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**The Sound of Silence**

by fancyh

**Summary**

In a world where Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes never met as kids, their paths still cross eventually. But hindered by Bucky's inability to speak and a lack of information, how long will it take before Steve realizes he's not a villain, but a victim?
Chapter 1

Steve inserts the last chip and sighs in relief, slumping against the console. The speaker in his ear crackles to life as Hill's voice sounds.

"Okay Steve, get out of there."

Steve raises his wrist to his mouth, knowing they can't afford to wait. "Fire now. I'll find a way out."

There's a slight pause on the line. "Steve, are you sure?"

"I'm sure. Do it. Fire now."

There's a pause, and then the sound of the Helicarriers shifting, guns locking into place. Steve makes his way down to the glass floor, where the Winter Soldier lies limp and unmoving, as explosions sound and the Helicarrier rocks around him, making him stumble. He crouches down next to the unconscious form, cautiously pressing two fingers to the Soldier's neck.

A pulse flutters under his fingers, slow and shallow. Not dead, then. Steve had choked him unconscious to get the chip, not caring if he'd killed him, but if he's alive then Steve can't just leave him here. He's dangerous, and will surely work to rebuild Hydra in the wake of the Helicarriers. No, he needs to be taken in. But where? SHIELD is compromised, is going up in flames along with Hydra. Steve's not sure who he can trust. He needs somewhere that will hold a supersoldier, if that's what the soldier is, and that Hydra can't find him to rescue him.

The idea comes to him. Tony. The tower is the safest place imaginable, and Stark has rooms built to contain the Hulk. Even if the Winter Soldier is a supersoldier like Steve, he won't be able to break free.

The Helicarrier rumbles and pieces of metal crash down around them, making Steve duck. First he needs to get out of here. He crouches, manhandling the soldier's limp body into a fireman's carry over his shoulder before standing. The Soldier is heavy, especially with the metal arm, but it's still nothing for Steve's enhanced body. He makes his way to the edge of the fishbowl, peering over the side that's been ripped away by falling shrapnel. The water of the Potomac flows beneath him, already filled with debris but a better alternative than land.

Steve rearranges the Soldier so he's carrying him bridal style, tucking him close to his body. It's strange, holding the deadly assassin so intimately in his arms, but he can't risk losing him to the water. The soldier is warm against him, face strangely peaceful in unconsciousness and long hair spilling over Steve's shoulder. He looks young, and vulnerable, and Steve has to remind himself that he's a bloodthirsty assassin who shot Fury and tried to kill him multiple times. There's nothing innocent about him. Steve shoves the thoughts down, focusing on getting them both out. He steps to the edge, takes a deep breath, and jumps.

He hits the water hard, immediately kicking out with his feet to propel him to the surface. He readjusts his grip on the Soldier, looping his arms around him from the back and kicking backwards, making sure his head is clear of the water. He makes it to shore, dodging falling debris, and drags the Soldier up onto the bank. He pauses only a moment to rest before slinging the Soldier over his shoulder again and setting off, feet squishing in his wet boots.

He sticks to the shadows, not wanting anyone to see him. Even SHIELD. It's better if no one knows
that he's captured the Winter Soldier. Safer. He sends a silent apology to Sam, swearing he'll call him and Hill as soon as he gets a phone. Right now, he doesn't have time to let them know he's alive. The Soldier could wake up any minute.

He makes his way to the road and finds someone's vehicle, abandoned in favor of videotaping the destruction. People are standing on the bank gawping, phones raised, and the don't notice as Steve circles behind them and slips into one of the cars, finding the keys still in the ignition. He sets the Soldier down in the backseat and takes off his shield harness, managing to rig it into a makeshift restraint that wraps around the Soldier's mismatched wrists. He pats the Soldier down for weapons, removing no less than six knives from various places and two more guns. He puts the weapons in the trunk and then slides into the driver's seat and starts the car, driving away.

The Soldier wakes an hour into the drive, the sound of his breathing changing the only warning Steve gets before he jolts upwards and kicks the door out with his feet as Steve screeches the car to a halt on the side of the road. Steve jumps out and runs to the side nearest the Soldier's head, managing to get his arm around the Soldier's neck as he thrashes, silent as always. He squeezes until the Soldier goes limp again, sighing in relief. He lets the Soldier fall limp against the seat again, moving to close the door he'd kicked out, though the locking mechanism is broken. He climbs into the car again and keeps driving.

He stops for gas once, and has to knock the Soldier out two more times before they arrive at the Tower. He pulls up to where he knows the underground parking structure is, waiting for the camera to recognize him. After a minute, the wall moves and an opening emerges, Steve driving through into the structure as it closes behind him. He stops next to the elevator and gets out, grabbing the Soldier and slinging him over his shoulder before stepping into the elevator.

"Good evening, Captain Rogers," JARVIS says, voice cool and crisp as always. "May I inquire as to the nature of your visit?"

"Hello JARVIS," Steve replies. "I need a secure room to hold an enhanced prisoner."

"Floor fifty-two. Sir has taken the initiative to build a secure cell and interrogation room. Shall I tell him that you're here?"

"Yeah. And I'll need to make a couple calls."

"Of course, Captain Rogers. I shall inform Sir of your arrival."

"Thanks, JARVIS."

The elevator ascends and stops with a ding on floor fifty-two, Steve stepping off. He finds the cell JARVIS talked about, which adjoins to an interrogation room complete with a reinforced chair and manacles and a two-way mirror. He sets the Soldier into the chair and restrains him with magnetic cuffs around his wrists and ankles that attach to the chair, the chair itself bolted to the floor. The Soldier's head lolls limply, chin touching his chest and tangled hair dangling around his face. He smells like river water and sweat, and Steve knows he smells no better. He's still in his uniform, the straps stiffening from the water and starting to chafe. He desperately needs a shower and clean clothes, but he has to make sure everything is taken care of first.

The elevator dings and Steve turns, seeing Tony step through.

"Cap! I'm almost glad to see you. Almost. What happened in DC? Apparently you broke the
government or something? Why wasn't I invited?"

Steve sighs, feeling almost glad to see Tony as well. Almost. "SHIELD was Hydra," he explains wearily. "Tried to take over the world with Project Insight. I didn't have time to call you, and besides, didn't you say you were retired?"

Tony waves a hand. "Seriously? Hydra? And whatever. I mean, yes, I did trash all my suits and have open-heart surgery, but I'm still offended you didn't call me. I helped design those Helicarriers, you know. Anyways, what are you doing here? JARVIS says you have a prisoner?"

Steve nods. "You ever heard of the Winter Soldier?"

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Steve steps out of the shower, luxuriating in the feeling of being clean. He towels off and dresses in the clothes awaiting him in his room, which has already been set up for him. Apparently he has his own floor that Tony had wanted him to move into. He feels slightly bad. Tony obviously cares, in his own way.

After he'd explained everything in DC to Tony, he'd called Sam and Hill and informed them of what happened. Tony had found the person whose car he'd stolen and sent them money, and sent a quinjet to pick Hill and Sam up. They should be here any minute. The Soldier had woken up a little while ago, but after a brief spike in vitals he'd simply stared into space. Steve still hasn't heard him make a sound. It was eerie, fighting him, the only sound the Soldier's sharp breathing through the mask. Even when Steve had landed a hit, the Soldier hadn't so much as grunted. It's like he didn't even feel the hits, though he must have. And his eyes are so dead, his face so blank. Without the mask it's almost even more unsettling. The Soldier is oddly beautiful, Steve thinks, with his blue eyes and soft features and long hair, but he lacks the warmth of expression. He looks like an automaton, like there's not actually a person behind his eyes, like his soul has been sucked out and replaced with nothing but the imperative to fight. He's a ruthless and efficient fighter, certainly a match for Steve. Maybe better. Steve fights to injure usually, and reacts to pain. The Soldier fights to kill, and as if he doesn't care what happens to him. He uses his body as a weapon, without care for injury, and that's what makes him dangerous. Given time, a small voice tells Steve that the Soldier might win against him.

After grabbing a bite to eat, Steve makes his way to the fifty-second floor again. Tony is watching the Soldier, tapping on a tablet as he peers at him inquisitively. Steve steps up next to him, seeing what looks like notes and a schematic of a cybernetic arm on the tablet before he glances at the Soldier. The Soldier doesn't appear to have moved a muscle, still sitting silent and motionless as he stares ahead blankly. His gaze lands just to the left of Steve through the glass, and even though Steve knows it's two-way it still feels like he can see straight through him. It's unsettling. He doesn't even blink, just stares ahead with dead eyes. Steve starts to worry about brain damage from choking him out multiple times.

The elevator dings and Sam and Hill step through, looking exhausted. Sam's face is slightly bruised, but both of them look relatively uninjured and have even changed their clothes.

"Romanoff is staying to help clean things up," is the first thing Hill says. "I'll probably be needed back there, but I want to process him first." She jerks her head towards the still figure in the interrogation room.
Steve nods. "Sounds good. Thanks for coming." He addresses Sam. "You didn't have to come."

Sam shrugs. "Sounded like fun. It's crazy in DC, I can stand to be away for a few days."

Tony steps forwards, extending a hand. "Tony Stark."

Sam takes it. "Sam Wilson. Nice to meet you."

"I hear you were part of the Falcon program."

Sam nods, then grimaces. "Yeah, but the last pair are destroyed. By him." He nods towards the Soldier.

Tony grins. "Oh, I think I can make much better ones."

"Later, boys," Hill admonishes tiredly. "Let's get this done. He's secure?"

Steve nods. "And no weapons. Besides the arm, of course."

"Then let's get him printed and see if we can get an identity. Stark, do you have a fingerprint scanner?"

Tony scoffs. "You have to ask? Cabinet over there, top left drawer."

Hill walks over to the cabinet and withdraws an electronic fingerprint scanner before stepping to the door. She pushes it open, Steve close behind her. The Soldier's eyes snap to them but he doesn't move, expression staying blank. Hill sets the scanner on the table in front of him.

"Okay, here's how this is going to go. Hydra is going down, the Helicarriers are destroyed, and we've got you in custody. No one knows you're here, and you can bet this isn't through the legal system. You're a terrorist and an assassin. You don't have rights. If you comply, maybe we'll go easy on you."

Steve swallows down his discomfort. He knows part of Hill's speech is a bluff, or at least he hopes so. No matter what the Soldier has done, he still has rights and deserves fair treatment. They're certainly not going to torture him.

"Do you understand?" Hill questions.

The Soldier's blank stare flicks between Steve and Hill, and then he nods slightly, a short jerk of his head. Hill pushes the fingerprint scanner towards his right hand.

"Okay, set your fingers on here."

The Soldier extends his fingers and rests them on the scanner, range of motion limited by the cuffs. The scanner lights up and then beeps, and Hill pulls it back.

"We're going to run your prints, and if that doesn't work we'll use facial recognition. Either way, we'll figure out your identity. But we could save time if you just tell us. What's your name?"

The Soldier's stare returns to the middle distance. Steve feels a spark frustration. Apparently the Soldier doesn't intend to cooperate. He should have expected that. No doubt he's extremely loyal to Hydra given his record, though Steve had checked for fake teeth and cyanide but found none. So the Soldier has no intention of dying, which seems strange given the way he fights. Something feels off, though Steve can't put his finger on it.
Hill puts her hands on the table and leans in, posture slightly threatening. "You're not doing yourself any favors by staying silent. Like I told you, we'll find out eventually. You might as well tell us."

The Soldier doesn't so much as blink. Steve sighs internally.

Hill pats the table with a hand. "Alright, if that's how you want to play it. We'll be back." She leaves the room, Steve glancing back at the Soldier before following. Tony and Sam are standing outside, watching through the window.

"Anything yet?" Hill asks.

Tony shakes his head, looking down at his tablet. "Nope. No hits yet. I'm guessing we won't get one, though, considering who he is. He's careful."

"What about facial recognition?"

"Trying that too. Nothing yet."

They all fall silent, settling in to wait as Tony's tablet flashes through potential matches. Sam and Hill set their stuff in their rooms and shower as Steve watches the Soldier, who doesn't even shift as the minutes tick by. It's like he's not human. An hour passes, then another. They order Thai food and eat it, and still the Soldier doesn't move. He must be hungry or at least thirsty, but he shows no sign of discomfort. His vitals remain steady. Steve debates offering him water or food, but Hill rejects it. The more uncomfortable he is, the more likely he is to talk.

"We're not going to torture him," she says, "but we can make him pretty uncomfortable."

Steve agrees. He has no sympathy for the Soldier. He had chosen to work for Hydra, to kill dozens of people for them. He's not a good guy, and though Steve won't condone torture he doesn't really care for the Soldier's comfort.

Tony's tablet dings at the three hour mark and he frowns.

"What?" Steve questions.

Tony shakes his head. "There's nothing. No hits on fingerprints or facial recognition. It's impossible. I went through every security camera, every photo database, every digital high school yearbook, everything."

Steve thinks of Natasha's words. *Over two dozen assassinations in the past fifty years.* He thought that maybe the Winter Soldier was a title, passed on from operative to operative, but what if it's been the same person all along? Steve had survived almost seventy years in the ice, if the Soldier is enhanced as well he could have undergone something similar.

"Try going back fifty years," Steve says slowly. "The Winter Soldier's been active for fifty years, maybe he's older than he looks."

"The problem is that there's no way to check fifty years ago," Tony responds. "There wasn't really security cameras back then, or police databases. I don't have every high school yearbook or photograph on file to look through."

Steve sighs in frustration. Without knowing an identity, they don't have much to go on. There's little to no information on the Soldier anywhere, even in the top security agencies in the world. It's like he doesn't exist, and yet he's sitting right in front of them. He has to be *someone.* He had to
come from somewhere.

Steve pinches the bridge of his nose. "Let me talk to him."

Hill shrugs. "You can try." She holds out an earpiece. "We'll monitor his vitals, tell you if we get a reaction."

Steve takes the earpiece, tucking it into place. "Wish me luck."

"Good luck," they chorus, as Steve takes a breath and pushes through the door. The Soldier's gaze snaps to his in that disconcerting way again, following him as he sinks down into a chair across the table from him.

"I'm Steve," Steve says, "but I'm sure you already know that, given you tried to kill me." He gives a wry smile. The Soldier just stares at him blankly. "You must be thirsty," Steve continues. "Want some water?"

The Soldier doesn't respond. Steve forges ahead.

"I'm sure we could get you some, if you answered a couple of questions first. You're really not doing anything by staying silent. Hydra is going down. You understand? It's gone, and you're never going to see the light of day again. You'll never go back to Hydra again. You might as well tell us what you know."

The Soldier stays silent, but Hill speaks softly in Steve's ear. "His vitals spiked slightly."

Steve files this information away, figuring out where to press. "So, how long have you been working for Hydra? A long time, I'm guessing. All that for nothing, huh."

The Soldier's right hand twitches, fingers curling and meeting his thumb to make an "o." It's a deliberate gesture, like a sign, but it makes no sense. Zero years?

Steve frowns. "What are you doing?"

The Soldier looks at him, and then wiggles his fingers. There's the faintest crease in his brow.

"His vitals are elevated," Hill informs Steve.

Steve takes a breath. "Okay, I don't know what you're trying to do. Just talk to me."

The Soldier's mouth pinches downwards and he makes a series of movements with his right hand.

"His vitals are really spiking," Hill says.

None of this makes sense. Steve tries to order his thoughts. The Soldier obviously doesn't want to talk, but he has no idea what the hand movements are. It's not ASL, because Steve knows that, and it's not any military signs he recognizes. He's not sure if the Soldier is playing with him, or something else is going on. The Soldier is smart and ruthless, so Steve opts for the former. He's probably toying with him, having no intention of breaking under interrogation. It's evening now, and Steve is exhausted. Maybe morning will bring better results.

Steve stands up abruptly. "Alright, if you're not going to cooperate I'm done. I'll let you think this over for a while. Right now, you're going to go into a cell for the night. You try anything, this room fills with knockout gas. Got it?"

The Soldier gives a sharp nod. Steve gets up and crosses the room, opening the door to the cell.
Then he unlocks the cuffs from the Soldier's legs and detaches the wrist ones from the chair, snapping the Soldier's wrists together in front of him. He takes him by the arm and leads him to the cell, shutting him in and opening the small slot in the middle.

"Put your wrists here."

The Soldier places his cuffed wrists on the small ledge and Steve unlocks the cuffs as Hill walks in, passing him a bundle of white scrubs. Steve passes them through the slot into the Soldier's hands.

"Put these on, and give your old clothes to me."

There's the sound of rustling and a minute later the Soldier's tac gear is passed through the slot, damp with sweat and smelling like river-water. Steve closes the slot, putting the magcuffs back on the chair and exiting the room. The door is locked and reinforced, and JARVIS is monitoring the cell. The Soldier isn't going anywhere. Steve passes the others, setting the tac gear on a table.

"Come on. Let's get some rest. We'll deal with him in the morning."

The others mumble agreement and follow him, splitting off to their respective floors. Steve gets ready and falls into bed, lying awake for a while with mind spinning with the events of the day before he finally drops off into a restless sleep.

Steve peers at the screen showing the cell, the Soldier sitting on the bed motionless. "So, what did he do last night?"

"According to JARVIS, he just sat there," Tony replies. "Didn't sleep at all. We gave him some food and water this morning, but he didn't touch it."

Steve presses his lips together. Well, the Soldier might not have had a cyanide capsule, but it seems he's trying to kill himself slowly regardless. Hunger strike. This might be harder than they thought.

"I'll try to talk to him again," Steve says tiredly. "Find anything on his identity?"

