb shelters and bunkers and tunnels, which had been sealed-up or locked down: no cameras there.

In the end, the hardest part of his escape turned out to be buying an Oyster Card, he reflected, watching the English countryside fly past on the 13:05 to Winchester. Though it was quite a miraculous little card really. The lady on the platform had been quite happy to have it.

1944.

They were stripped of their weapons; some of the men were stripped of their boots. Bucky kept his, thank God—the march was bad enough. They stumbled one after the other, single file, moving deeper behind enemy lines. Mostly they kept their heads down, though Bucky glanced around when he could, trying to stay alert, catching the occasional glance from Dum Dum and Gabe, further back in the line. A light seen through the trees was hanging from a gate in the high wall of a Nazi compound, and as they approached, a couple of guys decided to run for it.

They were shot. They lay where they fell, ignored.

Inside the gates, they were marched across an empty courtyard and then through an iron door into a windowless brick building. The inside was like a kennel, a chicken coop: full of cages, three stories of them, linked together by metal catwalks. Each cage already housed several men—and Bucky felt his senses sharpening and knew that Steve was behind him, ready to direct him, because he only had one shot at this—and then the guard looked away for a moment and at Steve's signaling tap he slid quickly and silently through the line till he reached Dum Dum and Gabe. If he was gonna be caged, better to be locked up with guys he trusted.

But the Kraut guard counted them off without reason, shoving two guys into one cell, three guys into another. He and Dum Dum were waved into a cell with a wary-looking Brit and someone else: a mess of rumpled clothing with a mustache, sitting on the ground, asleep, knees pulled up.

"Barnes," Bucky said, without extending his hand. "This here is Dugan. 107th Infantry."

"Falsworth," the Brit replied. "3rd Independent Parachute Brigade." He turned to the bundle of clothes in the corner, the mustachioed face resting on the drawn-up knees. The guy reminded Bucky of the drunks sprawled on the streets of Red Hook, pickled and dreamy on red wine after shift. "This is Dernier. He's from Marseille," Falsworth said, before adding, almost offhandedly, "They arrested him after he blew up the railway line to the internment camps."

Bucky and Dum Dum exchanged impressed glances. Dernier let out a small snore.
Bucky'd been brought up to think that the English were standoffish and the French were rude—and they were—but it didn't take long before he and Dum Dum and Monty were crouched down together around the sleepy Dernier and exchanging, in whispers, first bone fides, and then boasts, and then real information. Bucky'd noticed that their guards were all young, healthy, and well fed—why would you waste men like that? Anyone who could hold a gun was on a front line somewhere, so there had to be something big going on here. Monty agreed, but he didn't know what; all he'd seen was his cell and the factory, where they'd been set to making shell casings—

"Wait, this is a fucking arms factory?" Dum Dum interrupted.

"Anything explosive?" Bucky asked.

"Not that I've seen," Monty said regretfully—and then the sleepy bundle of clothes lifted its head.

"C'est tout explosif," Dernier mused, in a rough voice, "si vous savez comment l'utiliser."

They looked at him, and then at each other. "I like this guy," Bucky told Falsworth. "I like you, pal," Bucky told Dernier. "Let's blow it up. Let's blow it the fuck up—la faire foutre—explodez! Tell us what to do," and Dernier idly rubbed at his chin and told them what they should look out for.

#

Working together, they located drums of acetone peroxide, white buckets of potassium persulfate, glass jars of nitric acid and ethanol…but in the end they didn't get to do anything with them, because after Bucky’s tenth day of hauling crates and pushing carts, he was sitting on the metal floor of his cell trying to bring his cup of thin soup to his lips when his vision blurred.

A taste like metal, bitter and vinegary, spread through his mouth, and he didn't even realize that he'd spilled his cup and was keeling over sideways until Steve caught him. He stared up into Steve's worried face, which was wavering and twisting against the harsh light of the bare bulbs.

"Steve," Bucky scraped out, his throat closing up. This was it; this was the end of him.

Things went fuzzy and strange; there were words somewhere, an argument, but he couldn’t understand what was being said or who was talking. Steve was glowing, a little; he was the only real thing now. "What’s happening?" he asked Steve—and then he had the sensation of being jerked into a sitting position. An arm came around his back, holding him up. The strange sounds resolved into words, and he suddenly understood what the argument was.

Dum Dum was afraid Bucky was gonna die. Falsworth was afraid they were going to kill him.

"Don't let them see," Falsworth was gritting out. "If they see he’s not well—if they take him—he's done for," and that was a nice thought, except…There was that strange metal taste in his mouth.

"Right, they know already," Steve told him sadly. "They know because they did this to you; they poisoned you," and so Bucky wasn’t surprised when the rusty hinges screeched and two guards came in and hauled him up. He tried, incoherently, to stop Dum Dum from fighting with them, watching with horror as he took a blow to the head with a truncheon and then a couple more kicks once he was down.

"It’s all right," Bucky croaked as they dragged him out. "I’ve got Steve. Steve's with me," but they didn’t seem reassured by this.
2012.

He’d made it to Winchester in a fugue of instinct and suppressed anger, but now that he was here—having walked out from the station and through town and down an English country road for several miles before finding the brick gate post marking the house—he felt lost and afraid.

*Meadow House,* it said in raised iron letters. And if Peggy was here, he had no plan for it: what to do, what to say to her. She was in her nineties. He might not even recognize her. She might not remember him. He wasn’t sure he was ready to have the image of Peggy Carter in his mind supplanted by the reality. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his compass.

"Jesus Christ!" Bucky said, fully exasperated with him, and so Steve sighed and turned into the lane leading up the house.

*Meadow House* was beautiful. It had obviously been a private house once, though now there was an ambulance on the curved drive, like a wartime hospital. Nurses in crisp white dresses were pushing patients in their wheelchairs through the elaborately landscaped gardens on both sides. Husks of old men and palsied old women stared at him with vacant eyes. *My peers,* Steve thought bleakly, feeling the urge to run, but Bucky grabbed his arm and said, "Pal, that’s *Elsie,* she was the singer at that pub you liked, used to sing ‘Taking A Chance On Love’ while wiggling her hips. And that’s *Dougie* with the strange limp. Ran the motorpool, kept asking if you’d *really* met Ava Gardner. And that old man there was the kid who ran our telegrams around the London base. Always got tongue-tied around you: hero worship. He was fifteen then, so he’s eighty now—got the Parkinson’s. ’But he’d still fuckin’ jitterbug if he could," and Steve didn’t know if Bucky really knew all these things or if he was making them up, but it made him feel better, anyway—and that woman did look quite a bit like Elsie, the girl singer at the White Stag.

He just had to go through the arched doorway. Tell them at the desk that he was here to see Margaret—

"No, you don’t even gotta," Bucky interrupted, "because she’s right there," and even though Bucky was pointing, Steve refused to turn, was afraid to turn. Because it wasn’t true, it couldn’t be true—and then he let his eyes dart, for just a second, to the gardens stretching back away from the house. There were pink blossoms among a million shades of green; a figure in white. Her back was to him. He was sitting in a chair under a tree. It wasn’t her, it couldn’t be her. There was no way to know from a glance anyway. Except he did know: he was as sure as Bucky was. Something about the way she held her shoulders, the way the white hair cascaded down.

He moved toward her almost unwillingly, drawn to her across the lawn. The woman in the chair had her elbow braced on the chair arm, and her chin tilted down—she was reading, because that’s how Peggy sat when she was reading. And then suddenly Bucky tugged at his elbow and his feet went left, and he was going around, circling her, giving her a wide berth while trying to get a look at her. He stopped behind a thick-trunked tree, touched the ridged bark with his fingers, then pressed his forehead against it. He felt like his heart was gonna thump out of his chest.

It was her. *Christ,* it was her, it was Peggy, and she was old, but she was beautiful, sitting there with a pair of half-moon glasses on the tip of her nose, the silver chain hanging down. She was beautiful but she was so old now—if he touched her, he’d break her. If he hugged her the way he wanted, if he touched her—he couldn’t touch her—he—

"Pal, you have got to get a hold of yourself," Bucky admonished him. "You come out from behind this tree looking like you do now, like a goddamned mess, you’re gonna give the woman a heart attack. Just pull yourself together and go over there, say, ‘Hello darling, it’s me, it’s—"
"Steve?" and Steve gasped and jerked, startled, at the sound of his name in Peggy’s voice. His feet tangled in the bluebells growing at the base of the tree, and he stumbled and had to grab at the trunk to steady himself. Holding on, he craned his neck around the tree to look at her. The reading glasses hung from her neck, and she stood there in her skirt and white blouse looking at him with a combination of bewilderment and longing that he found utterly familiar.

"Peg?" and what had Bucky told him to say—*Hello darling, here I am?* Something like that, but mostly Steve was focused on not tripping as he stepped out from behind the tree. And then Peggy was saying, in a voice choked with tears, "You're alive. You came back," and then he went to her and held her as she wept. And he could have stood there forever, holding her. He could have stood there until he became a tree himself.

1944.

