In the Space Between Breath

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In the Space Between Breaths

by TetrodotoxinB

Summary

When Bucky gets drafted, Steve thinks that war is probably the worst thing men can visit on one another. But war or not, life in Brooklyn must go on, so he takes Bucky’s old job working in a medical clinic for the eccentric Dr. West. It isn’t long after that Steve is robbed of his life and then his humanity. What he’s left with feels less and less like who and what he had been and hoped to be. But through pain, loss, madness, and the bloody tang of war Steve learns that the things that make life worth living can never be taken from him.

Notes

Story by TetrodotoxinB
Art by inflomora-art

Many thanks for beta work to SoftObsidian74 and my 68 year old mother. Yes, you read that correctly, my mother.
Chapter 1

Steve set down the box and duffle bag he was carrying and looked around the dusty room. “Upstairs apartment” was what Dr. West had called it when he offered the job to Steve. It wasn’t not an apartment, but it was small, one room, and fundamentally ugly. Where the lower stories had either painted or papered walls, this tiny attic room lacked both. Instead, the walls were covered with unfinished wooden panels and there were small gaps between the boards where the wood had shrunken over time. Inconsiderate of aesthetic appeal, someone had filled the gaps with plaster giving the room a weatherproofing that looked like it came from a sharecropper’s house fifty years ago.

Besides the look of the place, there was nowhere to cook or bathe. He could use the toilet in the clinic bathroom three floors down, but at least he wouldn’t have to share it with nearly one hundred other people like in his old tenement building. Of course, there was still the unfortunate reality that there wasn’t a place to bathe, much less store a wash basin. He could put a tub in his room, but he wasn’t keen to lug that much water up the four flights of narrow stairs that led to his attic bedroom. But inconveniencies aside, with his ma dead and Bucky shipped out to bootcamp, Steve could really do with a rent-free apartment and a steady job that didn’t require working outside. As he had far more pressing concerns, Steve pushed all the complaints about his new living arrangements to the back of his mind and instead focused on the matter at hand.

It only took Steve fifteen minutes to put all his meager possessions where they belonged. His few books, dishware, the only pictures that he had of his ma and pa, and his art supplies fit on the one bookshelf. His clothes, he folded and put in the bureau. The bed was already made though quite dusty, so Steve took off and replaced the bed clothes with the ones brought from his former residence.

Steve was just starting to wipe the grime from the windowsill, when he heard a faint knocking. To his half-functional ears the sound seemed to be coming from downstairs so he put down his rag and hurried down to the clinic.

“Mr. Rogers, I take it that the room is to your liking?” Dr. West asked, seeming less than interested in Steve’s answer as he wrote something on a patient’s chart.


“Good, good. I’ve gone ahead and closed up for the day. I need you to clean the exam and surgery rooms. When you’re done, join me in the basement,” Dr. West instructed as he finished scribbling something in a patient’s chart. Then, without ever looking Steve in the eye, he snapped the folder shut and left.

Steve nodded, though Dr. West was already gone, and set about scrubbing down everything with carbolic acid and alcohol. The fumes from the carbolic acid eventually started to make him cough and wheeze so he opened a window to air out the room while he went down the hall to fold bed sheets and towels. When he opened the cabinet to put them away, his heart clenched.

Bucky.

Steve had tried for years to teach him to fold hand towels and sheets the way that normal people did, but Bucky had always insisted on some technique that involved triangles halfway through the process. It made the final product look like it was folded by a five year old, Steve thought. But now that Bucky was gone, drafted and shipped out to training, seeing his half-ass folded towels
made Steve’s heart warm. Part of him was still with Steve, even in the smallest of ways.

He finished the cleaning and then padded his way down to the basement.

“Dr. West?” Steve called as he stepped off the staircase into the dimly lit room.

“Over here,” he called.

Steve crossed the room and pulled aside a large drape. There was a spotlight giving off waves of unnatural heat pointed at a large metal table. Steve froze, the drape still in his hand, and stared at the table agape.

Dr. West did not seem to take notice of Steve’s sudden stillness, instead focused on an evaporating apparatus set over a lit bunsen burner.

“Is- is she dead?” Steve finally asked.

“Very,” Dr. West replied distractedly.

Steve stepped into the draped area and let the curtain fall closed behind him. “What are you doing with her?”

Dr. West did pause at that and looked over his shoulder with a frightening smile. “Embalm her, of course.”

“Isn’t this a clinic?” Steve asked a little incredulously.

“Of course it is,” Dr. West answered, turning around and going back to mixing something.

Steve looked around the room again, taking in the corpse that was probably only a day dead. “Don’t you have to be a licensed mortician to handle the dead?”

“She was a long-time patient of mine. Her family can’t afford both the embalming and the burial. I’m doing them a favor,” he explained.

Bucky had never talked about what he did for Dr. West, but Steve knew that he often worked nights, long after the clinic should have closed and far longer than Bucky would have needed to clean. Still, Steve never asked, and Bucky never told him anything. It made sense now that Steve thought about it, though. Illegal embalming and whatever else this clandestine operation entailed certainly weren’t topics of idle conversation.

Steve nodded to himself, trying to absorb this abrupt change in his employment. “Right. Okay, then. What do you need?”

“We’re going to embalm her. There are supplies in the drawer over there,” Dr. West said pointing at a cabinet on the wall. “Grab two needles, two three-foot sections of tubing, and a roll of adhesive tape.”

“Yes, sir,” Steve said as he rummaged through the cabinet. He came back to the table, trying not to look too closely at the corpse, while Dr. West continued carefully rotating the flask over the flame in silence.