Tony shakes his head. "Still nothing."

Steve sighs, and then heads into the room, picking up the magcuffs and opening the slot on the cell door.

"Wrists here," he intones.

He hears the Soldier get up and his quiet footsteps approach before two mismatched wrists are shoved through the slot, hands curled loosely. Steve snaps the cuffs over his wrists and waits for him to withdraw before opening the door. The Soldier heads right for the chair, sinking into it without resistance as Steve cuffs his ankles and separates his wrists, activating the magnets on the cuffs again to attach them to the arms of the chair. He takes the chair opposite, studying the Soldier. He's wearing the white scrubs, revealing a scar in the hollow of his throat. His skin looks pale and clammy, hair limp and tangled with sweat, and he has dark circles under his eyes. He looks almost ill, or like he hasn't seen the sun in years. How long? Steve wonders. How long has he been working for Hydra? Years? Decades?

"Good morning," Steve starts. "You thought any further about cooperating?"
The Soldier's hand makes a strange movement again.

"I don't know what you're trying to say unless you talk to me."

The Soldier's hand moves again, motions jerky, a crease appearing on his forehead.

"His vitals are spiking," Hill says. Steve stares at the scar on the Soldier's throat, and has a strange suspicion.

"Can you speak?" Steve asks.

The Soldier shakes his head sharply. Steve blinks.

"You can't speak at all?"

The Soldier shakes his head again. Steve considers. The Winter Soldier is a high-level operative, and if Steve is right, has been operating for decades. If he was caught, Hydra would want to ensure he couldn't spill any secrets. It makes sense, and also makes sense why he doesn't have a cyanide capsule. He doesn't need to die if he can't speak. The Soldier probably volunteered for the operation. God, Hydra is twisted.

"Do you know ASL?" Steve asks. The Soldier has to communicate somehow.

The Soldier shakes his head.

"Can you write?"

The Soldier hesitates, then nods. Steve gets up.

"Okay, I'm going to be right back." He exits the room, seeing the others with similar expressions of realization. Hill quickly hands him a notepad and a pen, unscrewing the pen so it's only the tip. That way the Soldier can't use it as a weapon. Steve goes back into the room, placing the pen and notepad within easy reach of the Soldier's right hand.

"Okay, write your name."

The soldier picks up the pen, only able to reach the bottom half of the notepad given the cuffs. He holds the pen awkwardly, pressing the tip to the paper and then beginning to write in shaky block letters, like those of a child.

*I DON'T HAVE A NAME,* he writes slowly, barely legible. It looks like he's never held a pen before.

Steve stares. "You don't have a name?" he asks incredulously.

The Soldier shakes his head.

Steve sighs. "So you're still not cooperating."

The Soldier frowns slightly and crooks his pointer finger, other fingers curled inwards. Steve thinks he's using some sort of sign language, only he doesn't know what it is. Maybe it's custom, one only Hydra understands. He decides to just keep going.

"How long have you been working for Hydra?"

The Soldier lowers the pen to the paper again and writes laboriously.
Steve pinches the bridge of his nose. "How do you not know? It's a simple question. Stop playing games. At least give me an approximation. Twenty years, thirty? Forty? Fifty?"

The Soldier hesitates.

"His vitals are spiking," Hill says.

The Soldier nods slightly.

"Yes what?" Steve presses. "Which number?"

The Soldier points the pen at the paper again, at the writing. I don't know. He hesitates again, eyes darting to the side, before pressing the pen to the paper.

>20? he writes.

"More than twenty years?" Steve questions.

The Soldier nods.

"How? You look pretty young."

The Soldier writes. CRYOFREEZE.

Steve nods. That makes sense. It's what he'd thought. And at least the Soldier is cooperating slightly.

"You're enhanced, then?"

The Soldier points to the paper with the pen. I don't know. His gaze flicks to his metal arm and then away. Steve feels frustration build.

"You don't know? How do you not know?"

The Soldier's face tightens slightly. It's the most expression he's shown so far.

"He's really agitated," Hill warns in Steve's ear. "Vitals are skyrocketing."

"How did you become enhanced?" Steve presses. "Was it Hydra?"

The Soldier blinks, and then nods sharply. Steve can see the traces of distress in his dilated pupils, the way his nostrils flare slightly as he takes shallow breaths. Something about this is making him agitated.

"What did they do to you?"

The Soldier flips the pen in his grip so he's holding it like a knife. Steve tenses, but the Soldier only lowers it to the paper, underlining his previous words with a shaky line. I DON'T KNOW.

"His heart rate is very high," Hill says.

Steve decides to keep pressing. At least they're finally getting somewhere, causing a reaction.

"How did you get the metal arm?"
The Soldier underlines the words again, more viciously. He's still holding the pen like a knife in his clenched fist.

"I think you do," Steve says. "What aren't you telling me?"

The Soldier underlines again, and Hill tells Steve his vitals are through the roof.

Steve stands up, slamming his hands onto the table. "Stop lying to me!"

The Soldier stills and his eyes go glassy and distant. The pen slips from his hand and rolls on the table, clicking softly.

"His vitals are slowing," Hill informs him. Steve looks at him for a moment, his vacant stare, and then leaves the room, closing the door behind him. He leans on the wall, heaving a frustrated breath.

"Something's not right," Sam muses slowly.

Hill frowns. "Like what?"

Sam shakes his head. "I'm not sure, but I don't like it."

Steve turns to watch the Soldier through the window, seeing him sitting still and silent. His vitals have dropped again, slow and steady. "Yeah, you and me both," he replies.

Around noon Steve brings water and food into the interrogation room, setting them on the table. The Soldier has been sitting still for hours, staring ahead, no sign that he's even cognizant. Steve estimates that he hasn't had food or water in over 24 hours. He detaches the wrist cuffs from the chair and snaps them together in front of the Soldier, the Soldier staying limp and pliant; Steve doesn't even think he's blinked.

"Go ahead," Steve says, hoping the Soldier isn't still on his hunger strike. "Remember, you try anything, the room fills with gas."

The Soldier reaches forwards with both hands, grabbing the plastic cup of water and raising it to his mouth. He drinks quickly, gulping down the water as some spills over his chin and he chokes slightly. When he's done he sets the cup down, breathing deeply as a crease in his forehead smooths out. He must have been thirsty, Steve thinks. He wonders why he hadn't drank before.

The Soldier sets his cuffed wrists carefully on the table but doesn't touch the food or even look at it. Still on his hunger strike, then.

Steve sighs. "You know, if you don't eat, eventually we'll have to make you. It would be easier for everyone if you just ate."

The Soldier frowns slightly and makes a circle with his fingers in the same motion as before.

"I don't know what that means," Steve says.

The Soldier looks frustrated. He pulls over the paper from before and points to the underlined words. I DON'T KNOW.

"You don't know..." Steve shakes his head. "What don't you know?"
The Soldier's mouth presses into a line. Slowly, he points to the food and then shakes his head.

"You don't...know how to eat?"

The Soldier shakes his head, then nods. Then he touches the back of his right hand with his metal one, pushing a finger emphatically over the vein. It suddenly clicks.

"IV?" Steve questions. "You're fed through an IV?"

The Soldier nods, something like relief in his eyes.

"Why?" Steve asks.

The Soldier points to the paper again. *I don't know.*

That seems...strange. Why would he not know why he's being fed that way? That's a pretty serious medical decision to not know. But at least it solves the problem of what Steve thought was a hunger strike. They'll have to figure out how to get the Soldier nutrients, and what's wrong with him that he can't eat food. And why he can't speak.

Hill's voice in his ear startles him out of his thoughts. "We should get blood and scans," she says. "Now that we know he's cooperating."

"We should get blood and scans," Steve repeats for the Soldier's benefit. "I'll be right back."

He takes the tray of food and the water cup and exits the room, setting them down outside.

"He can't speak, and he's fed through an IV," Sam says. "Something about this really doesn't feel right."

Steve nods. "I agree. Let's get some scans."

Hill finds a needle and vials for taking blood, and Tony brings in a handheld scanner. Sam volunteers to draw blood, as he's had training, and Tony won't let anyone else touch his scanners. They troop into the room as Hill waits outside to keep monitoring the Soldier, who hasn't moved from the position Steve left him in even though his arms are relatively more free.

Sam sets the blood kit on the table, prepping a needle, as Steve cuffs the Soldier's wrists to the chair again. Sam feels for a vein and ties a band around the Soldier's right arm before sliding the needle in. The Soldier doesn't even blink, staring into the middle-distance. Steve supposes he's used to needles. Sam draws two vials before withdrawing the needle and taping gauze over the tiny pinprick as Tony steps forwards with the scanner.

"I'll need him standing," Tony murmurs.

Steve nods and turns to the Soldier. "Okay, I'm going to uncuff you and let you stand up. Don't try anything."

He uncuffs the Soldier's ankles and wrists, the Soldier standing up but not making a move. Tony waves him into an open area of the room, gesturing with his hands.

"Okay, arms out to the side."

The Soldier complies, standing with feet shoulder-width apart and arms outstretched, expression distant, as Tony starts to wave the long, cylindrical device over him. He runs up each arm and down his legs, scanning every inch of his body as the Soldier stands unmoving. Tony spends
especially long on the metal arm, making circles around it as the device beeps. Finally he steps back, nodding.

"Okay. All done."

The Soldier drops his arms but doesn't move. Steve moves towards the cell and opens the door.

"We can be done for the day. We'll figure out how to get you food soon."

The Soldier walks into the cell and Steve closes the door behind him, locking it securely.

"Alright, let's figure out what's going on."

"Holy shit," Sam breathes, peering at the screen. Steve is inclined to echo the sentiment.

"What are all these?" he questions, reading the list of unfamiliar words.

Sam clears his throat. "Fentanyl is a powerful opioid, which relieves pain. Amphetamine is a stimulant. Caffeine is also a stimulant. Um, amitriptyline is an antidepressant. Almotriptan would be a triptan. I think they have something to do with migraines. Atenolol is a beta-blocker. Divalproex sodium, um, I'm not sure-"

"Depakote," Hill interrupts.

Sam snaps his fingers. "Oh. Right, Depakote. That's an anticonvulsant or a mood stabilizer. Uh, Clozapine. That's a fucking antipsychotic. It's for treating schizophrenia. Jesus, how insane is this guy? This combination of meds, he probably should be dead right now. At the very least, he's seriously fucked up."

Steve runs a hand over his face. The feeling of wrongness intensifies. Something about this isn't right. The Soldier can't speak, can't eat, and is on enough psych medications that he shouldn't even be functioning. It doesn't seem like the sort of thing you do to a valuable operative, even if they have been cryogenically frozen over the years.

Tony jogs into the room, waving his tablet. "Okay, so I got the scans. First of all, that arm..." he shakes his head. "I'm no doctor, but that thing must be causing him constant pain. I mean, it's a marvel of engineering, but the way they attached it..." He shudders. "Anyway, so he's got two trackers in him, one in his thigh and one in the arm. Luckily this tower is a Faraday cage so that's not a problem. When you get deeper, that's when it gets worse. I mean, if you're right and this guy is over seventy years old, he must have seen a lot of action. It looks like every bone in his body has been broken at least once. Also, he's missing his voice box. Like, the whole thing is just gone, surgically. He physically can't speak. So that's messed up. But it's his brain that really interests me." Tony moves closer so they can all see the tablet, where an image of a brain revolves on the screen. Even Steve can tell that something is wrong based on the holes and white spots clustered in the middle.

"Is that-" Sam starts, voice aghast.

"Yup. That's our good old assassin's brain," Tony proclaims. "It looks like Swiss cheese. From my best guess, his memory centers are severely damaged. That might be why he kept saying he didn't know. He might not remember. I'm thinking a head injury of some sort? Maybe he even got shot in the head."
"That might explain the medications," Sam muses. "At least some of them. The migraine medication would help with pain and inflammation from the brain damage, and the anticonvulsant might be for the brain damage also. The beta-blocker can be used be for migraines as well. The opioid could be for the arm, and the stimulants might just be performance enhancing. The antipsychotic and antidepressant I'm not sure about, but who knows? Maybe he has schizophrenia."

Steve feels a trickle of relief. This makes sense. The Soldier had a brain injury, and the medications are to counter that. He feels guilty for having felt bad for the Soldier before. *He signed up for this,* he reminds himself. The Soldier is a bad guy, bottom line. He needs to stop getting lost in those wide blue eyes that seem so innocent and young. The Soldier is a murderer, a fucking Nazi. Just because he can't speak doesn't mean he deserves to be coddled. Steve hardens his resolve, determined not to show the Soldier any sympathy. He's been going easy on him, but not anymore. He's going to get some answers, whatever it takes.
They bring the Soldier out in the evening and insert a nutritional IV, and Steve notices a faint tremor in the Soldier's hand and a sheen of sweat on his brow.

"Withdrawal," Sam says. "It's been over 24 hours since the Helicarriers and I don't know when his last dose was, but he should be going into withdrawal within the next few hours at most. Most of them are unpleasant but not life-threatening except for the anticonvulsant. We need to know if he has seizures."

Steve sits down across from the Soldier, watching the liquid flow through the IV into the Soldier's arm.

"So, we found that you're on a lot of drugs," he starts. "Why?"

The Soldier points to the paper with a finger, wrists cuffed to the arms of the chairs. I don't know.

"You don't remember maybe? You also have brain damage."

I don't know.

Figures, Steve thinks. He never gives a straight answer. "Gotta say, you're really not doing well. I mean, brain damage, drugs, cutting out your own voice box..." Steve crosses his arms and leans back in his chair. "Hard job, huh? Ever consider another career path?"

I don't know.

Steve sighs. "Alright, I get it, you don't want to answer my questions. But I do have one that you need to answer, unless you want to risk dying. Do you have seizures?"

I don't know.

Well, that's not helpful. "You don't remember ever having a seizure?" he prods. The Soldier hesitates, looking uncertain. Steve uncrosses his arms and leans forwards. "What?"

The Soldier picks up the pen and drags it down the page in a short, zig-zag line.

"What does that mean?" Steve questions, annoyed.

The soldier adds to his drawing, another line joining the first and tapering down into what becomes recognizable as a lightning bolt.

"Electricity?"

The Soldier nods. Steve is lost. Electricity? What does that mean? He scrubs a hand over his face.

"Okay, look, just write what you're trying to tell me. None of this pictionary stuff. It's a simple question. Do you have seizures or not?"

The Soldier looks frustrated and taps the lighting bolt again.


The Soldier starts drawing again, a small oval beneath the lightning bolt. He fills it in with
squiggles. A brain, Steve thinks. Electricity zapping his brain. Isn't that exactly what a seizure is? "Electricity in your brain?" he clarifies.

The Soldier nods.

"I'm pretty sure that's a seizure, pal."

The Soldier shakes his head. He puts the pen to the paper again, drawing what looks like a chair. He then draws a arcing line over it and a circle in the middle, and another lightning bolt. He taps it almost frantically, hand shaking, and then takes the pen and holds it like a knife, stabbing the brain and scribbling angrily. He looks up, eyes dilated and ringed with blue, a hint of desperation in them.

Steve shakes his head. "I have no idea what you're trying to say."

The Soldier's expression crumples slightly and his eyes fill with frustration. He stabs the drawing of the brain again and then makes angry x's over it, tearing a hole in the paper.

"His stress responses are off the charts," Hill informs Steve. "He's seriously upset, also possibly unstable because of the withdrawal. If he's coming off of antipsychotics suddenly, he may have a psychotic episode if he has schizophrenia or something similar."

The Soldier certainly looks unstable. Beads of sweat dot his forehead and his hand is visibly trembling, skin pale and the whites of his eyes reflecting the harsh lights of the room as he stares at Steve intently, knuckles white around the pen.

"I get that you have brain damage," Steve says carefully. "What I want to know is if you have seizures, and you said no. I don't know what you're trying to say, but if you won't write it out then I can't help you. You're gonna have to take your chances, and if you get a seizure that's not on us. Got it?"

The Soldier's expression closes off again and he nods sharply, pen slipping from his hand. He looks resigned and exhausted, and Steve has to push down the well of sympathy that rises up. It's his own fault. He's obviously an unstable, brain-damaged assassin who signed up for Hydra because he liked to kill people. He's probably a psychopath.

Steve stands up. "Okay, we're done."

Steve swallows the last of his coffee as he steps into the viewing room, nodding to the others.

"He's in withdrawal," Sam informs him. " Didn't sleep again. He's basically sweating and shaking, and threw up the water he drank. Heart rate is fast and his temperature is a little high. I'd bet he has a killer headache, too. Coming off that cocktail of drugs isn't a fun ride."

"He didn't sleep?"

Sam shakes his head. "We're going on over thirty-six hours without sleep now, and that's just the hours we know. We don't have to torture him, he's doing it well enough himself."

Steve chuckles darkly. He wouldn't wish this on the Soldier, but he doesn't really feel sympathy. He did bring it on himself. "I'm going to talk to him," he decides.

Sam raises an eyebrow. "Now? He's sick."
"Exactly. His defenses are down. He might give us something."

"I agree," Hill adds. "He's not in his right mind now, either. He could let something slip without meaning to. It's our best chance."

Steve grabs the comm off the table, inserting it into his ear before entering the room. He grabs the cuffs and opens the slot on the door. There's the sound of movement, and then the Soldier thrusts his wrists through the slot. His right hand is shaking badly, and his skin is hot and clammy as Steve snaps the cuffs over his wrists. He opens the door and takes him in, feeling his stomach twist slightly at the sight. The Soldier looks horrible, sweat-soaked hair hanging around his face in limp strands and skin pale and beaded with sweat, dark circles like bruises under his eyes and his whole body trembling faintly. His eyes are dilated and slightly crazed, pain written in the lines of his face. Steve ushers him out into the room, sitting him down and cuffing him securely before taking his own seat. The Soldier squints, the harsh lights obviously hurting his eyes and head. Steve pushes the pen and paper into his reach before starting.