They lifted him onto an operating table like a sack of potatoes and secured him with thick leather straps. "Steve," Bucky gasped and squeezed his eyes shut to stop the tears from coming, because Jesus, what kind of end was this, he didn't want to end like this. A bright light crashed on overhead, turning the insides of his eyelids orange. Steve's warm hand gripped his and Bucky clutched at it hard, needing to feel it: like they'd done when Steve had been convulsed with the asthma, like they'd done when Bucky'd gotten his leg caught in a winch at the factory; Christ, he'd been so shit scared. He'd been sweating, sure in his heart that he was gonna lose the leg, that it was gonna be crushed or they were gonna have to cut it off or something, but when he'd finally gotten free he was just bruised. And Steve had been with him the whole time, hand tight in his, giving him somewhere to focus as the other guys swarmed over the goddammed machine.

Steve was gripping his hand that way now, except instead of whispering, "It's okay, Buck; it's gonna be okay; hang on, you're almost out," he was whispering, "This ain't medicine, Buck—whatever the hell they're doin', it ain't—" and Christ, he'd had needles before but these were goddammed *excruciating*, and so many of them. They scraped the bone. He felt it in his teeth. It was torture, and he was supposed to—there was a thing he was supposed to—


"—five seven zero three eight," Bucky finished, and then he started again, voice quavering as more pain hit and rolled over him. "Barnes. James Bucha..." and then the world exploded, light as hot as the sun, blasting him backwards and frying him up like an egg in a pan—and then Steve grabbed him, pulling him up by the hand, hauling him straight up and out of his body. For a moment he had the dizzying feeling of seeing himself down below—a beat-up soldier in a puddle of yellow light, rows of needles hanging out of both arms—but then Steve pulled him through a door into what turned out to be McAllister's Pub on Fourth Avenue.

There weren't too many guys drinking at this hour, just the regulars, but Steve made a beeline for the beat-up bar and said, loosening his tie and half-collapsing onto the stool, "I need a beer," and then, glancing over at Bucky, "you need a beer, pal? No: something stronger," and like he knew they were coming, the barman turned to them carrying Steve's pint in one hand and a whisky and soda in the other—a double. The thick glass was cold in his hand.

Steve picked up his glass, clinked it against Bucky's. The whiskey burned his throat. He drank it faster than he ought've, considering how little he'd had to eat, but he liked how it went to his head. He'd barely set the glass down when the bartender brought him another. The world blurred a little, and then Steve slid off the stool, the pint of golden beer in his hand, and waved him toward the back
of the bar, where there was a bare mattress and—it was that flophouse a block from the Navy Yard, except Steve had never been there; he had never been there with Steve.

Which was a shame—it should always have been Steve, he knew that now. So much time wasted chasing women, paying women, trying to fuck himself into the right shape. She had been the first: Mrs. Stephens, a widow who specialized in giving young boys their first tumble over the mattress. He’d thought she was so old though she was maybe only a year or two older than he was now, and fifty years younger than he felt. He’d asked Steve if he wanted to come with him, thinking he was doing the kid a favor—Steve had no father, no brothers, nobody to guide him into manhood—but Steve just had looked at him strangely and said, "No,"—which had really riled him, because Jesus, Steve could be a sanctimonious prick sometimes. It was only later that he’d understood that in this, as in so many things, Steve was way ahead of him and stubbornly waiting for him to catch the hell up. Every time he thought that he’d left Steve somewhere behind him, Steve turned out to have been out in front the whole time—that impatient, fuzzy figure out on the horizon. It was a goddamned magic trick. It made Steve feel inevitable.

Now Steve was slugging back his beer and wrestling his crumpled canvas jacket off, flicking his suspenders off his shoulders. He turned to Bucky with a look that was part disdain, part dare—so whatcha gonna do now?—so perfectly Steve in that moment that Bucky could only stare at him. And of course there was a right and wrong answer to the question. Bucky began to unbutton his uniform and Steve’s lip curled into a grin; right answer, pal.

Steve had a way of pushing him around, even—or maybe especially—in bed. He pushed all Bucky’s buttons, especially the ones that stopped him thinking, so that everything became sensation: rolling around on the mattress half-dressed, roughly kissing and groping, Steve’s big hands in his hair, kissing him with a wet sloppiness that drove him crazy. And then Steve was biting his earlobe and whispering, low and ragged, "Do it. Go on and do it," and the thinking part of his brain didn’t know what the hell Steve was talking about, but his body knew, his hands and his hips. He turned Steve over and dragged his pants down his slim hips—and Steve was already pushing back at him, grappling for control of the moment even with his ass in the air, and—oh. Christ. He finally got Steve shoved down underneath him, arms braced and sobbing, "oh. yes. Buck. please," as Bucky fucked him with short sharp thrusts. And when it was over, when he’d convulsed and collapsed, sweating, on top of Steve’s narrow, smooth back, it was Steve who somehow turned so that their bodies fitted together perfectly, cradled in each other’s arms.

He drifted sleepily, arms occasionally flexing to pull Steve closer—and when he woke Steve was bent over him, shaking him, saying, "Bucky? Bucky? Oh, my God…" Bucky thought that he was probably late for work, but then he opened his eyes and saw the dank brick ceiling and the grimy windows of the interrogation room, the burned-out radiation machine overhead, and understood that he’d been left for dead. But somehow Steve had—

Was this Steve? The soldier who turned toward him was tall and had enormous shoulders—but he was wearing Steve’s face, his crooked nose, and Steve’s big hands were sliding over his body in a familiar way—and snapping the heavy leather straps like they were made of paper. That was… That.

"It’s me. It’s Steve," the soldier insisted, hauling Bucky up. "Come on," but that was easier said than done, because Bucky’s legs wouldn’t support him. And Steve was looking at him with a peculiar, anxious expression, nothing like how Steve had been looking at him these past few months; this Steve looked like he’d seen a ghost.

"I thought you were dead," Steve said, dragging his arm around his neck. His voice had thickened a little.
"I thought you were smaller," Bucky muttered—but it wasn’t until they’d marched halfway back to Italy that he realized that this wasn’t a ghost or a hallucination: this was Steve, this was the real Steve, and it wasn’t just that he was six feet tall now, he was also called Captain America and he’d made movies and was now a personal enemy of Johann Schmitt and Hydra and half the S.S.—Hitler too, probably—and what the hell, he’d left Steve behind at the Army Recruitment Center in Queens just a couple of months ago, and wasn’t that just so goddamned typical?

2012.

"You’ll say it’s queer," Peggy said, once they’d gotten settled back in her room, which was lovely and spacious, with a large bay window overlooking the gardens, "but I wasn’t as surprised to see you as you might think. The truth is, darling," she said, reaching out for Steve’s hand—Steve had pulled a chair up to hers, and now took her dry, papery hand in his—"that I always see you out of the corner of my eye. The back of your head, a face in the crowd. I'd be walking along and see you queuing up for a newspaper or hailing a cab…” Peggy was looking at him, except it wasn't him at all: she was staring wondrously at some other Steve she’d glimpsed in the street, years ago. "And I'd get so excited," Peggy said softly; she was talking to herself now, too. "My heart would…I ran into the road once! Practically got hit by a bus," and Steve saw that some part of her was still there, dodging traffic in a hat and black pumps. He could almost see her: all glossy dark hair and red lips, one hand pressing her hat to her head as she ran.

"I caught you, actually, that time," she said, as if he doubted it. "But of course it wasn't you at all," and Steve blinked and Peggy in her chic red suit and hat was gone: her curls were white now, though still pinned in ringlets. "It was never you. But it didn't seem crazy to think that it could be." She laughed, which creased her face in delightful, familiar ways. "It was mad, wasn't it."

"No, it wasn't—it wasn't at all," Steve said, and then confessed: "I see Bucky all the time."

Peggy squeezed his hand. "Well, of course you do," she replied, and Steve turned to look and yes, there he was: leaning back against the chest of drawers, arms and legs crossed and wearing a light linen suit, like he’d dressed for England. Bucky uncrossed himself and went to her chair, then bent to kiss her cheek. Peggy didn’t notice. Bucky's mouth moved to her lips: God. Steve remembered how they used to kiss, Peggy cupping Bucky’s head in her hands and drawing his mouth to hers…and desire came like a punch, hard and fast, leaving him breathless; the first lust he’d felt since the ice, like his blood had only just melted enough to get him hard. He wanted…nothing he could have, nothing that was even possible. In his mind, Peggy and Buck kissed deeply and then smiled into each other's mouths, Peggy stroking his cheeks with her—

"He’ll never get old," Peggy said, "which is something. I can’t recommend old age: it’s all aches and pains," and Steve felt tears threatening, so he turned in his chair and swiped his thumb under his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose hard enough to hurt.

"Did they ever find..." Steve managed, and his voice sounded unnatural—and hell, it was unnatural, he was: still alive and only twenty-seven years old. "…him, him, his... "

Peggy frowned, then seemed to understand. "Bucky, you mean? No, I—no," she said slowly, "I don't think so. Not that I ever heard. I mean, nobody ever reported that they’d found him—"

Steve was suddenly, irrationally angry. "Did anyone even look?"