"Let's try this again. What's your name?"

The Soldier extends a shaking finger to point at the words on the page. *I don't know.*

"You don't remember?" He hadn't thought of that possibility. But why hadn't Hydra told him what his name was after he had the head injury?

The Soldier shakes his head slowly, looking pained at the motion. Steve hardens his heart.

"Okay, can you remember anything about who you are? Anything that would identify you?"

The Soldier's eyes move to the paper slowly, obviously barely with it. He picks up the pen in his shaking hand and starts to write, occasionally stopping and looking confused. He pulls back when he finishes and Steve reads the numbers etched into the paper in shaky lines.

32557038

"Three-two-five-five-seven-zero-three-eight," he reads for the benefit of Hill and Tony. "What's that?"

The soldier shakes his head vigorously and points. *I don't know.* He takes a labored breath, hand shaking worse than ever and eyes brimming with panic as he stares down at the numbers. Steve sees his lips move, though no sound comes out. Steve reads his lips. 32557038, he repeats, over and over. Like a mantra. Like *a-like a serial number.*

"A serial number," Steve says out loud, leaning forward in excitement. "Is that a serial number? Were you in the military?" Something about it is familiar as well, like he's heard it before.

The Soldier points, breaths ratcheting up as Hill informs Steve that he's distressed. *I don't know."

"You don't remember?"

The Soldier shakes his head violently, breaths coming fast and shallow. His lips form the number and his eyes are glazed as he stares down at the paper, fist shaking where it clutches the pen. He flips it like a knife and stabs the ripped place where the brain was again, dragging the pen in jerky motions. Hill informs Steve that the Soldier is entering what could probably be called a panic attack.

The Soldier stabs the brain again and hyperventilates, looking up at Steve and seeming to try and
talk, mouth opening and closing before he suddenly tugs on the restraints as his eyes fill with
unmitigated terror. He seems to choke silently on what might be a sob, gritting his teeth as his eyes
flick around the room wildly, unseeing. They land on Steve and seem to stare through him, only
faint rings of blue still visible. The Soldier wheezes without sound, body shaking as Steve stays
frozen, unsure what to do. The Soldier's eyes flick back down to the paper and he takes the pen,
holding it like a knife as he starts to scratch long, shaky lines across the page, forming letters. Steve
leans closer to see, trying to pick out the letters through the other scribbles on the page.

HELP

Steve sits back, feeling something like dread in the pit of his stomach. Maybe this is just
withdrawal and psychosis, but his gut tells him that something is terribly, terribly wrong.

"Steve," Hill says lowly. Her voice is serious. "We got an identity. You'll want to see this."

Steve stands up, the Soldier's desperate eyes following the motion. He feels the need to reassure
him. "I'll be back." He exits the room, Hill's face unreadable as she stares at Tony's tablet. "What is
it?" Steve asks.

Hill hands over the tablet. "His serial number gave us the identity. He was a US soldier in World
War two. He was captured and experimented on by Dr. Arnim Zola at Kreischberg." She looks at
Steve significantly.

Steve draws a breath. "Kreischberg? That's-that's the Hydra factory I liberated. He..." He trails off
as the memory comes to him, the serial number echoing in his ears. 32557038...

He looks down at the tablet, sees the picture, the information. James Buchanan Barnes, born
March 10, 1917. In the picture he's in his Army uniform, hat tilted rakishly and lips turned up
slightly, eyes bright and clear even in the grainy photograph. His hair is short and neat, face clean-
shaven, and he looks young and innocent and untouched by the horrors of war. But looking at his
face Steve can remember it differently, can see the short hair tousled and sweaty and his face
bruised and streaked with blood, eyes glazed and lips moving, repeating the same thing over and
over. James Barnes, Sergeant, 32557028....

He remembers pulling him off that table, helping him out of the factory and then...he'd seen
glimpses of him, during the trek back to Italy, but then they'd arrived and he'd probably gone to
medical and Steve had never seen him again. Until now. Steve looks up, staring at the
Soldier-Barnes-through the window. He's barely recognizable, with the long hair and metal arm
and haunted eyes. He doesn't look capable of the expression on the younger Barnes' face. It's no
wonder Steve hadn't recognized him. But now that he sees the picture, it's undoubtedly him. But
how? What had happened to turn an American soldier into the Winter Soldier?

Steve drops his gaze back to the tablet, scrolling through the digitized file. Barnes had apparently
kept fighting after Kreischberg, becoming one of the Army's top marksmen. Then, in February
1945, he went missing in action after a classified mission. Steve wants to know what it was, but the
information on the tablet is all redacted. Maybe Barnes was a traitor? He could have been working
for Hydra, and defected to them as the war was drawing to a close. But that doesn't explain
Kreischberg. He had been tortured, experimented on. When Steve found him, he was barely
cognizant, mumbling his name, rank, and serial number over and over like they were supposed to
under torture. Surely he wouldn't have joined Hydra after that. Or would he? He's obviously been
working for them for decades. Something had to make him switch sides.

Steve thinks of the memory loss, the drugs, the lack of voice, the panic, the shaky help he'd
written. Maybe...maybe Steve's been wrong all along. Maybe Barnes wasn't a willing participant.
Maybe he's a victim. A prisoner of war for...seventy years. If Barnes had lost his memory somehow, all Hydra would have to do would be to convince him he worked for them. Convince him that Hydra was right. If that's true, if Barnes didn't choose this, then Steve has been approaching this all wrong. He's been questioning and honestly almost torturing him for something he didn't choose. It's too much to think about. He can't discount the possibility that Barnes is a traitor. But in his heart, he knows that's not true. He thinks of Barnes' blue eyes fluttering open as he'd shaken him on that table, the way they'd latched on to Steve. You're gonna be okay, Steve had said. You're safe now. What's your name?

Bucky, Barnes had slurred. My name is Bucky.

Steve sits down across from Barnes, watching his feverish eyes rove before finding Steve. Steve leans forward, resting his clasped hands on the table.

"We know your identity."

Barnes just stares at him, trembling slightly.

"James Barnes," Steve says carefully. "Your name is James Barnes. You were an American soldier in the second World War. I rescued you from Kreischberg prison camp. Do you remember that?"

Barnes shakes his head, pulling at the restraints slightly.

"Okay, do you know why you joined Hydra?"

Barnes shakes his head, then nods, then shakes his head. His breathing picks up. His long hair is drenched with sweat, and Steve can smell the sour tang of unwashed flesh and river water. Barnes shakes and shivers uncontrollably, face pale and taught with pain and eyes dilated and feverish, underscored by deep shadows. Steve can't even begin to imagine how he feels.

"Did you join Hydra willingly?" Steve questions.

Barnes doesn't respond, breathing shallowly. Steve decides to press.

"Why did you work for them?"

Barnes clenches and unclenches his fist, opening his mouth. No sound comes out and he snaps it closed, helpless frustration sparkling in his eyes. Steve is becoming convinced that the muteness is not by choice. Hydra had wanted to strip Barnes of communication for some reason, and that only leads to one conclusion.

"Did Hydra force you to work for them?" Steve asks gently. "Were you a prisoner?"

Barnes flinches and draws a panicked breath, eyes going wide and terrified. He shakes his head violently, fists clenching and wrists pulling at the restraints. His right hand flutters in unfamiliar signs, repeating them over and over. He's saying no, but everything about him screams yes. Well, Steve thinks, if he's traumatized enough-after seventy years of imprisonment-then he probably has Stockholm Syndrome or something similar. Steve wishes he knew more. What had Hydra done to him? Why does he seem to have no memories? How had they made him kill people? Everything is a big blank, and it's frustrating. He feels Barnes' frustration that he can't speak, or even seem to communicate through writing. All they have is some scribbled pictures and hand signs.

Steve suddenly gets an idea, and can't believe he hadn't thought of it before.
"Hey," he says, to break Barnes' panicked litany of hand signals, "can you show me what each of your hand signs mean? Write them down?"

Barnes blinks, seeming to settle. His eyes brighten slightly and he nods. Steve sighs in relief.

"Okay, let's go through them one by one." Steve makes the "o" with his hand that Barnes had before. "What does this mean?"

Barnes points to the paper. *I don't know.*

Steve takes a guess. "It means 'I don't know'?"

Barnes nods.

Good, they're making progress. Steve crooks his index finger, other fingers curled in. "What about this one?"

Barnes picks up the pen and writes in shaky letters, but he's switched from all capitals to lowercase. *I don't understand/explain,* he writes.

"It means 'I don't understand,' or that you need someone to explain?"

Barnes nods. Steve thinks about the times he had used that sign, and feels guilty. God, Barnes hadn't understood any of the questions he'd been asking.

"Okay, what about this one?" He makes the motion that Barnes had just used a minute ago, moving his thumb on the inside of his fingers almost like he's going to snap but instead rubbing from pinky to index smoothly.

*Please,* Barnes writes.

Steve feels his stomach twist. Barnes had been begging. He steels himself and makes the other sign that Barnes had used in conjunction with *please* just a minute ago. It's simple, fingers all straightened and pressed together and the hand moved down in a chopping motion. Steve has a feeling he knows this one already.

Sure enough, Barnes writes *stop.*

*Stop, please, please stop,* Barnes had been saying. Steve feels sick. He gathers himself, determined to keep going.

"Okay, what's another one?"

Barnes makes a fist with index finger extended and then draws it in a circle. Then he picks up the pen and writes *ready to comply.*

Steve swallows. "Next?" His voice comes out a croak.

Barnes extends his fingers, then brings them into a fist rapidly, curling them slightly from pinky to index as he does so. *Target eliminated,* he writes. He makes a thumbs up. *Mission success.* Then he makes a thumbs down. *Mission failure,* he writes.

Well. That must be how he makes mission reports. Steve shakes himself and moves on.

"Next?"
Barnes holds up one finger. Yes. He holds up two. No.

That's a simple system, straightforward. Steve nods and gestures for Barnes to keep going.

Barnes shakes his head. Steve frowns.

"You don't want to keep going?"

Barnes presses his lips together, then writes. All.

Steve stares. "That's all the signs?"

Barnes nods. Steve feels a swooping in his gut. Ten signs. Ten signs. That's all Barnes has to communicate. He seems to struggle with writing, so that's evidently not a commonly used mode of communication. That means that for however long Barnes has been unable to speak, those ten signs are the only things he's been able to say. He can't even say basic things, like that he's in pain, or that he's thirsty. Only begging, and mission reports. It's horrifying.

"I'll teach you more signs," Steve says. "I promise. You'll be able to communicate again."

Barnes just stares at him. Something in his eyes looks resigned, tired. Like he can't let himself believe Steve's promise. Like he's been lied to too many times. It breaks Steve's heart. What did they do to you? he wants to ask. But Barnes can't tell him. His only answer is silence.

Steve watches the screen, showing the cell where Barnes is lying on the cot, shivering and breathing shallowly. He'd thrown up what little water he'd drank, so they'd had to give him fluids through an IV along with the IV nutrition. He's in the throes of withdrawal, and it hurts Steve just to watch him. Coming off of the cocktail of drugs Hydra had him on is a long and excruciating process, though at least they actually care about his comfort now. Steve had put his foot down. No more interrogation. Barnes is suffering enough. They'll let him detox and try to find out more about what happened to him under Hydra before they talk to him again. Steve isn't alone in thinking that Barnes hadn't been a willing participant. He's a victim, Sam had said. There's no doubt about it. He's been stripped of all communication, drugged, probably brainwashed, and definitely tortured. He needs help.

Hill had been the most skeptical, but even she had agreed that something was wrong. Even if Barnes is somehow conning them, everything about this situation is still off. They need to know more. Steve had contacted Natasha and explained the situation. If anyone can get them information, it's her.

As if summoned by his thoughts, Steve's phone buzzes. He hits the button and brings it to his ear.

"Hello?"

"Hey," Natasha says. Steve feels a surge of anticipation. "I have something. A file, and a location. You need to come to DC."

Tony turns away abruptly, jaw clenched.

"Tony-" Steve starts.

"He killed my parents." Tony's voice is clipped and tight with anger. "It was him."
"We don't know what they did to him. I don't think he did it willingly," Steve tries to placate.

"I don't care." Tony throws the file on the table. "We're going to DC. I need to know everything about the son of a bitch that killed my mom."

Steve, Sam, and Tony step into the bank cautiously, looking around. Hill is staying at the Tower to keep an eye on Barnes, who's not doing well. He still hasn't slept more than five minutes in the past few days, and he appears to be hallucinating. Steve just hopes this base will give them more information.

So far, there's nothing. The main floor of the bank looks innocuous, empty and normal. The teller's desks are ordinary, everything still and normal as if it really is just a bank. But apparently it's only a facade. Natasha had said there was good intel that this was a Hydra base, and Tony says the power readouts from here are far beyond any normal range. Something has been happening here, only they don't know what.

They move deeper into the bank, coming upon a gated elevator.

"Who wants to bet Hydra does all their dirty work underground?" Sam comments.

Steve tightens his jaw and pries open the elevator doors, stepping in. Sam and Tony follow him, the elevator surprisingly roomy. There's only one button, and Steve presses it. The elevator starts with a lurch, descending into darkness. Finally it stops and the doors open, revealing a long hallway. The quiet is oppressive, the only noise the slight humming of the florescent lights that extend down the hallway, their glow eerie and harsh. Steve takes point, holding his shield at the ready as they creep down the hallway. There's a door to the right, and they push through to find a room filled with computers, a bank of screens taking precedence. Steve backs out, intending to come back after they've cleared the rest of the base. Further down the hallway it opens up slightly, with barred gates leading to a vault and two passages extending on either side. They take the left one first, finding what looks like a training room at the end, with a small adjoining room devoted to weapons and tac gear that matches the Winter Soldier's. The right fork leads to a cement room with a drain in the center and a hose lying on the floor. Steve retreats, feeling unsettled. He has a growing suspicion that this is where Barnes was kept.

They enter the vault last, stopping short. There's some sort of chair-like contraption in the middle, like a dentist's chair, with a strange mechanical halo hanging above it and strong cuffs where arms would go. Steve is reminded vividly of Barnes' drawing, and has a bad feeling. Wires trail from the chair into the walls, and screens and equipment are set up around it. There's an IV pole standing next to it, as well as a couple of rolling stools. The bad feeling intensifies.

"What the hell?" Sam says. Steve wholeheartedly agrees with the sentiment.

He notices a doorway to the left with a sleek pod standing just inside and moves towards it, scanning it up and down. It's roughly his height, with a small window at head level, and various wires trail from it. A cryo-pod, he thinks suddenly. This must be how Barnes was cryogenically frozen off and on for seventy years.

He moves on, stepping through the doorway into a room that makes his stomach turn. There's what looks like an operating table in the middle, sleek and metal, complete with cuffs and straps to hold the unlucky patient in place. There's a drain underneath it, and rust-like stains immediately identifiable as blood. An array of surgical equipment sits innocently on carts to the side. A camera blinks in the corner.
Steve backs out, feeling sick. Sam steps past him and emerges looking similarly shaken, as does Tony. He goes to step back through the doorway when he notices what looks like a cell door opposite the cryo-pod, with heavy locks but no slots or viewing windows. He opens it, finding a tiny cell with a hard cot and a toilet, barely enough room to move around. There are no windows.

So this was where Barnes was kept. A tiny cell, with no sunlight or room to move. An operating table with cuffs. A horrible chair contraption with cuffs. What looks like a shower room but only has a hose. There's no doubt in Steve's mind now—Barnes was a prisoner. A respected Hydra operative would never have been treated this way, and would never have to be restrained. Steve exits the cell and notices another camera in the room with the chair. He thinks of the room with the screens. He waves to Sam and Tony.

"Come on, let's see if the security footage is still here."

They troop back down the hallway into the room with the screens, Steve hoping against hope that the footage hasn't been deleted. He presses the power button on the screens and sighs in relief when they blink on, showing the various rooms at the current time. Tony shoves Steve aside, starting to type.

"I'm going to look for right before the time of the last power surge," he explains under his breath. "I want to know what the hell they were doing that they needed 1200 volts."

The feed on the screen rewinds, the time stamp going backwards until it reaches the night before the Helicarriers. Tony stops the feed, showing the room with the chair. Barnes is sitting in it, staring ahead blankly as men in white coats work on his metal arm. His chest is bare, showing a starburst of scars where his metal arm meets flesh, more scars littering his torso. Guards line the room, facing outwards. Suddenly Barnes moves, lashing out with the metal arm and throwing the technician across the room. The guards whirl, guns trained on him as he breathes heavily, fists clenched. They're there to guard him, Steve realizes. Not for his protection, but to keep him imprisoned.

After a minute Barnes slumps, hands going to his lap and shoulders hunching as he stares ahead blankly again. Another minute and there's commotion as none other than Alexander Pierce enters the room, flanked by Rumlow and Rollins of STRIKE. Steve feels his blood boil. He had trusted them.

The sound through the speakers is tinny, but Pierce's voice is audible as he stops in front of Barnes.

"Mission report."

Barnes doesn't respond, still staring into the middle-distance.

"Mission report, now."

Barnes doesn't even seem to have heard him. Pierce bends down, peering into his eyes before his arm snaps out and he backhands Barnes across the face with a sickening crack. Barnes' head snaps to the side but he doesn't protest, blinking as he looks around. His hand moves.