Her eyebrows flew up, and Steve braced himself for the answer—"Where, in the Alps?" or "In the middle of a war?"—but then her face softened, and she said, only, "No."
"Well, *I'm* going to look," Steve said—and Bucky snorted and gave him a look that Steve had seen a thousand times, maybe more: *Steve, you goddamned crackpot.* But Peggy just made a thoughtful sound and said, "Well, you could fly into Innsbruck—*Kranebitten*—and hire a car. There are resorts in that part of the Alps now; they'll have the right sort of equipment," and Steve's heart swelled and hurt, because this was the Peggy that he knew—and she knew him.

1944.

"*I'm a great fan of your films,*" Bucky repeated, quoting Schmitt, though it didn’t come out as mockingly as he wanted, because his teeth were chattering even though he was sweating, like he maybe had the flu or something. Still he kept walking; they had at least another ten miles to go. "What films? The Little Rascals? Stag films—?"

"Look, it all just happened, all right?" and it was weird to hear Steve’s aggrieved voice coming out of that big body. "I know you think that it’s *me*, somehow, that I’m looking for trouble—"

"Now why would I think that?" Bucky drawled.

"—but I swear to God, it just happened. These things just happen to me."

"Sure, like the time your face just happened to get in the middle of a ruckus between the White Hand and the Italians which was none of your fucking business and you know better!"

"That wasn’t my—I told you, there was this—*Jesus Christ*, that was years ago," Steve moaned.

"Yeah, but it’s fucking *indicative,*" Bucky said, and Steve really didn’t have an answer to that.

There was a moment when he thought he was done for, where he thought he would drop dead between one step and the next—and then, surprisingly, it passed. And after that, although he was still mechanically putting one foot in front of the other and sweating like a motherfucker, he felt like he maybe on the upswing. "I'm okay," he told Steve, who was shooting him worried looks in between commanding the makeshift army he'd raised out of fucking *nothing*; "I'm better," and by time they marched into camp, it was like nothing'd happened at all. He was dirty—they were all dirty—but he only had a bruise here, a scratch there; nothing important. There was nothing noticeably wrong about him; nothing anyone could *see,* anyway.

And nobody *did* see: everyone was crowding around Steve, staring at him like he was a god made flesh or a movie star or something. The colonel pushed through the crowd, positively radiating affection for Steve while pretending to be annoyed with him; in truth, the colonel looked like he wanted to *adopt* him. And then the most beautiful woman Bucky’d ever seen walked past, with eyes only for Steve. Steve stared back at her—and Bucky'd never seen such longing on his face before, but then again, no dame had ever given Steve the time of day before. This dame looked ready to give him the whole goddamned calendar: New Year’s Day to New Year’s Eve.

Bucky cleared his throat. "Let’s hear it for Captain America!" he shouted, and the men cheered and hollered and pounded Steve on the back and threw their hats into the air as Steve blushed. No one looked Bucky’s way at all; in fact, no one said a word about him until after the colonel'd bundled them onto a plane for London: Steve and Dum Dum and Morita and Gabe and Falsworth and Dernier and the beautiful dame, who was called Agent Carter. And him—him, of course.

"So you found your Sergeant Barnes," Colonel Phillips drawled to Steve, startling Bucky by using his name, though Phillips wasn't looking at him. "I suppose the reports of his death were greatly
exaggerated," he added, which made Steve smile, but Bucky felt like he’d died on that operating
table. He felt like a ghost.

2012.

He was careful about hugging Peggy—let her hug him, instead; let her squeeze his arms and stroke
his face—but he did kiss her, gently but rather a lot; Bucky'd shown him that it was all right to kiss
her. Kissing her was sad but sweet, because there was still so much there—enough to make him
angry for all they'd lost. "You'll come back again, won't you," Peggy said, when he was gathering
himself to leave, "and tell me what you've found?" and Steve immediately sat down again, fighting
for control of his face, and said, "Of course I will; I'll come as often as I can, and I'll write, too—
promise you'll write?" and he felt a small thaw of happiness at her smile.

They offered to call him a cab to take him back the train station, but he smiled and said no and
instead walked back down the long drive in the dark. Natasha's car was parked by the brick post.

He sighed, went to the passenger side, and got in. Her face was glowing in the reflected red and
green lights of the car's dashboard, which was more elaborate than the controls of any of the planes
he'd flown. He didn't know the next move in their chess game, though at the moment he didn't give a
good goddamn, because the only woman he'd ever loved was being helped into bed in the big house
behind him, and the only man he'd ever loved was a pile of bones somewhere across the channel.

"Will you drive me to Dover?" Steve said.

"Sure," Natasha said, and then, surprising him—he'd thought they weren't going to talk about it:
"You did well, you know. I tracked your Oyster Card to Hammersmith before I realized." Steve
tipped his head, accepting the compliment and hearing the warning: now she knew that he knew that
there were tracking devices in everything.

"So how'd you find me?" Steve asked, as she put the car into drive. He wasn't expecting an answer,
but Natasha did answer, her eyes fixed on the road: "You don't have that many friends."

He recoiled, stung. "That bitch," Bucky muttered from the back seat, though Steve wasn't sure how
she'd meant it: was she trying to say that

they

should be friends? "How the hell are you gonna be
friends with her when she's tracking you across Europe?" Bucky objected angrily. "I'll lay even
money they clap you in irons by the end of the week: this is a long rope they're giving you, pal, but
you're gonna hang at the end of it, wait and see."

"I don't care," Steve choked out. "If I can find you again, I don't care," and now Natasha glanced
over at him, frowning. "I'm sorry, what?" she said, and so Steve said, for her benefit. "There's
something I need to do," he told her, "in Austria, and if I do it, I don't care what happens afterwards.
I'll do anything you goddamn want," or he'd sit in his cell and write letters to Peggy, if they'd let him,
or read the Bible if they wouldn't.

Natasha rarely gave anything away, but right now she seemed to be having trouble keeping up.
"Austria? If you want to go to Austria—it's an hour to Vienna by—"

"I don't want to go to Vienna," Steve said, aware he was being a pain in the ass, but not caring. "I
want to go to Innsbruck."

"To Innsbruck," Natasha repeated. "All right. I can have SHIELD helicopter us to Innsbrook—"
"I want to take the train to Innsbruck," Steve interrupted. "From Zurich, through the Alps. I want to ride the train that goes through the Arlberg Pass. I want to see the goddamned view."

Natasha opened her mouth and then shut it again and bit her lip, considering. "I can ask for someone else. Do you want me to ask SHIELD to assign someone else to you?" and there was something in Natasha's voice that hadn't been there before; some act that had been dropped. "You might get on better with someone else. A man, maybe. A soldier—a veteran," and behind him, Bucky barked out a laugh and said, "My God, she thinks you're a chauvinist. Listen, lady," Bucky said, leaning forward, "this is Steve: he's just a garden variety pain in the ass." But Natasha wasn't listening; she was going on, thoughtfully, "SHIELD has agents who are ex-army."

"How about no one?" Steve asked quietly. "I suppose there's no chance of being left alone?"

Natasha shot another look at him, and her mouth was amused but her eyes were sad. "No chance at all," she said. "But I think they assigned me to you because of the Avengers Initiative. So we could get to know each other."

"Well, you're really not seeing me at my best," Steve said.

"I've seen you at your best," Natasha replied seriously. "During the battle of New York."

Steve shook his head. "That wasn't..." but Bucky hunched forward between the car's enormous curved seats to say, "It was, though; you've always been at your best when you're fighting—or fucking, though most people don't know about that. I think I've figured out why, too; have you?" and Steve stared out the window as he realized the answer to a question that he'd never even thought to ask. "Adrenaline," Steve said, and then, realizing he'd said it aloud, he looked at Natasha and said: "That was just adrenaline," just as Bucky said, "Right-o, pal: adrenaline opens those shit-knotted lungs of yours right up. Must've felt great: well worth a punch to the face," and Christ, was it only that simple? Had he been fighting all his life just to breathe?

"I'll take you to Zurich however you want," Natasha said quietly. "We can fly or drive: go by ferry or train—"

"Can we just go, you and me?" Steve asked finally. "Or do you have to report our movements every step of the way," because he wanted to keep SHIELD out of this, but if they were in it, they might as well be of some use.

Natasha didn’t answer right away; she seemed to be considering the question carefully. "I need to send an all-clear each day," she said finally, "so they know we’re alive and that I’ve got eyes on you. Beyond that..." She gave a casual shrug in her black leather jacket. "Beyond that, I think we could be invisible, if we’re careful."

Steve’s heart gave a little leap at this hint of freedom. "Okay. Okay. Now you’re talking..." but then Bucky muttered, "If you can believe her. If you can believe one goddamned word of her," and he would have popped Bucky one, except for how that was maybe even true.

1944.

Somehow he’d crossed into another world, Steve’s world: an underground bunker full of maps and laboratories and scientists running around everywhere; the world of the SSR. They had him and the other POWs from the camp looked over by fancy doctors, who pronounced them fit—though for what, Bucky didn’t know. He felt dazed, spun around: he’d somehow gone from a shithole to a
prison to hell—and now suddenly he was here, sitting down to a real meal of hot food while a pimply kid in a British uniform came around with a bottle of wine, for fuck’s sake.