I don't understand, he says. His eyes flick up to Pierce, as if seeking answers.

Pierce hesitates. "What don't you understand?" he asks benevolently, voice calm and soothing as if he's speaking to a child.

Steve feels a surge of incredulity. He must know that Barnes can't answer that.
Mission failure, Barnes says. No. Stop. Please. No. I don't understand. I don't know. Please. Stop. He's obviously trying to communicate something, by the desperation in his eyes, but he doesn't have the words to do so. His mouth opens and closes and his face tightens in frustration.

Pierce seems to weigh his words before pulling up a stool and sitting down, leaning forwards. "Your work has been a gift to mankind," he says. "You shaped the century. And I need you to do it one more time."

Barnes looks frustrated and confused, and Pierce's posture suggests he's talking to a child, or someone incapable of understanding. It's nauseating.

"Society is at a tipping point between order and chaos," Pierce continues. "Tomorrow morning, we're going to give it a push. But if you don't do your part, I can't do mine. And Hydra can't give the world the freedom it deserves."

Barnes swallows, looking resigned. It's a pretty speech, Steve thinks. Complete bullshit, but expertly crafted. Barnes is obviously confused and looking for something to latch onto. It's brainwashing, plain and simple.

But Barnes presses his lips together, something like skepticism in his eyes. No, he says. Please. No. Stop. I don't understand. Please. I don't know.

Pierce gets up, studying him. "Prep him."

"He's been out of cryofreeze too long..." one of the techs says.

"Then wipe him, and start over."

Something in Barnes' gaze shatters, a hopeless resignation that tells Steve nothing good is coming. The techs move forwards and push Barnes back into the chair. He goes without a fight, but his eyes find Pierce and he stares at him defiantly as he opens his mouth for a bite guard. Then the cuffs snap around his arms and he jolts back, breaths picking up as the metal halo starts to move above him. Two paddles lower over his face, electricity sparking from them, and Steve suddenly realizes what's about to happen. He thinks of the drawing, of Barnes slashing at the brain with angry lines. This, this is how they made him into the Winter Soldier. Exactly how, he doesn't know, but he was right. Barnes is a victim. They're torturing him.

Barnes' chest heaves. The paddles clamp over his face and then....silence. The tendons in Barnes' neck strain, jaw clenched over a scream, but no sound emerges. He is silent in his suffering, cut off from all form of expression. He has been denied even the ability to hurt, and to hurt loudly. To make others aware of his pain. Steve tries to imagine it, screaming with no sound, pleading to be heard but swallowed by silence, and only feels horror. It's psychological torture as well as physical.

Tony lunges forward and stops the feed. "That-" He breaks off, voice cracking. "That's torture."

Sam shakes his head. "That's something more than torture. 1200 volts to his brain? Where do you think he got his amnesia from?"

Steve turns. "You think they wiped his memories?" That's the suspicion he had, too.

Sam shrugs. "Yeah. That's the word Pierce used, and it fits. Otherwise it wouldn't really make sense. There's other ways to torture someone, but that's some high-tech shit. Looks like he questioned, so they wiped his memories again." He leans forward and hits the play button. "We need to see what happens afterwards. He hits the fast-forward until the halo detaches from Barnes'
Barnes slumps in the chair, head lolling on the headrest and eyes fluttering weakly. The techs move forward, taking out the mouthguard and shining a light in his eyes, taking his vitals. They treat him like an object, or an animal, hands grasping his face to tilt it this way and that as they check pupil response without care for his autonomy or comfort. One pats him on the cheek roughly.

"Hey. Soldier."

Barnes blinks heavily, eyelids slipping closed. The tech pats his cheek harder, almost a light slap.

"Hey. Look alive. Come on."

Barnes finally opens his eyes, blinking blearily as he focuses on the tech. His mouth opens slightly and then closes, and he swallows. His eyes rove around the room, head drooping. The tech grabs him by the chin, holding his head still and shaking slightly until Barnes refocuses on him.

"You know where you are?" The tech glances down at Barnes' right hand.

Barnes blinks, and then raises two fingers. No.

"We're in America, in DC. This is a Hydra base. You know what Hydra is, who you are?"

Yes.

"You remember anything else? Anything not Hydra?"

No.

"You remember what happened before this?"

No.

The tech releases his chin, stepping back and shrugging to the other. "I think we're good. Let's drug him up before Pierce comes back." The other tech wheels over an IV, inserting it into Barnes' right hand as Barnes stares ahead, eyes dead. Sam stops the feed.

"Well," he says roughly. "That answers that."

"Yeah," Steve echoes distantly, reeling. Wiping memories. He never would have thought it was possible, but he just saw it happen. Barnes had questioned, had said no, had said stop, please, and so they had sent 1200 volts into his brain to kill every last scrap of resistance, of memory. He didn't even remember questioning. It's inhuman. They've taken everything away from Barnes-his self, his autonomy, his memory. God, he doesn't even remember his name. Steve has never hated Hydra more. Barnes deserves help. Real help. Steve vows that he'll help him if it's the last thing he does.

The flight back is subdued, all of them lost in thought. Even Tony isn't talking like usual, and Steve suspects it's something to do with the fact that Barnes killed his parents, but Tony just saw him get tortured and mind-wiped into obedience. It's kind of hard to blame Barnes for anything after that. When the helicopter touches down onto the Tower's helipad Steve feels an irrational urge to check on Barnes, to make sure he's okay (or relatively so). His previous hatred has washed away, replaced by sympathy and horror for what Hydra had done to him. Guilt washes over him as he thinks about how he's been treating Barnes, how they all have been treating him. They imprisoned him, interrogated him, and let him go through the torture of withdrawal. Barnes has no
reason to think they're any better than Hydra.

Swallowing down the nausea at that thought, Steve hurries into the Tower and down to the fifty-second floor, Sam right behind him. Tony begs off with a mumbled excuse that he has to do something, but Steve knows he just can't look at Barnes right now. He understands, even if he holds no such compunctions. He and Sam make it down to the floor, seeing Hill sitting in a chair by the feed of the cell. They're monitoring him as well, Steve thinks. Just like Hydra. He has no privacy.

"How is he?" Steve asks, not bothering with pleasantries.

Hill shrugs. "He finally fell asleep." She gives both of them a once-over. "What did you find?"

Steve sets the hard drive from the bank down on the table, grimacing. "A lot."

Sam crosses his arms. "We're getting Barnes help. No more interrogation, no more of this fucking torture that we're saying isn't torture. Barnes is a victim. Hell, he's a prisoner of war. No more."

Steve nods. "I second that. We're helping him."

Hill looks between them, then nods. "Well, it looks like you did find a lot. Tell me everything."

Steve knocks on the cell door, opening the slot. He waits, but Barnes doesn't come to the door. Steve peers through the window, seeing Barnes lying on the cot motionless.

"Barnes?" Steve calls softly. Barnes doesn't move. He could be faking, to try and escape, but it's more likely that he's suffering from withdrawal still and is too exhausted to get up. Stimulant withdrawal can be hell, Sam says, because it causes intense depression and lethargy. Steve weighs his options, and then throws caution to the wind and opens the cell door, stepping inside. He crouches down next to the cot, taking in Barnes' limp form and glazed eyes, sweaty hair sticking to his face as he lays on his right side with his metal arm lying limply beside him. His eyes find Steve's but he doesn't move, exhaustion and pain written in every line of his face.

"Hey," Steve says. "I'm sorry about how we've been treating you. No one's going to interrogate you again, or hurt you. We want to help."

Barnes just stares back resignedly. His eyes are pools of sadness, deep and blue and tired. He looks like he feels every inch ninety-seven instead of...late twenties? Early thirties? Steve doesn't know how many years Barnes was actually awake between cryofreeze. He hopes not long. God, he hopes so.

Steve gathers his thoughts. "I promised to teach you more signs. How about we get you cleaned up first? There's a shower on this floor, you don't have to go far."

Barnes doesn't respond, but he pushes himself up to a sitting position with visible effort, jaw clenching and muscles trembling. Steve stands and extends a hand. Barnes stares at it, then looks up at Steve, blinking. Then, tentatively, he grasps Steve's hand. His palm is warm and sweaty but undeniably real under Steve's, and Steve feels a spark of something travel between their joined hands. He pulls Barnes up, automatically steadying him when he sways, another point of contact scorching Steve's nerves. He can feel the fever-heat radiating from Barnes, can feel his form trembling under his hand, can hear the sound of his ragged breathing and smell the mixture of sweat and chemicals and river-water that emanates from him. It's unpleasant, but it just reminds Steve that Barnes is human. He's a real human being, a real person, who's been imprisoned and tortured for seventy years. He's not a ghost, or a monster. He's just a person. A person who needs
Steve's help.

"Come on." Steve leads the way out of the cell, through the interrogation room and across the viewing room into a shower room. Barnes follows, bare feet silent against the tile even though he moves stiffly. He doesn't even glance twice at Hill and Sam sitting outside, watching silently, though his gaze does flick to the exit. Steve closes the door behind them, not worried about being alone with Barnes like he would have before. For one, Barnes is in no shape to fight, and then there's the fact that he's been compliant thus far. He's not a true Hydra agent, and has no loyalties. He's been under coercion. It's unlikely he's going to try to fight back now that they're trying to help him.

Steve moves to the first shower stall, standing to the side and turning on the spray. Barnes looks wary, and Steve thinks that he's probably never had a shower in all his time with Hydra. He beckons him forward, the spray nice and hot by now. Barnes inches forwards, tentatively extending a hand to feel the water. He blinks, face morphing into an expression of wonder, and he takes another step forwards, water spilling over his forearm as he turns it under the water in amazement. Steve feels his heart throb.

He clears his throat. "Okay, so soap is there." He points to an alcove in the wall lined with shampoos and soaps. "Go ahead and leave your clothes, I'll get you new ones." He walks away before he does something stupid, like try to give Barnes a hug. He finds the rack with the white scrubs and grabs another set along with a towel, then sets everything outside the closed shower door. "Everything is right outside," he calls, unperturbed by the lack of answer.

He retreats to a nearby bench to wait, and has a moment of panic where he wonders if Barnes knows how to shower. Should he have explained soap? But he doesn't want to intrude on his privacy, so he waits and hopes Barnes can figure it out.

After a few minutes there's the sound of the shower door creaking open, and the rustling of cloth. Barnes emerges, hair dripping wet but eyes clearer and face smoother and more relaxed. He smells of citrus, so Steve supposes he must have figured everything out. Clean and dressed in new white scrubs, he looks better than he has since he got here.

"Better?" Steve asks.

Barnes nods.

"Alright, let's go back and I'll teach you some new signs."

Something in Barnes' eyes brightens at that, though his expression doesn't shift. Steve thinks he's desperate to communicate. If he could talk, Steve wonders, what would he say? How would things be different? Maybe they would have known he was a victim sooner. Or maybe not. Who knows? There's no point dwelling on what might have been, or what Steve could have done differently. All he can do is try to help Barnes now, and hope it's enough.
"Like this," Steve says, long fingers twisting to make the sign. The Soldier imitates him, flesh hand shaking as he forces his fingers into the correct position.

"Yes, that's great." Steve smiles that same strange smile he keeps giving the Soldier, who is not used to people looking at him in such a way. "Let's stop for the day. You should try and get some rest."

The Soldier drops his hand to his lap, nodding his aching head sharply. Steve smiles again and leaves, and the Soldier curls back on the cot, intending to follow orders. Instead, his mind whirls. Steve had taught him the alphabet in sign, which means he can say anything now. Anything. Every word in the English language is suddenly available to him, right at his fingertips. It is simultaneously incredible and terrifying. He has never been able to say more than the ten signs, though something tells him that once, he had a voice. But he does not remember, and no one has ever wanted him to speak. He never needed to.

He cannot figure out these new people, Steve in particular. He is not sure what they want from him, why they changed from stern and demanding to soft and yielding. He doesn't understand the sadness in Steve's eyes, the gentleness. He does not know why everything is happening. He wants it to stop.

He knows Hydra will come for him, knows with a certainty that's bone-deep. They said Hydra was going down, but he knows better than to believe that. For now, he is compromised, undergoing withdrawal and held captive in this unfamiliar place where people ask him strange questions. His mind feels fractured, spinning out of control, responses not within functioning parameters. He has lost the stillness that usually pervades, the screeching static in the back of his mind that makes everything blank and numb. He is displaying psychological and physical abnormalities, an erratic racing heartbeat and feeling of intense fear, confusion clouding his mind. Images haunt him, flashes and snippets of faces and scenes, voices echoing in his ears. He knows he needs the Chair, knows the abnormalities need to be corrected. He is erratic, unstable, wipe him and start over-

The words amplify, echo, distort. He feels another burst of panic, heart rate elevating without a known cause. He tastes rubber in his mouth. Pain spikes through his head.

He forces his breathing even, squeezing his eyes shut. Every inch of his body thrums with pain, the seam of his metal shoulder aching with a cold fire and his head pounding fit to burst. His mouth is dry, tongue thick and heavy, fever wracking his body with shivers. Sweat makes his drying hair stick uncomfortably to the back of his neck, fresh scrubs already damp. Exhaustion tugs at him, dragging him down, and he pushes aside the pain as he slips into a light doze, mind going blank at last.

Time passes in fits and starts. Steve brings him out in the morning and an IV is inserted as he sits in the chair, legs still cuffed but arms left free except for the cuffs around his wrists. Steve shows him more signs, and he commits them to memory even though his awareness swims in and out, mind splintering like broken glass. He struggles to focus on Steve, the static in his brain growing louder, voices distinguishable in the noise. They whisper, they shout, they scream, filling his head with a cacophony of sound. Shapes hover at the edges of his vision, His head throbs steadily,
beating against the inside of his skull. His limbs twitch, and the room suddenly spins.

"Barnes? Barnes?"

He comes back to awareness to Steve's voice. He does not know why Steve keeps calling him that, but it makes his head pound even more insistently. He squints at Steve, who looks worried.

"You zoned out for a bit. You still with me?"

He stares, trying to process Steve's question through the fog in his brain. The static increases, a ringing in his ears.

"Barnes?" Steve leans forwards as the name sends a fresh wave of agony through the Soldier, and the static shifts to a scream. He sees his own hand dart out, grabbing Steve and smashing his face into the tabletop, feels the shifting of the metal arm as it rips the restraints off his legs. He lurches to his feet, stumbling away, IV line pulling taught. He rips it out frantically and stagger across the room, vision blurring and mind screaming, pain splitting his skull in half. His legs give out and he collapses into the corner of the room, drawing his knees up and pressing his hands to his head as he squeezes his eyes shut, teeth clenched around a silent scream. His body shakes uncontrollably, heart thudding wildly in his ears and breaths rushed, chest heaving ineffectually.

"-no, don't, not yet." Steve's voice is low, and the Soldier hears his footsteps approaching. "Let's give him a minute before we do anything."

The Soldier curls tighter, threading his fingers through his hair and digging them into his scalp. He wonders what they will do to him, for attacking Steve. Maybe they will use the Chair, and then everything will make sense again, even though everything in him rails against the thought.

There's a rustling and he cracks his eyes open to see Steve crouching in front of him a few feet away. He closes his eyes again, waiting for a blow that never comes.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Steve says softly. "I just want to talk. Can you do that?"

The Soldier takes a steadying breath, then another. Drawing on his last reserves of fortitude he slowly drops his hands and nods, a tiny jerk of his head that makes it throb. He needs to communicate to Steve that he is malfunctioning, needs them to fix him. He pulls the signs he's learned to the forefront of his mind, eyes still closed against the bright light and spinning of the room. He raises both hands, extending the index fingers and jabbing them together in front of him to make the sign for *hurt/pain*. It was one of the first things Steve taught him, besides the alphabet.

"Okay, what hurts?"

He points to his head. Then, unable to form the words, he tugs on his earlobe with his flesh hand, then taps beside his eyes. Crooks his finger in the sign for *I don't understand. Hearing things*, he tries to convey. *Seeing things. Malfunctioning."

"What don't you understand?"

His hand trembles in midair, and his chest heaves in a frustrated breath. Why can't he *speak*, he needs to tell Steve, he needs to make him understand, why won't anyone *understand-*

He shakes his head sharply, making the dizziness worse even with his eyes closed. He jabs a finger towards Steve, then crooks it again.

"I don't understand?"
He nods. Yes, yes, finally-

"You're right. I'm sorry, I don't understand. Can you try and explain? Take as much time as you need." There's a sound like Steve is lowering himself to the floor, and the Soldier takes another breath, nodding. He just has to find the words, words he's not used to using. He is used to ten signs, gestures, mimicry. He does not know how to form the words everyone else finds so easily, cannot make them into sentences that flow like water.

He points to his head again, repeats the sign for pain. Right hand out, shape the letters. H-E-A-R. S-E-E. Tap the head again. Flesh hand shakes, make it spell the letters, he knows this- M-A-L-F-U-N-C-T-I-O-N-S.

"Are you hallucinating? Hearing and seeing things that aren't there?"

He nods, then shakes his head. Taps his temple. Not hallucinations. They're in his head.

Steve is silent for a moment. "Memories?" he asks finally. "Are you remembering things?"

Hand in a circle. I don't know. Fingers jabbed together. Hurts. Make the signs from before. Please. Stop.

"I'm sorry." Steve's voice is rough. "I wish we could do more to help."