Afterwards, they took him from the underground dining room to a semi-private bedroom with two beds with real sheets and a nightstand and lamp in between, like in a hotel. Steve was sitting on the edge of the bed, spit-shining his too-large helmet with his skinny, angular arms. He squinted up at Bucky and said, "You don’t need me. He’s here. He’s actually here," and Bucky turned and saw—Steve. It was Steve. Larger, bigger than he was now, and standing in the doorway in his dress uniform. Steve—except he wasn’t wearing any of the faces Bucky usually pictured on him: he wasn’t being pissy or wry or sanctimonious. This Steve looked like he had the day his mother died, his tight expression straining to hold back the floodwaters. Steve turned, shut the bedroom door and locked it, then reached for a chair and silently wedged it under the knob. Bucky stood there, vibrating a little in the silence and afraid a little, too, of this man he knew and didn’t know. Steve came over soundlessly and reached for him, arms opening—and it was the smell of him that did it, knocked him sideways; not the nearness, not the shocking, alien strength of the hug as they fell into each other’s arms, but the familiar smells of soap and sweat and the shaving cream Steve liked, and that weird little jar of pomade that—and Bucky’d never thought to imagine these smells, or maybe the smells of the ghost had never been able to overpower the smoke and shit and rotting flesh of war, and so helplessly he pressed his face to it, dragging his nose, his mouth, over Steve’s collar, the spicy skin of his neck, his cheek.

Steve grasped at him—clutching him, squeezing him, like he was trying to relearn the shape of him, hands drifting over his back, arms, shoulders, over his head, fingers trailing through his hair like he was maybe searching for bullet holes. "I’m all right," Bucky whispered. "I’m all right, I swear to God I am," and Steve made a choked-off sound and dragged him in again and held him tight. Bucky made fists in the back of Steve’s jacket and breathed deep.

And like always, it wasn’t about sex with them until it was, until things caught fire between them. Steve turned his head and kissed him, as casually as lighting a cigarette. And then it blazed up in both of them: they kissed and reeled across the room toward the bed on the far wall. Steve was pushing and pushy like always, but now he was overwhelming, almost thoughtlessly strong in his affections, like an enormous dog leaping up to paw and lick without knowing its strength. Bucky stumbled backwards, holding on, all worked up just by the force of him. He clutched Steve’s head and kissed him, hard, deep, working his mouth open. They tumbled over together.

Steve came down heavily on top of him; the bed swayed and hit the wall and they just went faster, Steve’s hands scrabbling up Bucky’s side, tugging his shirt out of his pants. They undressed each other, roughly, by touch, not wanting their kiss to break, mouthing kisses across each other’s faces—Christ, the shocking tease of Steve’s tongue. Bucky grinned and nosed himself right up to Steve’s ear, whispered "Christ"—and Steve jerked above him, shot his hand out and yanked on the iron rail of the bedstead: crunch. And that just made Bucky shove his cock against Steve’s warm skin, sensation racing up and through him like an electric shock. He moaned—and Steve’s hand came down huge and heavy, covering his mouth even as the whisper came, hot breath in his ear, "shhhh."

Bucky twisted his head. "You’re the one," he muttered, "ripping the bed all to—" but Steve was moving over him awkwardly on knees and elbows. He slipped, knee swinging out on the twisting sheet, but when Steve settled down they were skin to skin, pressed together. Bucky could feel the heat of Steve's dick against his belly, his against Steve's, the symmetry of them. And then Steve was sliding a hand under him, tugging his thigh up even as he ground down and... ffffuck, yes. Bucky bit his lip and rocked up blindly into heat and friction, trembling as Steve’s cock dragged against his: the soft skin, the scratch of pubes, shocking, personal, this thing they weren’t supposed to do with each other. He curved his arm around Steve’s neck and kissed him, and they lurched into a stuttering grind: Bucky’s arm coaxing Steve down, Steve’s fingers digging into his thigh and tugging up —
until they hit it, the rhythm. Moving together, breathing in sync, their eyes blind and friction building fast between them; perfect. Steve was breathing little soundless exhalations into his mouth, oh. oh. oh., and with his blood rising, Bucky jerked away and said, feverishly, "I wish you would fuck me. You’re big enough. You should fuck me." Steve’s eyes went wide.

"I want to," Steve breathed. "I really—God, Buck, I—" and Bucky arched back and shuddered, his body surging with feeling—with good feelings, with good feelings finally. His heart thumped wildly and his cock jerked, his come splattering and cooling between them, against their flushed, sweaty skin. Steve hitched a breath and said, "oh," and squeezed his eyes shut. Bucky awkwardly clasped him while he trembled, wanting to hold him through it.

They held each other tight for a minute or two, panting and absentely brushing their faces together, caressing—and then Steve found Bucky's ear and whispered, "I'm still hard. I still wanna," which was nuts, except for how he was still throbbing, too. He turned to stare, a little wonderingly, into Steve's face: was this the war, working on them? Carpe the diem and all that? He remembered what a goddamned aphrodisiac a draft notice could be: guys rushing to get laid because it might be their last chance, and all the dames taking pity on 'em. He and Steve had gone at it like like rabbits before he’d shipped out—but not like this, not all at once. Except his blood was hot, desire licking up his spine before the sweat had even cooled. It was like their bodies knew something they didn’t.

"Trunk," Bucky managed to grit out. "I've got—" and he lurched up and shoved Steve over on the tiny bed to get past him to their footlockers, stenciled BARNES, ROGERS. He felt ridiculous—half-dressed, shirt hanging from one shoulder, pants bunched and dragging down his left ankle, dick bobbing up and down—but he could picture exactly where to find the tiny metal tube in his footlocker. He flicked the latches with a practiced hand, flung the lid up, and dragged out his kit; a moment later, he was turning back to Steve with the tube in his—

Steve was sprawled across the rumpled sheets, acres of him, hard and unnaturally smooth and somehow desperate-looking at the same time. "Buck," he said, in a low, cracking voice—and that was Steve, his Steve: the Steve he’d dragged across the ocean with him and halfway across Europe, "I was so scared—and angry and crazy—when they told me you were—" but Bucky scrambled over him, shushing him, desperate and a little furious himself. Dead. When they told me you were dead—except he wasn’t fucking dead. Or at least he hadn't fallen down—or not yet.

"Shh," Bucky said and straddled him, pinning him down. "It didn't happen. I'm right here." He rubbed his cock against Steve's belly for a few jittering, electrical strokes, shuddering as Steve's cock teased his ass, under his balls.

Steve groaned and his eyelashes fluttered. "Right," he said, but he looked a little frightened, too; somehow unconvinced. "Just. It's all almost too good to be true, like a dream—because you've been with me this whole time, Buck, ever since you left," and Bucky clutched hard at Steve's shoulders and stared down at him.

Steve flushed pink but held his gaze, almost defiant; he was maybe embarrassed, a little, but he wasn't ashamed.

"I know how that sounds, but it's true," Steve said. "Everywhere I went, everything I did; you won't believe me, but—"

"I believe you," Bucky managed. "I do, I swear to—Jesus, c'mere. Kiss me," and Steve surged against him, cupped his head, took his mouth, rolled them over—and this wasn’t a dream, Bucky thought, as Steve sucked hard on his throat and pushed slick fingers into him; wasn’t a dream; it wasn’t. Because in his wildest dreams he’d never imagined that Steve could somehow pick the lock on his own body and escape, had never imagined Steve all glowing and healthy like this. But here he
was—a miracle, an angel, strong and perfect and broad-shouldered and Christ, pushing into him, stroking Bucky's hips with his thumbs and filling him, sending pleasure surging through him—blood, nerves, making his fingers twitch—and looking at him like he was the only real thing in the world.

2012.

They crossed by ferry in the end, because he'd already kept Bucky waiting sixty-six years and a few more hours weren't going to matter. And because Steve had once gone to France via Dover during the war, albeit very differently: now, standing out on the ferry deck with the evening wind in his hair, he could almost see their tiny boat on the horizon: Bucky looking sleek and dangerous in dark combat gear, Peggy with her hair pulled back and no makeup, but still radiant in the moonlight. At the time he'd cursed that goddamned moonlight: their promised cloud cover had blown away, and now there was the danger that, tiny as they were, they'd be spotted. Him, Bucky, and Peggy, on a stealth mission—crazy—to occupied Dunkirk, where intercepted intelligence had told them that—

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Natasha said, materializing. Her face was turned toward the cliffs behind them.

"Uh-huh," Steve said, only half-hearing her; he was still staring at the ghost of their little boat. That mission: that was where Peggy and Bucky had really come to terms, because by God, Peggy could sail—she was glorious—and Bucky's instincts were such that he could follow directions before you'd even said them aloud. They'd been like a house on fire, that mission: the two of them yanking ropes and wrestling the boom and the tiller this way and that. Steve had mostly ducked and gotten the hell out of the way. His job was to sit where Peggy pointed, wherever she wanted his weight. So he sat, holding on and marveling at the fact that he wasn't seasick: a side effect of the serum.

"Peggy sailed at school—she went to some fancy school," Steve heard himself saying. "Bucky and his family went to Lake George in the summer; they had a car." Natasha was nodding politely, but Steve suddenly felt the enormous futility of it. Everything he had to say sounded crazy; everything was impossible to explain.

"You didn't give her the big picture," Bucky said, irritated, from his other side. "You gotta talk about the big picture: the mission and the boat—oh, and also, not to break it to you, but I'd been on like three boats before we sailed to fuckin' occupied France in the dark. I didn't know a damn thing about boats—I was just doing what Peggy said."

"Three boats is more than no boats," Steve objected, and then he coughed and said, turning awkwardly back to Natasha: "I'd never been on a little boat; just the ferry—in Brooklyn. But we sailed to Dunkirk in 1944, Peggy and Bucky and me. We were trying to intercept a Hydra scientist who was coming from Norway and headed to Paris."

"To the Institute," Bucky said, biting his lip and nodding. "What was his name, Franz something?"

"Zurbruck," Steve said; he remembered it like it was yesterday. "Franz Zurbruck. The Nazis had found some artifact in Norway that they didn't understand and—" Steve frowned; Norway. That made more sense, now that he'd met Thor and his homicidal brother: made some kind of sense, anyway. "The expert they wanted to consult was in Paris—occupied Paris. Hydra'd set up their flagship research facility there, right on the Rue Lauriston."

"Just down the street from the Gestapo," Bucky growled. "They were living high on the hog, those assholes."
"Torture by day, Beaujolais at night," Steve gritted out. "Enjoying all that Paris had to offer."

"Fuck Paris," Bucky said savagely.

"Fuck Paris," Steve echoed; Paris had seemed to them like a city without a soul. "But we didn't go to Paris—not that time. We had to intercept Zurbruck in Dunkirk—or that was Peggy's job, really. We were just there to protect her: get her there, get her back. She was the primary on that mission: she was a codebreaker, she spoke French…"

Steve drifted off in the memory: once they'd wrestled the boat onto the French shoreline, Peggy had shucked her tactical gear and slipped into a floral print dress. A coat of bright red lipstick later and she was indistinguishable from any of the pretty French girls in town. It was always easier to have Peggy with them—

"—when we were in France, yeah," Bucky agreed, nodding, "not just because she was the best fucking operative we had, but because with her around, nobody took a second look at us." Bucky hooted a laugh: "Hell, you could've been wearing the outfit and juggling balls through the town square and nobody'd look twice at you, pal."

Steve grinned helplessly; that was only the truth. Not to mention that if Peggy was there, you could always pretend to be—The memory nearly bowled him over. Bucky and Peggy pressed together in an arched doorway, her pale arms twined around his neck, his hands pushed up under her silk floral skirt. They kissed—just as the gendarme, a member of the Carlingue, the Gestapo Francaise, passed within a couple of feet. Across the road, Steve pulled his gun and thumbed off the safety: if the guy made a move, touched one hair on either of their heads, Steve was going to…. But the gendarme barely spared them a glance, just rolled his eyes and laughed, hardly breaking stride.

"You can always count on the fucking French," Bucky said. "Distract 'em with sex or cigarettes or both."

"I miss cigarettes," Steve sighed, and then he turned, because Natasha had laughed out loud. "What?"

The wind off the water was whipping through her red hair. "$\text{You used to smoke?}$" She looked delighted.

"Everybody smoked," Steve replied. "$\text{Not like now. It was cheap and it was something to do.}$"

"I know. All Russians smoke. And I was a dancer, once," Natasha told him. "$\text{All dancers smoke, too.}$" She was staring at him intently now, with her clear, intelligent eyes; she was giving away more than she usually did.

"I understand more than you think I do," Natasha said finally. "$\text{I left a world behind, too. So I know what it is to look at a place…"} She turned toward the gray waters of the channel. "$\text{…and see it with more than one set of eyes. My first trip to England was with the Bolshoi. I performed at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden. I had my first glass of champagne. My second trip, I seduced and blackmailed the Minister of Finance for Japan. My third trip…"} She trailed off, hands clutching the railing. "$\text{Well. Let's just say I played a small but crucial role in the assassination of a Ukrainian politician.}$" She looked at Steve and said, with a quick, hard smile, "$\text{Sometimes I still look around and think—God, the decadence. The West is swollen with capitalist greed and spiritual degradation —}"

"It is, though!" Steve interrupted, shocked into honesty. "$\text{I mean: it really is.}$"
"I know. But I won't tell if you won't," and when Natasha laughed, Steve found himself laughing with her; really laughing, for the first time since he'd come out of the ice.

1944.

So it was a team the SSR was recruiting him for: *a team of elite commandos*, whatever the fuck *that* was when it was at home. He was pretty sure it was going to be exhaustion and shit and mud and pain, like the rest—but the team was going to be Steve's team and so that was the beginning and the end of it. And maybe, just maybe, *elite* would mean that they'd get a hot meal and a semi-private room between missions, and he'd get to make love to Steve a couple more times before he died again. *That* thought made him smile into his glass of whiskey; his third. Cheap bastards had watered this stuff down so much that you could hardly feel a thing. He downed it and waved for another.

When Steve finally rejoined him at the bar, he was smiling. "See, I *told* you," Bucky said. "They're all idiots."

Steve sat on the stool beside his and gestured for the barman to pull him a pint. "What about you?" Steve said, deliberately casual. "You ready to follow Captain America into the jaws of death?" and Bucky flicked his eyes up from his whiskey: because it had been the other way around, hadn't it? Steve had followed *him* into the jaws of death—and plucked him back out again. If it weren't for Steve, he wouldn't be here at all—hell, if it wasn't for Steve, Bucky wouldn't be sure he was here *now*. The pub blurred a little around the edges; the whiskey kicking in, finally.

When he looked up, Agent Carter was standing there in a red dress, as beautiful a dame as he'd ever seen outside the pictures. She was staring at Steve like something out of a cartoon: with a knife and fork, practically. Bucky cleared his throat and made a play, but no dice: she didn't so much as spare him a glance before slinking off, taking Steve's eyes with her. Bucky opened another button on his shirt; he was sweating, it was hot in here, or maybe that was the whiskey, too. They said you should never drink alone—but he wasn't alone, was he?

"What's the story with you two?" Bucky waved at the barman; thank God for the barman. "She's clearly taken a shine to you: is it against orders or bad for morale or something? Because otherwise it's time to make your move—"

Bucky stopped; he knew Steve well enough to note that little twitch of—Shame? Pride? The penny dropped and Bucky laughed and straightened and clapped Steve hard on the back. Steve's deep flush was only confirmation. "Holy shit!" Bucky said, and Steve waved for Bucky to lower his voice: as if anyone was listening to him. "You already *made* your move—"

"*She* made it," Steve said, low and embarrassed. "Back in Brooklyn. Before…you know," and he shrugged awkwardly and gestured vaguely at himself: at his new, healthy body. "She…it came out, you know…that I'd never…" and Bucky turned his face away: he felt suddenly teary and so, so glad that that glorious battleship of a woman had had the good taste to take his scrappy pal for a tumble. The evening abruptly fell into a new light: Peggy Carter had come down here, in a red dress, for what? Christ, he'd been an obstacle, invisible though he was.

"Hey," Bucky said to Steve, low and sorry, "I didn't mean to… Just say the word and I'll disappear."

Now it was Steve who looked teary. "Don't you dare, pal. Don't you goddamned dare."
2012.

They drove Natasha's car off the ferry and powered down the A26 toward Switzerland. Steve was intentionally abrupt in his suggestion that they take a hotel; they couldn't all be bugged, could they? "How about that one?" Steve said, pointing, and Natasha shot him a sharp look but immediately steered the car into the tiny curved drive and pulled up...before the valet, Steve realized with a pang of guilt. Natasha slid out, and Steve quickly hauled himself out of the low car, after her. "Bags in the trunk," Natasha told the valet, smoothly handing over the key, and then she was striding toward the revolving door and into the fancy, gleaming lobby, Steve trailing behind her.

"Screw them," Bucky said, revolving in after them. "They're so flush with cash, let 'em pay for a decent room," but the room they gave him was more than decent: it was sublime, with a glass wall on one side and a balcony overlooking the lake. He drifted toward it, staring at the lights. Behind him, Natasha coughed politely.

"I'm next door," Natasha said, when he turned, "if you want me." Steve absently thanked her. She smiled and went.

His rucksack had been put on a chair, so he went and showered and changed into pajamas, then pulled out his laptop computer and went to sit at the desk. The internet had the most wonderful maps, and he was surprised at how well they correlated to the rough drawings he'd made from memory. The mission had been burned into his brain: the route of the train through the Alps, the wire they'd run across the track. They'd set up their ambush at an abandoned signal station, just after the Arlberg Viaduct. That was easy enough to map out. The hard—the difficult—the thing his brain didn't want to do was to track the route afterward, after he and Gabe and Bucky had landed atop the train. How long had it been? Two minutes? Three? The train had been going like the devil—far too fast for the snowy conditions. Steve looked away from his laptop screen and stared down at his sketchbook, seeing the narrow gorge between the mountains, the enormous, snow-covered trees. Two and a half, maybe three minutes... He moved his pencil along the route he'd drawn. "Stop," Bucky murmured. "That's it," and Steve sketched, lightly, a cross: a grave marker. The middle of nowhere, miles even from the tiny villages with their cuckoo clocks and their TB sanatoriums: all ski resorts now. He could still be there. Christ, please, let me find him; let him still be there—

There was a knock at the door, and Steve's head jerked up. "Yes?" he called, a little uncertainly. "It's me," Natasha said, and Steve frowned, closed the laptop, and hurried into the bathroom. They'd left a robe for him behind the door. He slipped it on and tied the belt quickly.