Yeah, so do I. He rubs his temple with his flesh hand again, breaths short and labored. Frustration bubbles up, anger at Steve for not understanding, for not doing anything, anger at his malfunctioning brain, anger at everything. He is tired, and confused, and malfunctioning, and everything hurts, and he just wants the Chair to make everything still and blank again, wants the ice to creep up his body, wants everything to stop.

"My friend wants me to ask you a few questions about your head," Steve says. "That okay?"

He nods shallowly.

"Does it hurt when you do that?"

He nods again.

"Okay, then let's stop doing that. Use signs."

The Soldier holds up one finger, then two, for yes and no.

"Yeah, perfect. Now I noticed you're keeping your eyes closed. Does the light hurt?"

Yes.

"Sorry about that. You can keep your eyes closed, it's okay. Is the pain in your head sharp, or an ache?"

B-O-T-H, he fingerspells.

"Are you experiencing any dizziness?"

Yes.

"Blurred vision?"
Steve is silent for a minute, presumably listening to someone speak into his earpiece. He takes an audible breath. "Okay, if we could get something to help with your migraine, would you want it?"

"Yes. That's all he wants."

"Alright. We'll get right on that. Do you think you can get up? We can make it nice and dark in the, uh, cell, and let you try and sleep it off."

"Yes. He pushes himself to his feet, swaying as the world spins beneath his eyelids and his head pounds savagely. A warm hand grasps his arm and he realizes Steve has stepped close, his steady breathing steadying the Soldier's own. He cracks his eyes open, squinting at the blurred shape of Steve's face, blue eyes swimming in his vision. There's a streak of red coming from his nose, from where the Soldier smashed his face into the table. He raises his hand between them, shakily forming letters.

S-O-R-R-Y

Steve looks surprised. "For what?"

The Soldier points to his own face, where Steve is injured.

S-O-R-R-Y, he repeats.

"It's alright," Steve says quietly. "I understand."

Maybe, the Soldier thinks, this time he does.

"Yeah, we really should get him back on migraine medication," Sam says, staring at the recording from the interview room. "And the anticonvulsant. Watch this." He presses play, and Steve watches as Barnes stares off into space, twitching suddenly before he seems to snap out of it, squinting at Steve. Sam pauses the video.

"Right there."

Steve blinks. "Right where? What?"

Sam rewinds, and plays again, as Barnes stares into space and then twitches. "I think he just had a seizure there."

Hill taps her chin thoughtfully. "Maybe."

"A seizure? But I thought those were...you know." Steve pictures convulsing, foaming at the mouth.

Sam shakes his head. "Some are. But there's what's called a focal seizure, I think. Or maybe...absence? Something like that. Some of my vets had them. There's ones where people just seem to zone out for a little bit, or twitch slightly. Some say they taste strange things, or see flashes of light, feel dizzy. That may be what we're looking at here. I mean, he's got massive brain trauma, and just went cold-turkey from serious migraine and seizure meds. So that's my first thought."

"You think that's why he attacked me?"

Sam shrugs. "Who knows? Honestly, anything could have set him off."
Steve plays the video again, watching as Barnes doesn't respond to his name and then lunges across the table, smashing Steve's face into it before freeing himself and stumbling across the room. In the corner of the screen, his vitals flash alarmingly.

Next to Steve, Sam shakes his head as the video continues to roll. "He's completely panicked, probably just had a seizure and has a migraine, is going through withdrawal, and is being imprisoned by his enemy, and yet look how hard he's trying, Steve." He points to the screen, where Barnes is uncurling, shakily signing with eyes scrunched closed in pain. "He had what, ten signs? Now he's actively communicating, calming himself down. Trying to make himself understood. He apologized for panicking and hurting you."

You don't understand, Barnes says on screen. How true that is, Steve thinks. He doesn't know what is going on inside Barnes' head at all, has only received communication through gestures and scribbles and fingerspelling. Whatever words are trapped in Barnes' head are a mystery. Yet Sam is right. He is trying. The frustration on his face is clear when Steve doesn't understand, lips tightening in the most expression Steve has seen from him yet. He struggles, he falters, and yet he keeps trying desperately to communicate, even when half out of his mind from pain and confusion. It's incredible.

"Yeah," Steve says, watching Barnes. Hurt, please, stop, he says, pale face creased in pain, hand shaking. Please make the pain stop, he was asking, and Steve had given him no answer. I wish we could do more to help. But they could, couldn't they? They could have not treated him like a prisoner, could have given him medication to make the pain stop, could have not made his life a living hell. On screen, he sees Barnes' face fall in frustration, fingers rubbing his temple, and feels the sentiment echoed. Barnes has every right to hate them for how they've been treating him. Every right.

He looks to the other screen, showing the cell. The lights are as dark as they dared to make them while still retaining visual, and Barnes is curled on his side on the mattress, hair falling over his face and hands gripping his head. Still in pain, surely. Still suffering, while they've done nothing but sit back and watch.

"We're getting that medication," Steve says firmly, watching Barnes' labored breaths. "We're making him feel better, whatever it takes."

It turns out, getting prescription medication in extreme doses is very easy when you're a billionaire, and Tony Stark to boot. Steve doesn't want to think about it too much, or how they actually got it. He just appreciates the fact that, within twenty-four hours, they have enough Almotriptan, Atenolol, and Depakote for an elephant, as well as Fentanyl. Sam and Steve had both agreed pain medication was a must, especially because Tony had said the arm must be causing him constant pain. They'll deal with trying to wean him off it later.

The lights in the interview room are dimmed and Steve brings Barnes out, sitting him in the chair and inserting the IV full of medication. Barnes immediately relaxes minutely, the lines around his eyes smoothing, and Steve feels nauseated at the thought of just how much pain he must have been in. He seems exhausted now, eyes half-lidded and glazed, trembling barely noticeable. Likely a combination of stimulant withdrawal and the exhaustive stress of his current situation.

When all the medicine and fluids are dispenses, Steve leads Barnes back to his cell, dims the lights, and leaves him to rest. Barnes immediately drops off to sleep, vitals slower than they've been since he got here, and Steve wonders how long it's been since he's actually slept deeply. Days, at least. Probably closer to a week.
Barnes sleeps for ten hours, and Steve lets him shower and change clothes before sitting him in the interview room again and administering more medication and IV nutrition while he teaches him more signs. Barnes seems lethargic but stable, and quickly absorbs the new signs, showing a proficiency for language acquisition Steve's only ever seen in himself. Another effect of the serum, perhaps.

"How are you feeling?" Steve asks, signing while speaking.


"What's a malfunction?" Steve asks carefully, leaving the question open.

Barnes touches his temple, then chin. Head. Two taps on his ear. Hear. A "V" tapped under his eye. See.

Steve makes a "V," taps it to his eye and then over his shoulder. "Memory?"

I don't know.

Barnes has probably forgotten what a memory is, so Steve assumes that's what's bothering him. If his serum is like Steve's, there's a chance his brain will heal and his memories will return.

"Can you describe some of the things you're hearing and seeing?"

Barnes swallows, then shakes his head emphatically. Okay, Steve thinks. That's a touchy subject. To be honest, he's not sure he wants to know some of the memories in Barnes' head.

"Is there anything we can do to help?" he asks.


Steve feels like he's been punched in the gut. The air leaves his chest in a rush, and he swallows, pushing back images of Barnes screaming silently as electricity shot through his brain. He leans forwards.

"No. We're not going to do that to you, ever. That's never going to happen again. Do you understand?"

Barnes shakes his head, face creasing in distress. Hill informs Steve his vitals are spiking.

Why? Barnes asks, hand shaking as he brings it from his forehead into a "Y."

Jesus, Steve thinks. "Because it's wrong," he says firmly, trying to keep his voice even. "Because no one should do that to you."

Barnes shakes his head, breathing shallowly. I don't understand.

"Hydra used that to wipe your memories. They did that so you wouldn't fight back. That's wrong. They hurt you." Steve gentles his voice. "You were a prisoner."

Barnes shakes his head desperately. Stop, he signs, vitals skyrocketing. Stop stop stop stop stop-

His eyes unfocus as he hyperventilates, fingers clenched around the arms of the chair.

"Panic attack," Sam says in Steve's ear. "Talk to him, try and get him to calm down."
Steve nods subtly, drawing a deep breath. He's grateful Sam's given him some tips for dealing with this if it occurred.

"It's alright," he says. "You're safe here. I know this must be very overwhelming. Can you try to breathe with me?"

Barnes' unblinking gaze snaps to his, eyes blown wide with terror. Steve tries to arrange his face into a reassuring expression, hands flat on the table.

"That's it. Just breathe with me."

Slowly, slowly, Barnes' breaths even out, eyes holding Steve's intently. His muscles relax, hands unclenching from the chair, and he blinks, seeming to come back to himself.

"You with me?" Steve questions.

Barnes nods shallowly, eyes tracking around the room before settling back on Steve.


"It's called a panic attack. It's a pretty normal reaction to extreme stress, apparently."

S-O-R-R-Y, Barnes says.

"You have nothing to be sorry for. I'm sorry that I upset you. I'm sure this is overwhelming."

Barnes nods hesitantly. I don't understand. He pauses, brow furrowing. Why. Frustration flits across his face and his hand stills in midair, trembling faintly. Steve gives him time to formulate words. H-Y-D-R-A. Another pause, and he shakes his head. I don't understand...Two hands, palms up, shaken...What...A hand towards Steve. You. A motion by his mouth Steve takes to mean speech. He glances up at Steve, waiting.

"You don't understand what I mean?"

Barnes nods, relief in his eyes.

"About Hydra? Or about the panic attack."

H-Y-D-R-A

"Okay." Steve thinks for a moment. "You can tell me to stop anytime if it's too much. But basically, you were an American soldier. Your name is James Buchanan Barnes. Somehow, Hydra captured you, gave you that arm, and wiped your memories. They took away your voice. They made you kill people for them. Hydra has done a lot of horrible things to you, and we know that the things they made you do weren't your fault. So we're trying to help you. Does that make sense?"

Barnes' brow creases, a question in his eyes as his fingers move. T-H-E-Y-L-I-E-D?

"Yes." Steve clears his throat. "Yes, they lied."

Barnes' hands drop to the table as something shatters in his gaze. He stares down at them, expression blank and distant.

"I think he's in shock," Sam murmurs. "Kind of a lot for him to wrap his mind around at once. You've probably guessed he might lash out."
Steve gives a slight nod to show he's heard. He's well aware this might make Barnes snap. It's a lot for anyone to take in, much less someone in as fragile a mental state as Barnes.

"Barnes?" he questions softly.

Barnes raises a hand. *B-U-C-K-Y*, he signs tentatively. He looks up at Steve questioningly, putting his hand to his chest.

"Yes." Steve swallows the lump in his throat. He signs as he speaks. "Your name is Bucky."

Bucky nods, something hardening in his gaze. Determination, maybe. It gives Steve hope that maybe, just maybe, he can be saved.

"Hey." Steve enters Tony's workshop cautiously, gauging his mental state. Sam exchanges a look with him as Tony turns around from the holographic screen he's staring at, the circles under his eyes speaking of sleeplessness.

"Cap! Thanks for coming. JARVIS finished decrypting all the Hydra material and analyzing the tapes. Thought you should see for yourself." Tony rubs his forehead. "Makes my trip to the desert look like a vacation."

Steve looks up at the screen, which appears to be a paused security feed. "What is this?"

"Russian tapes we collected. All the way from when they first captured him in 'forty five to 1991. Then it looks like he was transferred from Russia to America, and the rest are from the hard drive in the bank vault. Everything on how they made a war hero into the Winter Soldier."

Steve swallows, taking a breath. "Show me."

"-traitors! Fucking Russian bastards!" Bucky screams, one-armed and furious. "We're supposed to be allies you Nazi motherfucking-"

-blood runs down Bucky's face, cut with tracks of tears and sweat. The bandages on the stump of his left arm are dirty and unraveling. He slumps against the back of the cell, head tipped back against the dingy wall and eyes squeezed closed. His mouth twists, chin quivering-

-Barnes lays strapped to a table, tubes trailing from his arm. He mumbles his name, rank, and serial number over and over, eyes glazed, as men in white coats poke and prod and write on clipboards-

-he's shoved in the cryo chamber, door slamming behind him. An expression on panic flickers over his face before ice rushes over him-

-he blinks awake on the table, studying the silver arm now attached to his body. A doctor leans over and it shoots out, wrapping around his throat-

"-you are to be the new fist of Hydra," Zola says to a drugged Barnes, smiling down at him-

"-put him on ice." Bucky's fearful face is just visible in the window as the ice claims him-

-Barnes screams and struggles, lashing out with a metal fist-

-he mumbles his name, rank, and serial number over and over-

-they hold the cloth tight over his face as he chokes and thrashes in the bonds, water spilling to the
floor. Fennhoff stands next to him, speaking quietly-

-Barnes struggles as the halo descends over his face, confusion and fear warring in his expression. It clamps around his head and he screams, body arching in the chair, limbs pulling at reinforced cuffs-

-Fennhoff circles the chair as Bucky heaves for breath, reciting words. With every one, Bucky seems to slip away, calming. Fennhoff comes to a stop in front of him, and Bucky's eyes flick up dazedly.

"Good morning, soldier."

"Ready to comply-

"-What do you remember?"

"I don't know-"

-he masters Russian. He completes training flawlessly. He snaps and kills a room of agents-

-his screams echo in the room-

-the paddles clamp around his face-

"Mission report."

"Target eliminated, 0300. No witnesses-"

-he heaves for breath. A handler circles the chair, reciting the words-

-they lead him to the cryo chamber-

"Mission report."

"Target eliminated-"

-they drag him in, wounded and drugged, still struggling against their hold.

"Where was he?"

"New York. He talked, we had to do clean-up-"

-Bucky opens his mouth, closes it, eyes wide with panic. He tries again, tugging at the cuffs of the chair, tears starting to carve tracks through the blood.

What did you do to me? he mouths.

The halo descends, and this time his screams are silent-

-they lead him to the cryo chamber-

-ready to comply, he signs-

"Good job, soldier-"

-he wakes in the bank vault. He is confused, does not seem to know why he cannot speak, does not know how to communicate. There are no trigger words. They undo the cuffs and he kills everyone
in the room-

-they show him the signs. They wait until he says *stop, please, please stop* with broken fingers before they set the hammer down-

"Mission report."

*Target eliminated. Mission success-*

-Pierce backhands him across the face-

-*please, no, stop, please-*

Tony stops the tape.

---

Sam holds out a mug of coffee, which Steve accepts gratefully. "How are you holding up?"

Steve sighs as Sam settles onto the couch next to him. "Honestly, I don't know. What about you?"

"I'll admit, those tapes rattled me." Sam curls his fingers around his own mug. "I knew Hydra was fucked up, but that..."

"You don't have to stay, you know. You have a life in DC."

"Nah. I mean, I'll have to go back at some point to tie up all the loose ends, but I've got no problem staying. Becoming an Avenger is pretty cool. I can't stand around and do nothing after everything that's gone down."

"Yeah, I get it."

"I bet you do." Sam takes a sip. "I never asked, how do you know sign language?"

"My ma. I was deaf in my left ear and the right wasn't great, so she taught me sign language to make it easier. I didn't really use it except with her, though. After I came out of the ice, I looked into it again and found it was recognized as a whole language and everything." Steve looks over. "What about you?"

"My little sister. She was born with minor hearing loss. My mom had us all learn sign when she was a baby, even though she speaks perfectly well. Wanted her to have that leg up, you know."

Steve nods. "That's great. Maybe you should take a turn teaching Bucky. If you're willing to."

"Yeah, of course. It would be good for him to get comfortable with other people than you."

Steve worries his lip. "You think we should bring anyone else into this? I know Tony's on board now, but otherwise it's just Hill and Romanoff. If something happens, or god forbid Hydra tries to get to him...."

"I see what you're saying. But who can we trust?"

"That's the real question." He takes a sip of coffee while he thinks. "Plus, this isn't really by the book. Bucky being here and all. But I don't trust the government with him. SHIELD is gone. The Avengers are scattered. Tony's letting us stay here, but Bucky's a touchy subject with him, since he killed his parents. I don't want to put more on him than necessary. And Bucky...to be honest, I have no idea what to do about him."
"He needs help."

"Yeah, but how? I mean, how do you help someone who's been through that? Brainwashing, trigger words, trauma...I don't understand any of that."

"One thing at a time, Steve. First, we make him comfortable. We get him communicating. Then we can work on all the Hydra shit. We'll probably need an actual doctor on board, a psychologist too. I'm not qualified to deal with that level of brain damage, and to be frank I'm not qualified or willing to deal with his psychological trauma either. We need to bring in professional help."

"Yeah." Steve runs a hand over his face. "Yeah, you're right. Nat's tied up right now with DC, but she could probably help us find people who aren't Hydra. Tony too."

"Sounds like a plan. For now, you should fill in Hill. I'll take a turn with Barnes."

"Thanks, Sam."

"Hey, I've got your back."

---

[The slot to his cell slides open. Bucky - *his name is Bucky* - gets up and shoves his wrists through, waiting for the cuffs to snap around them. An IV cannula is taped just above where the cuff sits on the inside of his wrist, so they can access it easily.

The cuffs are snapped together and Bucky withdraws his arms as the cell door opens, revealing not Steve but the man with wings. He blinks, looking around for Steve, and the man gives him a smile.

"Hey. I'm Sam." His fingers swoop in an unfamiliar sign on his name, like a bird. "Steve is just taking a break, thought I could teach you some more signs."

He stands back so Bucky can exit the cell and Bucky moves forwards warily, sinking into the chair. Sam bends down to secure the repaired leg cuffs, every move slow and telegraphed.