"Coming!" Steve said, and went to the door. He hesitated, then opened it just a few inches; it still didn't feel quite decent. Natasha peeked in through the gap, looking freshly scrubbed, damp-haired and smiling—then pushed her bare arm through the gap. Steve frowned and jerked back, surprised, as she waggled it—and then he laughed.

She was holding a pack of cigarettes: Lucky Strikes.

"Where'd you get that?" Steve asked, and opened the door wider. Natasha was standing in the hall, holding a bottle in her other hand—clear glass, with a silver screw top: vodka, he surmised.

"Shop in the lobby," Natasha replied, shrugging. "I had an impulse—thought maybe you'd want one, too."

"Danger, danger, boyo," Bucky said in a low whisper from behind the door, and Steve could see what he meant. Natasha was wearing a sleeveless undershirt and some close-fitting pants in a soft fabric, like a light jersey. They weren't quite pajamas—people wore similar clothes on the street—but
they clung to her, well, everywhere, and she wasn't...that is, she didn't seem to be wearing— "You can see her nipples," Bucky said. "Or I can anyway."

Natasha looked at him expectantly, made a face. "Can I come in?" and Steve, helpless, stepped away from the door.

"She's doing it on purpose," Bucky told him, "you know that, right? If she'd made herself up, you'd've gotten suspicious—so she's dressing down, letting her natural beauty shine through. Which: fair enough, she's got a lot of it," and that was true: Natasha was even lovelier without makeup than she was all dolled up. "Just don't be fooled," Bucky cautioned, drifting after Steve as he followed Natasha across the room. She took two glasses from the sideboard and headed out onto the balcony, to the little table and chairs. "She's seducing you. That's what she does."
Natasha sat down, tucking her legs under her, and poured vodka into their glasses. Steve picked up the pack of Lucky Strikes, packed the tobacco, and unwrapped the cellophane. He lit one without thinking and handed it over to her; it was muscle memory, this kind of courtesy, and he missed it. Natasha smiled and took the cigarette from him, and he lit another for himself; inhaled and breathed deep. They picked up their glasses, clinked them, drank.

"That said, you 100% ought to fuck her," and Steve choked; Natasha looked over at him in alarm. "Two women in your life, it ain't excessive," Bucky argued. "Besides, it's what she's come for. She'll teach you things you never even dreamed of, I bet. Then she'll eat your head," Bucky said cheerfully, as Steve put his glass down and took a deep drag of his cigarette, grateful to have something to do with his mouth. "Which is okay, too; it's not like you're using it."

Steve smoked meditatively, looking out over the water, using his hand to cover his grin. *I'm using it,* he thought. *For another five minutes I'm using it.*

"What's so funny?" Natasha asked, smiling—and truth be told, he could imagine going to bed with her. It spooled out in front of him, a clear road to follow: he'd go to her and kiss her, let his hands gently smooth along the warm, soft jersey that covered her curves. She would follow his lead, pretend to be a little shy because she thought *he* was. But she would let him take her into the bedroom and undress her and kiss her all over. He would lick the undersides of her high, firm breasts, take her pointed, perky nipples between his lips, kiss her thighs. He'd gently lay her on her back and do her in the missionary position, and she'd think him sweet and a little sentimental, maybe: foolish, gentle, a relic of another age. And when he was deep inside her, and they were shaking and rocking together, he'd drop a sucking kiss on her neck or bite her lightly on the ear and say, "Okay, so what else have you got?" because he'd maybe been shy, once, with women; but that was before Peggy. Before Peggy and Bucky and…well.

Natasha raised her eyebrows inquisitively. Steve laughed and let smoke blow out through his nose.


1944.

The SSR gave them new uniforms and their own custom gear and parachuted them straight back into the war—everything the same, but different, because now everything worked. Before, Bucky'd been running from muddy hole to muddy hole while Steve, invisible to everyone but him, tried to stop him from getting his ass shot off. But now, Steve was where he was meant to to be—up front, visible, and in charge—and it was Bucky who'd learned how to disappear, to melt away into nothingness, to be the shadow thrown, black and long, from Steve's back.

They never saw it coming, any of them. Bucky'd climb up high, find a vantage point, or slip into a crack between trees, between worlds. He'd take aim and—blam—clear the space around Steve, let him walk around in his brightly-colored get-up with his head held high. Bucky liked that—it made Steve seem invincible, casting dead men at his feet. Even the others—Gabe, Dum Dum, Dernier—began to look at Steve with awe and unease, as if they'd forgotten that Bucky was there with his rifle, eye fixed on Steve and ready to kill anyone who looked at him wrong.

"I've got your back," Bucky whispered into Steve's mouth, first thing in the morning, last thing at night; another privilege granted the shadow. "Stay where I can see you," and Steve would nod, his face hot, and say, "I will, Buck; I will." He did, too—but then again, Steve had always stood tall, even when he was short; wherever there was trouble you could find Steve, standing there at the
center of things and refusing to take anyone's shit.

Steve also had a goddamned knack for knowing where Bucky'd concealed himself, no matter how clever or obscure the nest. It was like a sixth sense; even on the battlefield, bullets flying every which way, it was like Steve could sort his bullets from the rest and track 'em back to his location. "I can, actually," Steve told him, one freezing night, when Bucky'd thought to mention it to him; they were huddled up together under a blanket in an abandoned watch station, waiting for extraction: they were to be smuggled out on a freighter and then rendezvous with a motor gun boat in the North Sea. "I know that you're there: I can feel your eyes on me, watching me," Steve murmured, his breath warm against Bucky's chilled skin. "It's like living in the sight of God," and Bucky's mouth pulled helplessly into a grin and he turned to berate Steve—what blasphemy, you know better—except there was nothing mocking in Steve's expression. Nothing at all; rather, there was something fond and warm, a softness around the mouth, and if Bucky turned his head, a little—He brushed their mouths together and snuggled in closer: stole breath and heat.

It was easy to be with Steve like this in the war—everyone was strange in the war. London was harder: there were obligations in London, demands on Steve's time, and there was Peggy, too, to be accounted for. But London had its compensations: food and drink and crowds and music—everything they were supposedly fighting for—and one night after he and Steve had come back from a mission, singed and dirty but alive, Peggy turned to Steve and said, decisively, "Let's go dancing. Yes, now," and when Bucky tried to melt away, to leave them lovebirds to it, Peggy had surprised him by grabbing hold of his arm and saying, "Sergeant Barnes, wait; you, too," and when Bucky stared at her, in open-mouthed shock, Peggy had simply added, coolly, "I'm told Steve can't dance for beans."

It had been a long time since anyone had addressed him directly; Bucky felt exposed and a little frightened, if he was honest. He looked at Steve, who nodded, wide-eyed—he'd never have contradicted Peggy in anything; Do What Peggy Says was his motto. "Well all right," Bucky'd said slowly, "sure, I'll go; so long as we dress for it," and so they had all dressed for an evening out, him and Steve in their best uniforms and Peggy in a red dress, and then she’d surprised them by flashing the keys to what turned out to be an open-topped roadster. It was a long-nosed Austin one-seater, which they all crammed into with Steve in the middle and which Peggy drove being as she was the only one of them accustomed to driving on the wrong side of the road and which Peggy drove—as it turned out—like a maniac. It was exhilarating, terrifying, the way Peggy drove, pedal to the floor, weaving in and out of traffic and taking roundabouts at full tilt with her hair flying, and Bucky began to suspect for the first time in a long time that maybe he wasn’t actually dead after all, because Peggy’s driving put him in fear for his goddamned life and gave him a hard-on, to boot.

They went first to the Paramount which was packed and hot and where they danced and drank till they were flushed and sweating—Peggy was a good dancer, and she took him for the fast numbers and Steve for the slow ones. Then they stumbled out, piled back into the car, and drove (too fast) along the Thames to the Stork Club. The band there was Latin and Steve, flushed, was reluctant to rumba, but he and Peggy dragged Steve out to the floor and gave him cover to move his hips without dying of embarrassment by sandwiching him between them and dancing together, all three. The dance floor was crowded and nobody cared: people were dancing every which way and in every permutation, some of them this close to actually copulating, hands in pants and up skirts. Others, breathless and panting, left the club hurriedly.

After a while Peggy drained the last bit of her drink and nudged them toward the exit. It had started to rain, and the dark, wet street outside the club was deserted. Peggy covered her head and took off, running, in the rain, and they followed her down the street and around the corner and under a little red crop of awning in front of a doorway. There they huddled close, trying to stay out of the rain, and it was only then that Bucky noticed that Peggy was gripping his arm with her red lacquered nails.
and that the door behind them was stenciled, in gold, HOTEL. Bucky looked, shocked, at Steve—but Steve was staring at Peg, and Peg had a defiant look on her face and—come to think, Peggy had clearly been working her way up to something. He tried to step back, to slide away—this had already been one of the best nights of his life, the kind of night he’d always imagined for him and Steve in New York: out together, dancing—but Peggy held on tight enough that he’d really have to fight to get away and otherwise ignored him. She was focused entirely on Steve, who said, thickly, "Peg, are you sure?"

She bit her full lower lip and nodded. "Yes," she said. "He’s always been the ghost in the room," and so Steve turned to him and asked, in a low, desperate voice, "Will you, Buck?" and what, what kind of a question was that?

2012.

The next morning, they went to Zurich Main Station and boarded a gleaming new train bound for Innsbruck. The train had enormous windows and bright blue leather seats, and the laminated brochure in the seat back had a map of the route and promised Spectacular Views of The Alps—a promise that drove Steve out of his seat and on to his feet, sweat beading on his forehead. Natasha looked up, frowning, and Steve said, "Sorry, I need to—sit by myself." Then he went and found the conductor and bought another seat and the empty seat next to it, though Bucky never showed up.

It was as bad as he’d feared; worse, somehow, because it was so cheerful. The train was packed with happy families going on a ski holiday in bright winterwear, and the sky was bright blue and the sun was gleaming off the snow-topped mountains. Steve refused to look at the map but knew, still, in his body when they got close—and then realized he wouldn’t be able to just sit there and ride past it, like a tourist, and so got up and walked down to the end of the car and through the door to stand on the little enclosed platform between the trains. Above him was a hatch, and Steve glanced quickly in each direction to make sure that nobody was coming before yanking it open and lifting himself gracefully onto the roof. The blast of cold air was familiar, the wind and the speed, and Steve hunkered down and hung on. They were past the Swiss ski chalets with their brightly colored bunting, past the rebuilt Austrian towns. This stretch of track was desolate, apparently unchanged by time, and it was easy to imagine himself back in the past among the primordial mountains, glacial snow and enormous trees. How long had it been? Sixty-six years? His body felt it as a month, maybe a month and half. He was afraid to blink. His eyes watered.

Was it there? No. There? No, not there, either. Though that turn—and what he didn’t expect when the train curved and the landscape, the proportions, slotted eerily into place, was the voice in his head that whispered, Jump! Jump now! And he nearly did. Nearly: Steve had to suck in an icy breath of air and tighten his hands on the cold metal handles. The train rattled past the site of Bucky’s death and curved around the mountainside, past the signal station where they’d waited, past the zipline, and went deeper into Austria, leaving the Howling Commandos behind.

1944.

That night passed in a haze of sensuality, almost a dream: all of them in one bed, kissing and touching each other. Peggy was as bold here as she was everywhere else, flinging her bra away and climbing into his lap, slim arms twining around his neck. He kissed her breathless, those lips of hers that had said his name, and pushed up into her, grinding their bodies together with Steve right there, chest pressed to Peggy’s back and fervently kissing her shoulders, stroking her heavy breasts with his
hands. Steve was crazy for her, that much was evident—and fair enough, because she was a knockout, and brave and stubborn, too: just his type. Bucky came with a hitch of breath, gasping, nearly choking—as sweet a first lovemaking as he’d ever had—and Steve, wild-eyed, practically shoved him out of the way to get to her, tumbling her laughingly over onto the bed. He slid his long hands into her dark curls as he dropped down on her, and kissed her, and pushed into her, and then he let out a groan that—Bucky sank back, arm draped over his eyes, and trembled. Steve was pushing through his come, and Peggy was making little guttural noises, and they were speeding up, moving together. This clearly wasn’t their first time at the rodeo: Steve and Peggy fucked like lovers who knew what they liked. The bed lurched as Steve reared up, hand dragging down Peggy’s hip and then tugging at her knee, pushing her thigh higher—and then Peggy let out a moan of explosive relief and began to laugh. Steve laughed, too, hips still jerking, and then he was groaning and collapsing, listing sideways so as not to crush her underneath his weight. He landed hard against Bucky, and for a moment, they all just lay there, panting at the ceiling. And then Steve surprised him by rolling toward him and muttering, “Come here, you,” and then Steve was kissing him right in front of Peggy. Bucky stiffened helplessly, the muscles in his shoulders bunching—it was a stupid time to get shy about things—but Steve’s mouth against his was insistent, familiar and real, pushing, coaxing, stubbornly drawing him into the kiss, into the fuck of their bodies against each other, and after a while he forgot to think of Peggy. It was only later, after he’d come again, that he heard the soft sizzle of a match and looked over to see her sitting against the headboard and lighting a cigarette; she was wearing his uniform hat and red lipstick and nothing else, so that was all right. Peggy took a drag and then offered it to him—he reached out and took it gratefully, inhaling deeply. After a moment, Steve elbowed him and he handed it on.

"Round two?" Peggy asked brightly, and—_ha!_—oh, my God.

2012.

From Innsbruck they backtracked to an old hotel nestled high in the mountains near where Bucky had fallen. Steve continued to be unnerved by how goddamned _pleasant_ everything was: the hotel had a steeply arched roof and every window had a window box of bright red flowers. In his mind this whole area was a barren mission-site, but it was obviously a lot more now: full of rich, healthy people in expensive ski clothes. Natasha fit right in.

_Natasha_, Jesus. He’d hoped to offload her in Innsbruck, but she hadn’t taken him up on his suggestion of a hotel. Now, though, she _had_ to stay behind; he couldn’t bear to have her follow him any further. He rehearsed the speech he needed to make to her; he would beg her, if need be. _Please. Don’t ask any questions. I need to go into these mountains. And I need to go there alone._ He would get up at first light and search all the impossible places, the cravasses and the ravines, the snowy crags. Looking for a bit of blue fabric. A glint of metal. Anything at all.

Today, however, was dedicated to reconnaissance. He and Natasha walked around the bright, cold village with its cheery landscaping and quaint, Swiss-style architecture, and eventually found themselves outside the town hall—the _Gemeindeamt_, or maybe they called it the _Stadtamt_ or _Magistrat_ around here: he wasn’t sure which word the Austrians used. He went in, figuring they might be able to provide him with the most up-to-date maps of the area.

His German hadn’t had time to get rusty, and the words came easily enough when he needed them—"Entschuldigen Sie bitte, gibt es in der Nähe Bergpfade?"

The man at the information desk frowned at him. "Für Wandern? Die beste Aussicht ist..."

They went through a door and down a flight of concrete steps; the air got noticeably colder, and Steve realized that the official, the Beamte, was leading them to a part of the building that had been carved out of the mountain itself. That should have been his first clue, but he wasn’t thinking; the second clue should have been the shiny, insulated double doors, but he was distracted by the rest of the room, which was lined with tables and—that was a German helmet, wasn’t it? On a green metal tray. A pair of driving goggles with the lenses missing. A rusted fork and spoon from a mess kit. A scabbard for a K98 bayonet. A razor. A disintegrating ammo pouch. A harmonica. Part of a field kitchen. There were people coming toward them, two men and a woman, and the Beamte was explaining that they were part of a joint expedition, Austrian and Italian, who specialized in the Archäologie der extremen Umgebungen, the archeology of extreme environments. They had excavations going in a number of places in the Alps, and while they were primarily occupied with documenting the White War, the trench war that Italians and Austrians fought between 1915-1918, they’d found a number of Artifakten that clearly dated from the Second World—and that was his writing, wasn’t it? The chatter around him receded, though for the love of God he ought to have been paying attention ("Many have come to us in search of lost relatives," but that tattered hunk of paper was surely part of his field notebook, pages he’d normally have burnt, but there, at the frozen camp they’d made at the signal station, he’d been jealous of the match and who the hell was ever going to find a bit of paper buried at the top of a mountain?

"Ja, ja," one of the archeologists said, seemingly delighted by his interest, "that, there, we found at an old signal station near the Arlberg Viaduct that we think was occupied by British commandos—notice that the writing is in English," and he was pointing carefully with a wooden stylus at words which, indeed, were written in English, because he had written them: "not completed before the middle or end of March." What had that been about? He couldn’t remember. The archeologist went on, "Most interesting, since most relics found in this area are Austro-Hungarian. We also found the remains of a pulley and cable system. And then, here, just to the south…” and Steve was so lost in trying to remember what wouldn’t be completed before the middle or end of March that he missed his last and final clue; or rather he saw it, vaguely, the porcelain sign besides the double doors as they invited him in (Leichenschauhaus), though the translation, in oh-so-literal-German, only slowly seeped through his distracted brain (corpse show house?) before he was inside the cold room and staring at the five metal tables.