"Sorry about this," he says. "For everyone's safety, yeah?" He stands and separates the cuffs on Bucky's wrists, leaving them free before taking the seat across from him.

"How are you feeling?" he asks, hands fluttering as he signs alongside his speech. Bucky contemplates the question, running inventory on his status. The fever and shaking has disappeared, the pain has lessened, and his head feels less jumbled. He is tired, severely so, and his skin crawls slightly with anxiety, but he is semi-functional.


"Better is good." Right hand from mouth to left palm for *good.* "You want to learn some more signs?"

Bucky nods, sitting up straighter. He wants to *talk,* he wants to make people *understand* him. He wants to be *Bucky.*

Sam grins. "Alright, man. Let's get started."

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Chapter End Notes
I am actually hard of hearing (I wear hearing aids) but my family never taught me sign language beyond a couple childhood signs, something that has always bothered me and made life difficult. I'm trying to learn it now, so this fic is kind of me processing that. ASL is super duper cool and I encourage anyone interested to look into it!
["Sign language is different," Sam says. "You say things in a different order. For example, if you want to ask 'what is your name,' you would sign 'your name what.'"]

A hand held out. Your. Two fingers on each hand, right tapped on left. Name. Two hands, palms up, shaken. What.

"Exactly!" Sam smiles. "You're picking this up super fast. I'm impressed." He raises his hands. Palm to chest, fingers tapped, the swooping sign. My name is Sam.

Bucky repeats the motions, fingerspells his name. My name is B-U-C-K-Y. Make the swoop for Sam. A hand touched to the head, pulled away in a "Y" for why.

"It's a name-sign. Each person gets a unique sign for their name. See, mine's like it's flying, because I have wings. Or had."

Bucky feels a strange sensation in his gut, mouth tugging down at the corners. He rubs a fist clockwise on his chest. Sorry.

"It's okay. I know it wasn't your fault."

Bucky frowns again. A hand to the chest. My. F-A-U-L-T. It was his fault, wasn't it? He remembers tearing off Sam's wings, kicking him off the Helicarrier. He had done that.

"Hydra made you do it. You weren't, you know, acting of your own free will. Or in your right mind."

But he remembers doing it, remembers doing it of his own accord. He had a mission, and he completed it. He remembers the clarity of the drugs, the adrenaline, body floating and buzzing with energy. Mind filled with blank static. Complete focus. Failure isn't an option. Blood. Screams. The staccato of gunfire.

If he had done those things, and they were wrong....if Hydra was wrong...

"Bucky?"

He realizes he's been staring down at the table for too long, breathing shallowly. He raises his hands jerkily, signs flowing into each other, the words just out of reach.

How-K-N-O-W- good-you-I don't know-

He bangs his hand on the table in frustration, chest heaving.

"How do you know we're good?" Sam asks hesitantly.

He looks up sharply, nodding and exhaling. Yes, yes, Sam understood him-

"Well, that's a difficult question. I'm glad you asked. The short answer would be to say there's no real way to know, that you'll just have to trust us. And that sucks. I'm sorry. The long answer is Hydra had to wipe your memories and torture you to get you to kill for them. We have no intention
of doing any of that. We're giving you tools to communicate, letting you get your memories back. So based on that, you tell me who you think is good."

He studies Sam, searching for deception in his eyes and finding none. He thinks of Steve and Sam's kindness, the words they've given to him. There's no chair, no missions. They have also hurt him, restrained him, threatened him. But only at first. He thinks Hydra was never kind, never gave him words, locked him in the chair until everything went away. They hurt him, they gave him missions, they gave him drugs that blurred his mind.

He does not know. He does not have enough evidence to base his conclusions on. His memories are limited, his knowledge even more so. He has believed Hydra for so long, but then Steve came along and shattered that, and gave him a name, and something deep inside tells him to trust him. To trust Sam too.

He has to make a choice. If he is Bucky, and not the Winter Soldier.

He thrusts a hand out across the table. Sam startles, then stares. Slowly, he reaches across and takes Bucky's hand, calloused palm fitting against his. Bucky squeezes."

"He shook your hand?" Steve stares at the tape, puzzled.

"Yeah." Sam shakes his head in astonishment. "He's in there, man, and he's smart. Straight up asked me how he knew we were the good guys, thought over my explanation, and then shook my hand. That right there, that's him throwing his lot in with us. It's trust."

"You did good, Sam." Steve claps him on the shoulder.

"Honestly, it's not even me. He's made an incredible amount of progress in the, what, week since the Helicarriers?"

"Nine days."

"Nine days, Steve. Nine days. He's already remembered his name - a nickname we never told him, mind you - and sided with us over Hydra. He's rational, smart, and eager to communicate. Whoever this guy was, and whoever he is now...I like him."

"Yeah, me too." Steve looks through the viewing window, where Bucky is hooked up to the IV, hair hanging in curtains around his face. "Me too."

The next few days bring even more progress. Bucky rapidly picks up signs, almost feverishly eager to learn, and his health stabilizes. He regularly sleeps ten-hour nights, and sometimes even falls asleep during the day, but Sam says it's normal. A combination of stimulant withdrawal and a healing brain. They stop monitoring him 24-7, to give him privacy, and turn the lights off at night. Hill is busy securing a new job at Stark Industries, so Steve and Sam take turns watching and talking to Bucky during the day. Tony stays away, only dropping in to see Steve on his floor and never venturing down to where Bucky is being held. They still keep Bucky's legs cuffed when talking to him, as Sam had pointed out he could do quite a bit of damage if he panicked, even unintentionally.

It's the middle of the night when JARVIS wakes Steve up, informing him Bucky's vitals show he's in distress. Steve pulls on a shirt and sprints to the elevator, instructing JARVIS to get Sam as well. When the elevator finally opens on Bucky's floor he rushes through the first rooms, bursting into the observation room and turning on the screen, switching the light on in the cell.
Bucky is huddled in the corner, blood spattered against one wall and dripping down his forearm where it looks like he ripped the port out. His knees are drawn up, hands cradling his head reminiscent of the first time he panicked.

Sam slides into the room, out of breath, stopping cold at the image on the screen.

"Fuck."

"I'm going in." Steve points to the red button on the wall that releases the knockout gas. "Hit this if I say so."

"Got it."

Steve takes a breath and enters the interview room, then unlocks the cell door, pulling it open slowly.

"Bucky?"

Bucky flinches and curls tighter, hands fisting in his hair. Steve steps into the cell and crouches down, taking in Bucky's labored breathing and tightly closed eyes.

"It's just me," he says softly. "You're safe here."

Bucky's eyes open, but they're unfocused, staring at a point over Steve's shoulder. His chest rises and falls rapidly, silent except for his harsh breaths. His hands drop to rest on his knees, smearing the white fabric with blood. His breaths slow slightly but his eyes remain fixed and open, sightless.

"Bucky?"

There's no response. Bucky continues to stare blankly into space, a look Steve had seen in shell-shocked soldiers on the battlefield. He stands and carefully makes his way out of the cell, Sam letting him into the observation room.

"Dissociation," Sam says lowly, as they both watch the screen. "Probably had a nightmare. This might be the start of the downward spiral."

"Downward spiral?"

"You see it in vets. They come home, they're glad to be alive, everything seems great. Then what happened to them starts to sink in, the nightmares start, the PTSD. They spiral. Look, he's been doing great, but I saw this coming a mile away. He was doing great because he hadn't processed any of that shit, or hell, even remembered it yet. It's gotta get worse before it gets better."

"Yeah." Steve runs a hand over his face. "Makes sense. What do we do?"

Sam shrugs. "Whatever we can."

It takes an hour before Bucky seems to come back slightly, blinking as if waking from a deep sleep. Steve slips through the cell door and crouches down, keeping his voice quiet.

"Hey. You with me?"

Bucky's eyes track languidly before coming to rest on Steve's face, and he blinks once. A slow nod follows. Steve stands and extends a hand, and Bucky clasps it with a blood-stained one, letting himself be pulled to his feet. There's blood on his face and even in his hair, sticking up in clumps.
His eyes are glazed and movements sluggish but he seems at least more aware than before, and he follows Steve as he leads him to the shower.

He emerges minutes later clean and dripping, in fresh white scrubs, and Steve sits him down in the interview room as Sam finishes cleaning up the blood in the cell.

"Hey. Let me see your arm."

Bucky extends his arm, showing the healing tear where he'd ripped the port out the wrong way. Steve holds up a finger and then goes back into the observation room, racking the cabinets until he finds the medical supplies. He brings bandages back and wraps a loop around Bucky's arm, tucking it in to fasten it.

"There." Bucky drops his hand back to his lap. "Do you want to talk about it?" Steve asks, hands twisting uncertainly.

Bucky's eyes drift to his again, and after a moment's pause he shakes his head slightly, gaze dropping back down to his hands. Steve hadn't realized how much expression Bucky had gained since those first days until it's gone, that unsettling blankness drawn like a mask over his face.

"Okay," he says simply. The silence grows, for the first time feeling awkward. Sam emerges from the cell, nodding to Steve, and disappears into the observation room to dispose of the bloodied towels and broken port. He comes back to perch on the table, lines of tiredness in his face.

"It's okay, you know," he says. "It happens. No one's upset with you. We just want to make sure you're okay."

Bucky continues to stare down at his hands, not so much as a twitch in response. His wet hair has soaked the collar of his shirt, drying in tangled waves that Steve irrationally wants to run his hands through. He also wants to wrap Bucky in a soft blanket and hug him until all the Hydra evil is squeezed out of him, but that doesn't seem a logical course of action either. He'd probably end up with broken bones.

"Do you want to try going back to sleep?" Sam asks.

Bucky presses his lips together and shakes his head, making his hair swing slightly with the motion. Steve notices the growing stubble on his face, rapidly turning into a beard.

Sam nods. "Alright. There anything we can do for you to help?"

Bucky raises his hand slightly, making a circle with his fingers. I don't know. His shoulders hunch in defeat, and he looks so small sitting in the chair that Steve finds it hard to believe he's the same Winter Soldier that almost killed him. But he is, he reminds himself. This is still the Winter Soldier, no matter how small and scared he looks right now. He could still kill Sam in a heartbeat if he wanted, could seriously injure Steve. Caution is a must.

Bucky glances up at Steve, eyes deep and blue. He puts a hand to his chest, then his head, to Steve, and then signs why.

I know you, why?

"I, um, I'm Captain America. You probably heard of me during the war. And when Hydra captured your unit in Azzano, I was the one who rescued you in Kreischberg. I pulled you off Zola's table. Do you remember?"
Bucky blinks, gaze drifting to the side in contemplation. *I don't know.* His jaw ticks. *Z-O-L-A.* He makes a fist with thumb extended, touches from forehead to left fist. *Remember.* He looks down at his metal hand, turns it in the light. The plates shift quietly as he moves the fingers. *Hurt.*


Steve swallows, guilt lodging in his gut. "I'm sorry," he whispers. "I didn't know. I never saw you again, after. I didn't know what happened. I would've tried to save you if I'd known."

*N-O-W*

"Now what?"

*S-A-V-E me?* He tilts his head, making it into a question.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm trying."

Bucky bites his lip, then raises a flat hand, extending it from his lips towards Steve. *Thank you.*

Bucky doesn't sleep the rest of the night, and neither do Sam and Steve, staying with him until dawn, when they insert an IV into the crook of his arm to give him his medications and fluids. Then they gently urge him towards the cell, but he balks, standing in the doorway tensely. Steve wishes they didn't have to keep him in a cell, so much like Hydra. He knows, now, some of the terrible experiences Bucky has had in cells.

"How about we keep the door open?" Sam suggests. "There's really no use for it, now."

Bucky nods, stepping tentatively into the cell and sinking onto the cot. Steve and Sam back away, leaving the cell door open, and slip out into the observation room. Sam is right. The knockout gas and heavy door between interview and observation rooms mean they can handle Bucky trying to escape in a panic. Now that he's on their side, and not actively harming them, there's no need for a cell door on top of that. If it lessens his anxiety, Steve can live with it.

Telling JARVIS to keep an eye on Bucky, Steve and Sam troop to his floor, making breakfast and coffee.

"I should go home," Sam says into the comfortable silence. "Wrap up everything in DC so I can commit to here fully. I'm guessing it's going to be long nights from here on out."

"Yeah." Steve scrapes his plate clean. "When do you want to leave?"

Sam scratches his chin. "Today. I'll try and be back in a few days, no more."

"Sounds good. Need me to do anything?"

"Nah. Just promise you'll come with when I get a chance to visit my mom in Harlem. She's gonna love you."

Steve laughs. "I promise."

By noon Sam is driving away, leaving Steve and Hill to watch Bucky. He'd apparently fallen asleep mid-morning, and although Steve feels creepy for watching him sleep Bucky's peaceful face and hair fanned across the pillow make him smile. Hill has been filled in on the tapes, and she tells
Steve that as soon as Sam gets back she's taking off, helping to coordinate the Hydra hunt with Fury from inside Stark Industries. She's contacted Romanoff, she says, who will be extracting Clint from a job within the month. Feelers have also been sent out for Bruce, who vanished somewhere in Asia three months ago.

They discuss the logistics of Bucky staying with them permanently, how to handle his recovery. Tony suggests moving him to a floor in the Tower, with Hulk-proof security measures. Steve agrees, eager to get Bucky out of the cell. Pepper is still on her "vacation," recovering from Extremis, and Tony extends it a little longer to keep her away. No sense mixing two volatiles.

No one besides them knows about Bucky's being here, and they resolve to keep it that way. They don't want anyone getting their hands on him again, even the US government. Especially the US government. Let them think him dead or disappeared, while they give Bucky a new life.

They do finally agree to call in a real doctor, someone trustworthy. A neurologist, ideally. A therapist as well, and one that is fluent in sign language. Tony seems a little less brittle, able to talk about Bucky without taking a drink every other sentence. He starts on the background checks, muttering that it's impossible to know who's Hydra or not, until Steve suggests that someone low-profile, working in bad areas for little reward, is their best bet. Someone non-white too, because as much as Hydra spouts separatist bullshit, a Nazi is a Nazi is a Nazi.

Leaving Tony to his search, Steve wanders back down and finds Bucky awake. He teaches him some more signs, impressed as always by his speedy progress, and broaches the topic of leaving the cell. Bucky immediately perks up, a hopeful expression on his face.

"L-E-A-V-E?" he signs, brows quirked inquisitively.

"Yeah," Steve speaks and signs. "You can have your own floor and everything. No more cell. It'll be a lot more comfortable. You want that?"

Bucky nods, eyes wide. Yes. Please.

"Okay, we'll get everything ready. You'll have to wear this." Steve holds up a round silver device the size of a quarter. "It will deactivate your arm if necessary. I know you don't want to hurt anyone, but we can't take any chances. Okay?"

Bucky nods, holding out his metal arm so Steve can stick the device to a plate on his bicep. JARVIS has control of it, and it will send out an electric pulse if Bucky acts dangerously, rendering his metal arm useless. He hopes it won't come to that.

"Okay," Steve says. "All done."

Bucky looks up at him with trusting eyes, and Steve resists the urge to hug him and tell him it'll all be okay. Nothing about this is okay. Instead he withdraws his hand and smiles helplessly, sitting back in his seat.

"Okay, let's work on some objects."

["Here we are," Steve says, as the elevator opens. "Go on, have a look around."

Bucky stares wide-eyed at the open floor, the city visible through the large windows along one side. The living room, with a soft couch and carpeting, flows into the kitchen, which seems to have been completely stripped of anything. Nothing he can use as a weapon, he supposes. There's stools wedged under the bar, and the walls are painted an unassuming cream, light spilling in from the
windows and making soft stripes on the smooth floor. There's a hallway bisecting the apartment, and as he ventures down it he finds four rooms - a bathroom, a bedroom, and two rooms as yet undecorated. In the bedroom is a large bed, easily fitting two of him on it, and he hesitantly runs a hand over the crisp sheets in wonder.

"That's yours," Steve says from the doorway. "Anything you need, just ask."

It sounds too good to be true. It's not until Steve is gone that Bucky truly explores the apartment, testing locks and assessing sight lines and exit points. The only way in or out is the elevator, which doesn't open for him. The windows are bulletproof glass, and one-way so that no one can see in, if his analysis is correct. Nothing in the kitchen - no silverware, not even pots and pans. The bathroom is stocked with soap and shampoo in the walk-in shower, thick towels stacked on a chest.

He finds soft clothes in the drawers of the bedroom, a stack of blankets there besides. After looking around surreptitiously, he entertains a bit of exhilarating rebellion and piles all the blankets onto the bed before flopping down on it and rolling around in the softness. He splays his arms and legs out and still doesn't reach the edge of the mattress. It is like laying on a cloud, and the blankets are so warm and soft against his skin. He can't remember ever being this comfortable.

He falls asleep buried in his mound of blankets, never wanting to leave.]

"Hey, welcome back." Steve leans in to give Sam a one-armed hug, avoiding the duffel bag Sam is carrying.

"Thanks. How are things?"

Steve shrugs. "As well as can be. We got him moved up to his own floor in the tower and Tony's working on finding doctors."

"Looks like I missed a lot. How is he? Any more incidents?"

Steve shakes his head. "No, he's mainly been sleeping and learning signs." He holds a hand out for Sam's bag. "Come on, I'll help you move in, then you can see him."

With Steve helping, it doesn't take too long to get all of Sam's stuff moved into a floor in the tower. They eat a late lunch and then troop down to Bucky's floor, JARVIS informing them that Bucky is awake and reading through the sign language book they'd given him. He's wedged in a corner when they find him, a highly defensible position with no view from the windows, and gets to his feet as they approach, looking vaguely guilty. In sweatpants and a t-shirt, he looks almost like any normal guy, except for the metal arm.

"Hey," Sam says. "Long time no see. How you doing?"


"That's great. How are you liking your new digs?"

Bucky cocks his head to the side like a curious dog, a furrow appearing between his eyebrows.

"The floor," Sam clarifies. "Here. Do you like it?"

Bucky seems to deliberate a moment, teeth pressing into his lower lip. Yes. Good. Thank you. Where-you-go?
"I went home," Sam speaks and signs. His signs are smooth and casual, easy to follow. "Had to get a few things. I'm staying here now."

Bucky nods in understanding, eyelashes making a quick sweep as his eyes dart around the room habitually. Assessing. Steve finds himself doing it too. Constant vigilance. It's exhausting.

Sam asks Bucky what new signs he's learned, and Steve watches with a small smile as Bucky bursts into a flurry of signs. He is so alive, standing here with his soft clothes and unruly hair, mismatched hands fluttering in the air. He signs with a certain delicacy, every move painstakingly deliberate and exacting yet softened with hesitation. He uses his metal hand just as well as his flesh and blood one, a solid base that his right hand dances over and around. His body is still too stiff, too neutral, facial expressions too flat, but he is making himself heard and understood and that simple fact seems to light him up from the inside out.

Steve tries to keep that image, that moment in mind whenever Bucky slips, falling back into the pit Hydra had dug for him. It is hard to tell what will set him off - a sound, a certain word, sometimes seemingly nothing at all. Often he merely flinches, or goes glassy-eyed; the worst is when he goes coiled and tense, eyes blank and void of anything. The Soldier, not Bucky.

But he rarely lashes out, thankfully; can usually be calmed with space and coaxing. It happens only once in the ensuing week, after his daily medication dosing, when Steve disconnects the IV and thoughtlessly rests a hand on Bucky's metal arm. The blow is swift and sudden, a whir and grind of machinery as the metal arm strikes Steve across the chest and sends him sprawling to the floor. He leaps to his feet instantly, seeing Bucky's arm dangling by his side, deactivated, which only seems to make him panic. He staggers, listing to the side with the weight, and claws at the arm with his flesh hand until blood starts to well from his fingers. Steve grabs for him to stop him hurting himself, fighting Bucky's panicked punches as he wraps his arms around him from the back, immobilizing him. Bucky struggles and kicks, then goes limp in his grasp, panting soundlessly.

"It's okay," Steve says. "You're safe. Just breathe. I'm not going to hurt you."

Bucky shudders, his heartbeat rabbiting against Steve's chest. With every harsh breath, they both move, Bucky's hair tickling Steve's nose. Slowly, Bucky seems to relax, breaths evening and muscles losing their tension.

"If I let you go, you gonna be okay?" Steve asks.

Bucky nods, and Steve slowly releases him, relieved when Bucky doesn't move. He steps around to face him, careful to telegraph his movements.

"Hey. You with me?"

Bucky raises his right hand, which is trembling faintly. Yes. Sorry.

"It's okay. I'm sorry I had to do that. I couldn't let you hurt yourself."

Why?

"Because you shouldn't hurt," Steve says, after a pause. "Here, let's get you cleaned up." He ducks into the bathroom to grab the medical supplies, sitting Bucky down on the toilet seat and waiting for him to give Steve his hand. His fingers are shredded, nails cracked and tips bleeding sluggishly from raking against the plates of the metal arm. Steve gently cleans them and wraps them in gauze, feeling Bucky's gaze on him. He looks up, meeting his eyes, the blue-gray of a winter sky. Unconsciously, his hands still on Bucky's, lingering on the soft skin there. Bucky searches his eyes
for something, then raises his now-working metal hand, signing small and clumsily.

*Why are you doing this?*

There are a million answers Steve could give, and yet he doesn't have a single one. He knows what Bucky is asking - why are they helping him, why aren't they throwing him back into a locked cell, why is Steve here, when someone else could be doing this.

To be honest, Steve doesn't think anyone else could or should be doing this. He stands the least chance of being hurt by Bucky's episodes, and they have a certain...rapport. It is Steve who can get Bucky to calm down from a panic attack, Steve who Bucky looks at like he hung the moon. Sam tries, and Bucky seems to like him, but the truth is Sam isn't the nurturing sort. He may be a VA counselor, but he's tough love and 'grow a pair and try a fucking coping skill,' not hand-holding and the sympathetic 'hmm'ing' and head nodding Steve had gotten from SHIELD psychologists. Steve has never considered himself to be the nurturing sort either, spending most of his life rejecting the attempts of others to nurture him like an angry hedgehog, but there's something about Bucky that softens his edges, that brings out the tiny bit of softness hidden under his breastbone that's all Sarah Rogers. Besides, he owes Bucky this much. He failed him once, seventy years ago. He doesn't intend to again.

"Well," he says finally, not breaking eye contact. "You deserve help. And I kinda owe you this. But that's not...Well, I know you don't have much reason to trust me, but you do, at least you must a little?" His voice rises, turning it into a question, and he sees Bucky nod in response. "Right. I guess what I'm trying to say is...when I came out of the ice, everyone I knew was gone. I didn't really have anyone. And I have friends now, but no one...no one really understands what it's like to have your whole life taken from you. So I guess I'm offering to be that for you? A friend, I mean."

Bucky blinks, searching Steve's face.

*I'd like that,* he signs left-handed, looking almost shy. Then, *I like you,* pressing his metal hand to Steve's chest gently. Steve's breath catches, caught in Bucky's gaze, so open and vulnerable. He slowly slides his own hand over Bucky's, feeling the ridges of the plates under his palm, his other hand still holding Bucky's real one.

"I like you too," Steve murmurs, a soft smile pulling at his mouth, and to his surprise Bucky mirrors him, pink lips curving up ever so slightly and crinkles appearing at the corners of his eyes. He is beautiful, Steve thinks.

And in the next instant - oh no, he is beautiful.

"Meet the doctors," Tony says, swiping up with his hands so the holographic profiles hang in the air. "Quite a team, if I do say so myself."

"Why so many?" Steve asks, moving closer to inspect one's profile.

"It's not the 1940s, capsicle. There's different doctors for different things."

"I know that," Steve says, irritated. "Why so many for Bucky?" There's three different doctors floating above them, plus a psychiatrist and a psychologist. Surely that's overkill? They'd asked Bucky if he was okay with someone helping him, and he'd said yes, but this is a lot.

"Well, I knew we needed a neurologist for sure. Check. An orthopedic surgeon, because of the mess with that arm. A GP, because there's a lot of little things that I'm sure are wrong. A psychiatrist can handle the medication aspect of murderbot's mental health, and a therapist for the
"Huh," Sam says. "You did good. How's this gonna go down, though? I'm guessing Barnes isn't a big fan of doctors."

Tony shrugs. "That's a you problem. My problem is getting them to sign papers so if Barnes does kill them, I don't get sued."

"Because that's all you care about." Steve rolls his eyes, though he knows deep down Tony isn't that heartless. None of them want to see this go sideways. "How much are we telling them?"

"Up to you. I vote everything." Tony raises an eyebrow at them. "You?"

Sam chews his lip, then nods. "I say we show them some of the tapes, but don't necessarily tell them his identity. And we keep a close eye on them, in case they have any contact with Hydra or let anything slip."

"I agree," Steve says. "Give them enough information to do their jobs, but keep it close. We can't afford any of this getting out."

"Alright then." Tony claps his hands. "Let's get them in here."

They decide to bring them in all at once, but have them meet Bucky individually so as not to make him panic. The neurologist is a woman who introduces herself as Dr. Dash. She works at a local VA, and thus is familiar with veterans and all nature of traumatic brain injuries. As they explain the memory-wiping and show a clip, her expression goes from curious to horrified, but she collects herself quickly and begins writing down notes, lips pursed in concentration, dark hair swept up into a bun.

The orthopedic surgeon is a young, attractive guy of short stature with an easy smile and an excess of energy that causes him to bounce on his toes. He takes one look at Bucky's metal shoulder in the hologram and says he's going to have to call his physiotherapist friend, because "whoever did that was both brilliant and wildly incompetent, and I don't know how our patient is standing." His name is Ari - Dr. Katz - and Steve likes him instantly.

The GP is an older woman who reminds Steve of his old neighbor, with grey hair and a kind face. Her name is Claire Steinfeld, though she tells him to "just call me Claire, hon" with a wink and a smile that makes Steve blush. She clicks her tongue at what they show her, sorrow in her eyes, and says her first order of business will be getting Bucky off IV nutrition and back to eating regular food.

"Eating normally, it'll help up here as well," she says, tapping her temple.

"I agree," Dr. Davis, the psychologist, chimes in. Her hair is cut short, black framed glasses hiding sharp brown eyes. She looks unflappable, and tough, like she's seen the worst the world has to offer and kept on going. Steve can't even imagine what a trauma therapist hears on a daily basis.

"As a POW, we're looking at someone who has had literally zero control over anything in his life for years," she says. "Getting him eating on his own could go a long way in making him feel independent again."

Steve decides he likes her. "We're trying to, you know, give him choices," he says. "But he's still technically a prisoner, so..." He lifts his shoulders in a half-shrug. "It's complicated."
"What's his mental state like?" Dr. Park, the psychiatrist, asks.

"It varies, but he's not fighting us anymore and he's very communicative. He trusts me." Steve feels a spark of pride at being able to say that. "For the most part, he's stable, but if something sets him off he'll panic or dissociate. He's not usually violent, though. He's on edge all the time, but also tired."

"How's he sleeping?"

"He either sleeps twelve hours or none. It depends. He'll go a long time without sleeping and then just crash."

Dr. Dash looks up thoughtfully. "Any abnormal sleep behavior?"

"Aside from nightmares, no. Oh, and he sleeps in weird places sometimes. I found him in the bathtub once."

There's lots of head nodding and note writing from the group. Steve exchanges a glance with Sam, who gives him a thumbs up.

"It'd help for us to see him, get a better idea of what we're dealing with," Dr. Katz says.

"You will, just one at a time," Steve replies carefully. "We want to do this slowly."

"Individually would make it harder," Ari protests. "It's better if we could collaborate."

"Listen," Sam interrupts, voice firm. "This guy does not have good past experience with doctors. You all go in there at once, I guarantee you he's going to freak out. As it is, there'll be no lab coats, no use of the word 'doctor' and no touching until he says so. He's been captured, experimented on, tortured, brainwashed, and god knows what else for the last seventy years. You cannot even begin to grasp the enormity of what you're dealing with. One wrong move and he snaps your neck. You say anything, anything outside this building and you bring Hydra down on our heads, maybe even the US government. Once you're in, you're in, and you do it our way. Got it?"

Everyone in the room nods, and Steve fights a smile. Maybe he should just pass Sam the Captain America mantle, let him make the speeches from now on.

"Good," Sam says. "Now, who's first?"

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They decide to send Claire in first, since she's the most unthreatening and is the least specialized. Steve asks Bucky if he's okay meeting her, and he responds with a hesitant yes, looking a little confused and apprehensive. They bring him down to the interview room, cuffing his legs to the chair for maximum security. They aren't risking him hurting any of the doctors.

The rest of the medical team plus Sam are in the observation room, watching through the one-way glass and monitoring Bucky's vitals while Steve and Claire initiate contact, an earbud in their ears. Bucky sits calmly in the chair, dressed in grey sweatpants and a black t-shirt, hair in messy waves about his face. He looks up as they enter, Claire wearing a simple outfit of jeans and a shirt in an attempt to put him more at ease. His eyes focus on Steve first, searching, then flick to Claire, sizing her up as one might a threat, even though she's all of five foot five.

"Bucky, this is Claire," Steve says, injecting as much calm into his voice as he can. "Claire, this is Bucky."
"Hello," Claire says with a smile, taking a seat in one of the two chairs opposite Bucky. "It's nice to meet you."

Bucky watches her warily, before his eyes flick to Steve again. His expression is blank, back to those first few days, and Steve marvels at how much he's opened up to them, the trust and rapport they've built. It's clear he doesn't trust this new person and is looking to Steve for reassurance.

Steve gives him a nod as he sits down, trying to communicate silently that everything is okay. The tension doesn't quite drain from Bucky's body, but it does ease imperceptibly.

"I'm just here to translate," Steve tells him, signing as well. "Claire wants to talk to you about getting you healthy, okay?"

Bucky nods, just a slight dip of his head. Claire leans forwards against the table, genial expression in place.

"Bucky - can I call you Bucky?"

Bucky nods. Claire smiles.

"Okay. I heard you've been pretty sick and I want to help you get better. Can you tell me if anything is hurting or uncomfortable right now?"

Bucky darts a quick glance at Steve, then raises his hands. My head, shoulder. Hurts. F-U-N-C-T-I-O-N-A-L.

Steve translates for Claire, careful to keep his words exacting. He doesn't want to misconstrue anything Bucky signs, not when communication has been denied to him so long.

"I understand you're on pain medication right now?" Claire asks.

Bucky nods, glancing at Steve again.

"That's good. We want you to be as comfortable as possible. Someone else is going to come in to talk to you about your head, so I want to focus on some other aspects of your overall health. I know you've been fed through an IV for a long time, but I want to get you back to eating normal food again."

Why?

"Well, IV nutrition isn't really meant for the long term. It's much healthier to eat normally, and as there doesn't seem to be any problems physically with you eating it's the best option. Plus, I'm sure you'll be happier getting to eat actual food." She smiles.

Bucky stares at her blankly, and Steve suppresses a wince. He's not sure happiness is really on Bucky's spectrum of knowledge or emotions.

"Alright, do you want to discuss a plan for re-introducing food?"

Bucky nods, impassive, and Claire pulls out a sheet of paper, starting to explain the process. Steve relaxes, relief spreading through him like syrup. One down, four to go, he thinks.

They start slow, with meal replacement shakes and soup, no solids. Bucky eats what he's given, showing little opinion or resistance. He reports to Steve only a little stomach discomfort, which Claire says is normal, and a little color returns to his cheeks. After a week, they decide to introduce
"This is..." Dr. Dash says, waving a hand at the scans of Bucky's ravaged brain, a frozen image of the chair up on the screen. "I have no words."

"Yeah," Steve agrees, shoving his hands in his pockets.

"I thought I'd seen the worst people could do to each other, but this..." She shakes her head. "It's amazing he's even walking and talking. Well, signing." Her eyes go hard. "They had to take away his voice, too."

"They took almost everything," Dr. Park says bitterly. "Pria is right. He shouldn't even be cognizant. The sheer brain damage coupled with the drugs they had him on should've sent him into a coma."

"But it'll heal, right?" Steve asks, with a tinge of worry. "He has the serum, we think."

Dr. Dash shrugs. "Maybe? This amount of damage, I'm not sure even the serum can fix it. It's like his arm. At some point, the serum can't grow it back. His brain may heal to a point, but it will never be the same again. He's going to have a lot of problems, probably for the rest of his life."

"Whatever we can." Dr. Dash smiles sadly. "He deserves our help."

"Yes. He does."

In the background, Dr. Park types, and a video rolls across the screen. On it, Bucky convulses against the concrete, foam bubbling from his mouth as doctors rush around him frantically. Steve turns away as someone plunges a needle into his thigh, others holding him still.

By popular vote, it's Dr. Dash who they elect to be the next doctor Bucky meets, for the simple fact that Bucky's neurological problems are the most pressing concern. He's had three more mini-seizures, and Steve thinks it may be more, if they include times he suddenly goes blank and still. It's hard to tell whether it's dissociation or a seizure.

Dr. Dash asks Bucky a lot of questions about his head - dizziness, vision changes, losses of time, pain, sensory sensitivity, the list goes on and on - and Bucky answers in the affirmative for almost all of them. He's slightly agitated, brow creased and heartbeat fast, according to Sam's voice in Steve's ear.


"It's not a malfunction," Steve says, for the thousandth time. "It's just your brain healing."

Bucky bites down on his lip, staring at the surface of the table. "Stop, he signs. I want it to stop."

Steve closes his eyes briefly, chest aching. "I'm sorry," he forces out, and the words feel hollow. "I know it must..." He swallows, tries again. "We're doing everything we can," he finishes lamely.
Bucky clenches his jaw visibly, the dark shadows under his eyes stark against his pale skin. He hasn't been sleeping well, lately. Nightmares upon nightmares. He keeps throwing up the little food he does eat.

"I'm sorry," Steve says again. "I know you must be frustrated."

The metal arm whirs, fingers clenching into a fist. Steve tenses, ready to leap into motion, and Dr. Dash glances over with mild trepidation. But Bucky takes a short breath, then another, and his fist uncurls. He looks away, staring somewhere over Steve's shoulder. Steve wonders how long it took for him to learn to shove his feelings down, lock away the frustration and fear and defiance into total blankness. A clenched fist and a couple breaths are all Bucky allows himself to express the oceans of rage surely bubbling beneath the surface.

Steve wonders when the locks will crack, and what will happen when they do.

[Bucky burrows deeper into his blanket nest, trying to ignore the pounding of his head. He's curled on his side, only a sliver of light showing from the gap in the blankets, body slowly roasting under the layers. He doesn't care. He'd rather be hot than be cold ever again. He feels like the noodles they've started putting in his soup - limp and buttery. Wrung-out, like an old dishrag. He's not functional, not an efficient weapon. They should decommission him, or use the chair; anything but this slow torture.