Morgue. The word snapped into place. Though it was more than a morgue, it was a literal freezer, because the tables still had chunks of glacier on them, blocks cut out of the ice and removed, entirely, with their contents. Men. These were men—or they had been, once. Now they were husks, abstract sculptures of leather and bone, flesh and clothes fused together. A few details jumped to make you realize that they had once been men. The perfectly preserved heel of a military boot. A seamed sleeve over a bare arm bone: no hand at the end. And there—a mummified skull, twisted, a single tendon still visible, and besides him the muzzle of a rifle rising out of the ice. One of the archeologists was telling him that a love letter had been found in this man’s pocket, signed Maria—and time was telescoping, he couldn’t breathe, he was having an asthma attack. Bucky was 26 and strong and healthy, over six feet tall and standing just there in his memories. Flushed, blood pumping, and Steve could get him hard just by trailing a hand over his side, or down gently from the small of his back to the slope of his buttocks. "Goddammit, Steve," Bucky would growl, "you just wait," and he wasn’t one of these desiccated exhibits, he couldn’t be, Bucky wasn’t that old—it was still summer, goddammit, and Bucky’d only died in March—

The hand that closed around his arm was surprisingly strong. "Walk," Natasha said, in the voice of
every C.O. he’d ever had, and it was only then that Steve realized he was half-bent over, sucking violently for air through his teeth, and everyone was staring at him. "Walk and keep walking," she commanded, and Steve straightened immediately and walked, Natasha half-shoving him, half-marching him through the doors of the morgue and up the concrete steps and out into the Alpine sunlight. But the mountain air was cold, like the morgue—and of course it was a morgue, the whole place was; the whole Earth. A giant, slow-turning morgue that contained everyone he’d ever loved—and the hand on his arm tightened almost painfully, keeping him moving, and what a sight they must have made, striding across the village together without ever looking at each other.

1944.

He would remember, forever, having sex with Steve and Peggy by candlelight in the abandoned carriage house they’d stopped to sleep in just outside Paris. In London, they’d turned up their collars and skulked to hotels under cover of darkness, but here in the upside-down world of the war, being discovered having sex with your best friend and his best girl made you seem rather less suspicious—or at least, it provided a credible reason for your acting suspicious other than, say, being a spy or a saboteur in occupied France. If they were caught, all Steve had to do was jerk his blond head up and shout angrily, in German, for whoever it was to fuck off; Steve’s serum had given him not only strength and health but an eerie facility with languages, so much so that Bucky felt that he was almost catching on second-hand, somehow; so many foreign words now seemed transparent and obvious to him.

Steve seemed to like watching him fuck Peggy, and Peggy seemed to like watching him and Steve hug and kiss like they used to in Brooklyn: long and deep and sloppy. It seemed to rev them up, so that when Steve and Peggy finally came together, they fell onto each other like beautiful hungry animals while Bucky himself lay in the shadows and smoked. When they finally fell back, satiated and drowsy, he would sometimes creep forward and kiss their faces as they slept; other times he slipped out to stand guard over them, or to do surveillance, feeling invisible and right.

That night outside Paris, Bucky got up and dressed silently before the guttering candles, which cast orange light on Steve’s pale hip, the curve of Peggy’s breast, and loaded up with knives. At the door, he turned back to look at them, and saw that Peggy was awake, her dark curls tousled, her eyes fixed on him. She nodded and he nodded back.

They’d discussed this; Steve didn’t like it, but that was his whole job, really: to do the things Steve didn’t like.

So he slipped out, silently pulling the rough-hewn door behind him, and went like a ghost down the dark, cobblestoned street: come morning, some Hydra personnel wouldn’t be reporting for work at the Rue Lauriston. Not for the usual reasons—that they’d eaten too richly, drunk too many looted bottles of Burgundy or fucked too many whores—but because their throats had been slit in their beds.

2012.

When they finally reached the hotel, Natasha dragged him past the concierge and up the steps and down the hall and, without a moment’s hesitation, pushed him into his room after producing his key from her pocket and unlocking the door. Steve stumbled in and looked around, but Bucky wasn’t here—Bucky wasn’t here—and Natasha was locking the door behind them and pulling down shades
and drawing the curtains with quick, efficient movements like she knew what was going to happen. He himself didn’t know—had no idea what was happening until it was happening, until he was falling down onto the bed on all fours and screaming soundlessly, tears dripping down onto the fancy fucking bedspread, which was coming apart under his clutching hands. He was bucking like a horse, trying to get it off him, throw it off him, the horror of all those bodies, the senseless waste of his entire generation, and it took him a while to recognize that he was actually screaming out loud, and so he dragged over a pillow and buried his face in it.

And in the end he couldn’t throw it off. It saddled him, hard, and after a while he collapsed, face-first, down onto the bed, gasping, trying to get used to this new pain. And there was Natasha, kneeling on the bed beside him, her arms loose and at her sides, ready to slap him or taser him or fuck him as necessary. She was staring down at him with those huge, gray-blue eyes, and Steve rolled onto his side and said, tearfully, savagely, "Archeologists."

"Yes," Natasha said simply, and then she made the decision for them by peeling her shirt off, over her head. Her body was nothing like Peggy’s, she had nothing of Peggy’s voluptuousness. Instead, she was slim and muscular, with small, high breasts that fit into his hands, and he reached up for her and toppled her over and rolled on top of her in one smooth motion. Her hands slid into his hair and dragged his mouth down to hers, and he pushed deep into the sweet warmth of her—and he knew that she expected him to be a bad lover, but he wasn’t, because Peggy wasn’t, and Bucky wasn’t, and he himself had always been an imaginative and determined sort of person. Still, Natasha clearly wasn’t expecting it, and he recognized her surprised laugh as he gripped her hips and lifted her up and ground against her until she gasped and fluttered around him; it was the laugh of surpassed expectations. He could almost see her adjusting her assumptions, and for their second go-around she pushed him harder, demanding, her fingers digging into his shoulders and pulling him in for brutal, impassioned kisses and pulling on his hair, a little, which hurt, but was good, good; distracting. He didn’t realize that she was trying to exhaust him until their third go-around, when she did something he really liked: managed to squeeze his cock between her smooth thighs while pushing her fingers into him, and he nearly whiteed out from the pleasure of it, Bucky’s face swimming behind his eyelids, and he could feel her triumph at his ecstatic, gape-mouthed reaction: she’d picked him like a lock, cracked him like a safe.

He collapsed back onto the ruined bed, and then turned, dragging his crooked arm over his face, but she slid her arms around him and held him and after a while he let himself fall into her and wept bitter tears into her hair.

1945.

And he’s happy as he strides in the dark toward Paris. No one sees him, and it’s better that no one can see him: Steve sees him—and Peggy, too, even if she mainly sees him as an extension of Steve: his dark shadow.

Years later, when he stands in a museum and sees that they’ve mistaken his death date, he isn’t surprised. It’s an easy mistake to make. He was dead for almost a year and a half by his reckoning—but that was all right. There were compensations. He got to sleep in Steve’s arms practically any time he wanted, which was all he wanted.

2012.
When he was finally empty and exhausted, the Black Widow propped herself up and looked down at him, and he saw a mirroring emptiness on her face. There was sympathy there, too.

He stared into her gray-blue eyes—ageless—and said, "How old are you anyway?"

The corner of her mouth curled up. "Depends how you’re counting. How old do you think I am?"

"About my age?" Steve replied immediately, and then, because that needed clarification, "Mid-twenties?" and her smile—genuine, wide and gorgeous—told him how wrong he was. But, of course, he wasn’t twenty-seven either; not anymore. "When—what year were you born?"

For a moment he thought she wasn’t going to answer; then she did. "Fifty-six," she said.

He blinked at her a couple of times. "You’re fifty-five years old?"

"I do Pilates," she said. "Maybe it’s Maybelline."

*It’s not possible*, Steve wanted to say, but of course it was; he was ninety-three. If they gave her the serum—

She anticipated the question. "I didn’t get what you got," she said. "It was something else. But it’s kept me alive—for better or for worse. This is why you have to stay with SHIELD," she said. "I didn’t know how to explain before. But you have to stay with your people; us, your kind. There’s no point loving anyone; they’ll just die," and the terrible vision swam up before his eyes: corpses so decayed they were just bits of leather and bone. Was Bucky like that? He couldn’t bear to think of Bucky like that. "Steve," Natasha said softly, "do you understand?"

"Yes," Steve said, meaning he understood what she was saying—and if she took that as agreement, so be it.

**1945.**

He doesn’t see it coming. He doesn’t know that this is the mission: there are so many missions, all terrible, hilariously impossible. He doesn’t know that this kiss is their last, though thank God it’s a good one: a kiss to remember for years, decades, the whole hellish eternity. They are hurriedly dressing in a tiny lean-to built on the side of a mountain, their breath clouding around them. Gabe will already have been on the horn with HQ confirming their orders, and Bucky’s about to duck out of the tent when Steve grabs him and drags him in and kisses him—

—their cold lips and cheeks warming to blazes and Bucky feels the embrace of Steve’s warmth and strength even through their cold weather gear and two sets of armor. He smiles against Steve’s mouth; this is their secret and their strength; the invisible force that no one else can see or understand. Some people have religion. They have this.

Zola’s train at T- 2 minutes. They’re opening up the throttle; wherever he’s going, they must need him bad. Mind the gap. *Maintenant!* I had him on the ropes. I know you did.

*Bucky, hang on! Hang on! Grab my—!*

And he falls

And he falls
And he doesn't ever stop

End Notes

This has been Part I of a two part story; Part II coming as soon as I can finish it! Feedback and encouragement very appreciated; also, if you liked, please consider reblogging on Tumblr.

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