No, he thinks, squeezing his eyes shut. *They won't do that. They're not Hydra. Stop thinking that just stop it stop it stop it-*

Soft footsteps interrupt his spiral, the bed dipping under the weight of a body.

"Hey," Steve says. Softly, gently. Like always. "You ready to get up?"

He has to get up. It's time, like every morning. Every morning the same. Routine.

He doesn't want to get up.

He should get up. He has to get up, or they'll punish him, they'll drag him out-

*Stop stop stop stop stop-

"Buck?" Steve's hand settles on his ankle over the blankets. "You with me, pal?"

He opens his mouth. Nothing comes out, like usual. Like always. He closes it with a click, drags a breath through his nose.

*Why can't I fucking speak I just want to speak please-*

He thinks he would be making a sound, if he could. A wounded sound, something frustrated and hurt. But his throat works and there is only silence, suffocating.

"Bad day?" Steve's voice cuts through the fog, thumb rubbing faint circles on his ankle.

He squeezes his eyes shut tighter, managing a jerky nod. They are all bad days, but this is the kind of bad that sits heavy in his bones like lead. He has learned to differentiate the types of bad days.

Some days are not so bad. He likes those the best, when colors are brighter and his head doesn't hurt or spin.
This is not one of those days.

"I'm sorry. Let me just get you some breakfast and your meds, alright?"

Steve gets up, and Bucky immediately misses him. He must drift, because Steve is there again, reaching out to help him sit up and propping pillows behind him. It's such a strange, familiar gesture that Bucky finds himself thrown for a minute, blinking away echoes of a warm hand on his brow and the smell of cinnamon.

Steve holds out a smoothie and Bucky takes it, drinking automatically. When he's done, it's time for the pills, Steve lining their little multicolored boxes up on the nightstand. A swallow of water for each, and then he tips his head back and shows Steve his mouth, to make sure he's taken them all.

*What are they?* he asks like he does every time, just to check. Steve never seems to mind repeating himself.

"These are pain medication," Steve says, pointing to each box with its little letters for the days of the week as he goes. "This is for your seizures. These are for your headaches. This is for depression."

The pills are the same as they have been. Steve's voice is the same, steady and quiet. Bucky likes Steve's voice. It feels like what strawberry smoothies make him feel, or blankets. He thinks he'd like to wrap himself up in Steve's voice and never leave. Maybe then he wouldn't have bad days anymore.

"There's someone here who'd like to meet you," Steve says, still sitting on the edge of the bed. "If you want."

*Who?*

"He's an...Avenger. Like me. He fights the bad guys."

Bucky presses a hand to his chest. *Me.*

Steve's face does an interesting thing, expression crumpling. "You're not a bad guy, Buck. Hydra were the bad guys."

*Okay.*

It is never worth it to argue.

"Anyway," Steve continues, "he got in an accident a while back and lost his hearing. So he knows sign language. I think you'll like him."

*Okay,* Bucky signs.

That's how he finds himself sitting on the couch with another few blankets wrapped around him while a sandy-haired man signs enthusiastically, leg in a cast and bandaids littering his exposed skin.

*Hi! I'm C-L-I-N-T. My name-sign is -* Clint uses a modified "h" shape near his eyes. *I'm H-A-W-K-E-Y-E. I can shoot arrows really well, basically.* He mimes shooting a bow to get his point across. *Don't judge.*
Bucky may not understand every single sign yet, or the subtleties of the language, but he can understand the majority of what Clint signs. It's...nice, he thinks, not feeling like he's the only one who needs sign.

*I'm B-U-C-K-Y, he signs. I'm not very good at ASL.*

*What are you talking about? You're really good,* Clint assures him, expression earnest. There's something about him that puts Bucky at ease. *It took me years to be able to sign well. It's taken you, what, a few weeks?*

Bucky shrugs, slightly affected by the praise. *Steve and Sam help.*

*They're good like that. You trust them?*

The question takes Bucky off guard. He squints at Clint, trying to gauge his motives. Clint just stares back, expression passive.

Bucky nods hesitantly.


*What?*

Clint shifts on the couch, blowing out a breath. *Listen.*

Bucky listens.]

"So," Steve says, drawing a finger around the rim of his coffee mug. "Clint and Bucky seem to be getting on."

"Yeah." Nat smiles, hair short and curled again, face bare of makeup. "I thought they would."

"Are you going to see him?"

Nat seems to think before she speaks, eyes guarded. "I'm not sure that would be for the best."

"Okay." Steve takes a sip of coffee, knowing Nat must have her reasons. "How long are you staying?"

"Not long. Just came to drop Clint off."

"Any word on Hydra?"

She shrugs. "Fury's got it handled. Once the Helicarriers came down, they were running scared. They don't have any traction now."

"Good." Steve clenches his jaw. "They should never have gotten this far."

"It's not your fault, Steve."

Steve exhales. "It's not yours either," he points out.

Natasha winces minutely, and Steve knows he's struck home. He reaches out, and after a moment Natasha lets him take her hand, squeezing once.
"You're a good person," he says. "Someone told me recently that we can't go back. All we can do is our best, and sometimes the best that we can do is to start over."

"Start over, huh?" She smiles sadly. "Tried that once before. Don't know how well it turned out."

"You're here, aren't you? Besides, you've got me. And Clint," he adds. "The day we're Hydra is the day the world ends."

"And Barnes? He have you too?" Her expression is guarded.

Steve wonders what it would have been like, meeting her when she was still defecting from the KGB. Still deprogramming, still more automaton than person. A fragile shell of violence and distrust. He knows what she's asking.

"Yes," he says firmly, holding her gaze. "He has me."

God, if only she knew how true that is.

"So, what do you think of Clint?" Steve asks, as he watches Bucky eat his soup in careful sips.

I like him, Bucky signs, setting down his spoon to free his hands. He said...B-R-A-I-N-W-A-S-H-E-D?

"He told you about Loki?" Steve guesses.

Bucky nods. Not the same. But... He shrugs, and eats another mouthful of soup, spoon clinking against the side of the bowl. His friend. More like me.

Steve's not surprised Clint told Bucky about both him and Nat, to try and make him feel less alone in the brainwashing department. Hopefully it will help, as Bucky starts to realize the impact of his actions. He's shown regret for his actions against Steve and Sam, but it seems the true guilt is yet to come. Steve's not looking forward to it.

"Yeah," he says, measuring his words. "There are others...like you. Hydra aren't the only bad guys out there. Being...manipulated, coerced...it could happen to anyone. The things you did aren't your fault."

A dent appears between Bucky's eyebrows, mouth tightening. Clint said.

"Well, he's right."

I don't understand.

"What don't you understand?"

But Bucky doesn't respond, and Steve can almost see the locks turning, rapidly shutting down everything, expression flattening and shoulders hunching.

"Buck," he presses, "you can tell me anything. I just want to understand."

Bucky folds in on himself, eyes going spooked and breathing elevated. Steve has no idea what's set him off this time, but he's dealt with this before. Sometimes, inexplicably, Bucky just...freaks out.

"Okay," Steve assures, keeping his distance. "Okay, you don't have to tell me anything. We're just going to sit here, okay?"
Like a switch has flipped, Bucky goes from panicked to angry in the space of a breath, metal fist smashing into the edge of the counter and upsetting the soup. Bucky stands, metal arm whirring and then falling dead at his side, and uses his right hand to punch the wall with a soundless yell before slumping to the ground and starting to cry.

Steve stares, at a loss as he watches Bucky's shoulders shake, and he realizes it's the first time he's ever seen him cry.

"Buck?" he tries softly, slowly crouching down beside him and setting a hand on his good shoulder. Bucky hitches a breath and leans into his hand, and Steve rubs up and down his back, and thinks oh, there it is.

[Wakey wakey," Sam says, knocking lightly on the bedroom door.

Bucky tugs the blanket over his head, then freezes at his blatant disobedience. He pops his head back out, staring at Sam.

"Breakfast is in the kitchen," Sam says, already turning. "Clint's here, don't ask me why. Come out when you're ready."

It takes several deep breaths before Bucky's heart rate returns to normal, and he slides out of bed, wincing at the stab of pain in his head. He slopes out to the kitchen, finding Clint slouched at the table drinking from a mug while Sam pours a green smoothie into a glass. The smell in the air is pungent and...familiar, he thinks, as he takes his normal seat.

Good morning. Clint signs one-handed, cracking a yawn. Bucky sniffs, squinting at the brown liquid in his cup, and his brain helpfully downloads coffee. How could he have forgotten coffee? he wonders abstractly.

Clint pushes the coffee cup towards him, evidently having seen his laser-eyed stare. "Want some?"

"Ah-ah," Sam chides, and Bucky jerks back like he's been burned. "That's not on the approved list of food and drink." He points to the list stuck to the fridge with a magnet.

Bucky stares down at the table, trying to keep his breaths even. You're okay, you're fine, he tells himself silently. Sam's not mad, he's not going to hurt you...right?

"Bucky." Sam's voice breaks him from his spiral, and he looks up with trepidation, focusing on the different colored straws Sam's holding up. "Blue or white?"

They do this often, forcing him to make a choice between little things, and there never seems to be a right answer. They just...want him to choose. It is baffling.

He considers. Blue is...nice. Like Steve's eyes, or the sky. White is...white. Blank. Snow.

He makes a 'b' with his hand and twists his forearm from the elbow. Blue.

Sam nods without comment or approval, sticking the straw in the smoothie and sliding it across the table. "Here you go."

This is routine. He settles, sipping his smoothie at an approved pace and watching Clint out of the corner of his eye. At one point Clint gets up to refill his coffee cup before slouching back down on his chair. Bucky is not sure why he is here, other than tactical backup for Sam in case he becomes unstable, but he doesn't...mind his presence. Clint's not harmless - Bucky can tell he's highly
trained and skilled - but he's harmless in a different sort of way; unassuming and steady. He exudes an air that says Bucky could probably smash the entire coffee pot in a fit of rage and he'd just say oh, no in his quiet voice. It's remarkably comforting.

After the smoothie it is time for his pills. The boxes are lined up, the correct day flipped open.

What are they? he asks, and Sam tells him, and he swallows each with a sip of water. Opens his mouth so Sam can see they're gone. The boxes are packed away, to be taken with Sam when he leaves. Bucky rinses the smoothie cup in the sink like he'd been shown and places it in the dishwasher. Clint drinks another cup of coffee.

He feels restless today; twitchy. His eyes keep tracking to the windows, the elevator, calculations running in his head. He could probably escape, if he wanted to. Probably. The AI is an unknown variable, but Sam and Clint are minimal threat. Steve isn't here, not on shift. Bucky doesn't know what he does when he's not on shift, but he's not here and therefore his chance of escape is greatest.

Why isn't he escaping? Should he escape? What is he escaping from?

He doesn't know at this point. Hydra, the people here - it all gets tangled up in his head. Hydra had manipulated him. Hydra had coerced him. Hydra is bad. But. But. His brain skims over the knowledge, refusing to accept it. He can't. He knows, but he can't. Clint had talked about...brainwashing, about feeling like he had no control, about his friend who was raised to be a killer, programmed, like Bucky, and he....he thinks he understands, but he doesn't, not completely. It's too overwhelming, and trying to think about it makes his brain hum like it's filled with bees and his head pound and then everything gets fuzzy and sometimes he throws up.

"Bucky."

He blinks, coming back to himself. Nothing looks different, he must not have lost much time. Sam is staring at him steadily, assessing.

"You should take a shower and get dressed," he says, like always. Not quite a command, not quite a suggestion. "There's another person for you to meet. They want to talk about your arm."

So far, the people he has met have been nice. They don't touch him, and they don't hurt him. Claire makes something tight happen in his chest, makes him smell the ghost of spices and herbs. Pria always asks about Bucky's head and gives him more pills that help, and tells him it's okay if he doesn't remember things or goes away for hours or behaves erratically. She tells him he has brain damage, and it's not his fault. He has stopped suggesting they use the Chair to fix it. He doesn't want the chair, he thinks, not anymore. Deep inside, where he won't admit it to himself, he thinks he never wanted the chair.

But the people are nice, and it is not up to him anyway, so he nods and goes to take a shower, holding his breath under the hot spray and battling the twin impulses of relaxation and panic. The hot water is nice, and soothes his aching shoulder and back, but the water over his face makes him think of punishment and hazy sense-memories that crowd his dreams, and no matter how hard he tries his pulse spikes anyway.

Picking clothes is more difficult, because there are too many options and he doesn't know which one is right each day. Luckily, they are relatively similar, loose pants and a shirt, so he squeezes his eyes shut and picks at random. So far, there have been no comments on his attire, so it must not matter which ones he picks. With Hydra, they had simply dressed him themselves, so he never had to choose, though he does know he chose his weapons. But that makes sense, because he is extremely skilled with and knowledgable of weapons, so he is qualified to choose within specified
parameters for the missions.

Was. *Was.*

There haven't been any missions. They say there are no more missions. That seems highly unlikely, and highly... *stupid,* as he is the most skilled assassin in the world. To waste his talents, his skills, is downright ludicrous. Of course they'll use him eventually, though they'll probably be nice about it. It's just a matter of time, once they fix the brain damage or whatever is broken with him. They saved him from Hydra, he owes them.

He exits the bedroom, hair still damp, and follows Sam and Clint down to the interrogation room. Steve is there, which sets him at ease, apologetic as always as he locks the restraints around Bucky's legs. Bucky understands why they have to keep him restrained - he's erratic, unstable. It's only safe.

A man comes in, short and dark-haired and young enough to still have a bounce in his step. He introduces himself as Ari, and uses his hands a lot when he talks, though he doesn't know sign.

"I've been taking a look at all the stuff about your arm," he says, "and I'm guessing it's causing you a lot of discomfort, yeah?"

Bucky stares at him blankly. The arm hurts, yes, that's a given. It's never been an issue before. He's still functional. It's just pain.

"Do you think you could rate your pain right now, from zero to ten? Zero being no pain, ten being unbearable pain."

It's not an assessment of functionality, but it's close enough. Besides, the pills he take dull the pain quite a bit.

He raises two fingers.

Ari bites his lip, forehead scrunching, and nods. "Okay...I'm gonna take that two with, like, a grain of salt. Are the pain medications helping?"

He nods.

"That's good. But the fact that you're still in pain even on a lot of pain meds isn't great. That arm is really doing a lot of damage to all the connective tissue in your shoulder, and the weight of it is actually pulling on your spine. Now, I don't think we can remove it, at least not at this stage, but there's some things we can do to help alleviate the pain. Part of it is keeping your muscle tone up to compensate and hold up the weight of the arm. And there's some exercises to help with the inflammation in the joint. You with me so far?"

Bucky nods. They want to keep him fit and mobile. It makes sense.

"Okay, great. I also recommend heat packs - they really help with stiffness and soreness. Now, I've got a friend who's a physical therapist, she could really help you with the exercise part. Would you be okay with that?"

He nods, as it seems expected. It's just another person to make him functional.

The physical therapist is a stocky woman with short hair and tattoos crawling down her arms, eyes sharp and focused. The first session she just assesses, making him walk around and show the range of motion in his shoulder. She asks before she touches him, gentle hands a contrast to her short
voice, and bends his arm this way and that, running hands down his spine and pressing as she asks him to report his pain. Her hand feels like a brand against his skin, opposing impulses of panic and longing battling for dominance. Her touch is clinical, like the doctors' used to be, and it hurts, but she does not seem to want to cause him undue pain. So he stays still, shivering slightly under her touch, and lets his mind slip into numbness.

It's familiar, settling in the routine of training, of following orders. His body is just an instrument, a tool, and he can bend it to his will. He's weak from the weeks of malfunctioning and lack of exercise, but he knows he can be in fighting form quickly. This, he knows. This, he's good at. He runs and stretches and does his exercises, and when Ira says good job it settles something inside him.

There is another woman, who doesn't try to make him functional, but just talks to him. She says she's a psychologist, and he can tell her anything. She says only JARVIS is monitoring them, and no one is listening or watching, but he doesn't know why. She tells him it's for privacy, confidentiality. He still doesn't understand, but he nods dutifully.

She understands sign language, and her signs are crisp and clear, her eyes assessing. She asks him how he feels about things, and he tells her he doesn't know. She says that's okay. She says a lot of things are okay. When she shows him a chart of emotions, and he can only recognize fear and anger, she tells him it is okay. She asks what he's angry at, and he doesn't know. He's just angry. She says that's okay, too.

It's okay to be angry at Hydra, she tells him, but he doesn't know if he is. They are bad, he thinks, and he has decided to be Bucky and side with Sam and Steve but he doesn't know if he is angry with Hydra. He is just...angry. A lot. He doesn't know why. Sam and Steve, too, tell him it is okay when he gets angry.

He doesn't know why everyone tells him things are okay when they're not.

I hurt people, he tells the psychologist, when she asks what he dreamt.

How does that make you feel?

I don't know, he replies. There is something tight in his chest. He thinks of hurting Steve, of hurting Sam, and it intensifies. He thinks: what if I killed them. He thinks: I killed other people. He thinks: there are other people like Sam and Steve. He thinks, he thinks....

Bad, he signs, and his hand is shaking. He feels like he might throw up. Bad.

She nudges the emotion chart closer to him on the table. "Be specific," she says.

He shakes, and shakes, and tries to look at the paper, but it blurs in his vision.

I don't know, he signs. He is crying.

"It's okay," Jo says in her calm voice, but it's not. It's not okay.

Maybe it's never been okay.]
Thank you for all your lovely comments that motivated me to finish this chapter. I'm super busy with school and Reverse Big Bangs right now, but mid-May I should be free again so expect an update sometime after that!

Works inspired by this one
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