While Steve waited, a little uncomfortable and a lot confused, he tried to decide how he felt about this whole endeavor. First of all, there was the illegal aspect. Steve wasn’t the most law-abiding citizen to ever walk the earth, but he respected most laws and understood why they existed.
Something like being a licensed, as opposed to self-taught, mortician, seemed fairly straightforward. Who knew what crimes could be easily covered up this way — the bodies discretely prepared without any kind of documentation or oversight.

Of course, the more Steve thought about the criminal potential for clandestine embalming, the less he really bought it. The mob didn’t have their victims’ bodies embalmed. They tossed them in blast furnaces or chunked them in the harbor wrapped in tarps and chains tied to concrete blocks. And people didn’t go about illegally embalming people out of spite, did they? What would the point of that be? And then there was the fact that Bucky had worked with Dr. West. He had to have known what Dr. West was up to, yet he had kept right on working for him for three years with no complaints that Steve knew of. If Bucky hadn’t objected then Steve figured that he probably didn’t have much to say either, taking Bucky’s tacit approval of Dr. West’s work as sufficient.

Even so, Dr. West, with his absurdly large round glasses, wild salt and pepper hair, and general lack of human emotion, was about as strange as they came while still being “normal” — if that was based on intellect and ability to work, which generally it was. But Steve knew that strange, eccentric, and even law-breaking didn’t always mean a person was bad. Hell, people called him all those things and worse on a regular basis. So, he decided to set aside his misgivings — mentally, if not emotionally — and help prepare the poor old woman with a little dignity. Lord knew Steve wished he could have afforded an embalming for his mother when she passed, and he couldn’t begrudge this woman her final preparations.

As Steve’s mind started to settle, no longer scrambling around in a panic over what was going on in the basement of his new employer, Dr. West turned off the bunsen burner and whirled around.

“Well what are you just standing there for?” he asked.

Steve looked down at his hands that still held the equipment and then back up at the doctor. “I was waiting on your instructions, sir.”

Dr. West paused and then shook his head. “Ah, right. I forgot for a moment. Your friend, Mr. Barnes, had gotten quite good at this. I guess you’ll need to be trained, too. Come on, then.”

Steve swallowed and took a step towards the table. Dr. West grabbed him by the elbow and pulled him in closer.

“Now do you see here — this large vein, right next to the trachea?” Dr. West said, pointing. “Place one needle in, going towards the heart, and in the jugular — this vein here — you’ll place it going away from the heart. You’ll want to connect them to the rubber tubing first.”

Steve nodded, too stunned to speak, and wiggled the back ends of the needles into the tubing. The gauge of the needles was enormous and Steve shuddered, thinking of how badly they would hurt if this woman if she were alive. But she wasn’t, and somehow that made his stomach turn even more.

“Go ahead, Mr. Rogers. Don’t tell me you’re squeamish,” encouraged Dr. West.

Steve promptly shook his head. Not only would he not back down from something like this — Bucky would never let him live it down — but he needed the job too badly to let any discomfort stand in his way.

“I’m fine, sir,” he replied. He positioned the needle and looked to Dr. West for confirmation. The older man nodded, and Steve began to press.

The skin of the older woman was tough, like death had robbed it of its elasticity. But Steve was
determined, and after only a moment, her skin gave. The needle slid in, and thick dark blood oozed out around the needle and down her neck onto the table. Steve advanced the needle until Dr. West told him that it was deep enough, and taped the tube to her neck. Then, he repeated the process on the other side.

Relieved to be finished, Steve took a deep breath. But his stomach dropped and he tried not to be sick on the spot, when Dr. West explained the next step. If fluid went in, something had to come out, so Steve was tasked with placing a drain line in the old woman’s thigh. Her skin was thick, but it was her seized muscles — still locked with rigor — that provided significantly more resistance. Steve was forced to bear down on the needle, one of a much larger, and more stomach-churning gauge than the ones he had put in her neck, until he felt a pop and blood began to ooze from the needle into the tube. Quickly, Steve taped the tube in place and clamped the end as instructed.

After that, the process got easier. Steve’s initial unease at participating in this morbid ritual dissipated as nothing sinister manifested from the shadows to reprove his perceived misdeeds. There were infusion bottles to hang and a pump to monitor. By the end of it all, Steve no longer felt like he was doing something illicit and sacreligious. Instead, he felt honored to care for this woman. He wished he could clean her up and get her dressed more fittingly, at least in an unsoiled dress since he didn’t really have any idea what to do with her sparse, gray curls or gray pallor, but Dr. West told him no.

“I have assured the family that I will take care of the more personal parts of the procedure myself. But there will be others which will require your assistance. However, I think you’re done enough for your first time. I can finish up from here,” he assured Steve. “Go on to bed. Clinic starts promptly at eight o’clock in the morning. Make sure you have eaten, bathed, and gotten the clinic set up by the time the doors open. I trust you can find everything on the checklist, yes?”

“Yes, sir. I went over it earlier,” Steve answered.

“Excellent. Goodnight then, Mr. Rogers,” Dr. West said.

Knowing he had been dismissed, Steve nodded. “Yes, sir. Goodnight.”

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For the first week Steve more or less enjoyed his work. People came into the clinic, and he was able to do simple tasks for Dr. West. He cleaned, held instruments, learned to give shots — which he was sure was illegal without being an actual nurse — and kept up the business end of the clinic, taking payments and booking new appointments. Of course, there were also the oddly frequent embalmings, four that week alone, but then a lot of people lived and died in New York City — most of them poor — so Steve chose to not think much about it.

It wasn’t until the end of the second week that doubts began to fester in Steve’s mind. Never once did he see a relative of the deceased come in to thank Dr. West or drop off clothing. There was also the fact that the bodies always seemed to just appear in the basement, though he could never tell when they arrived or how. To make matters more confusing, once embalmed, the bodies simply vanished, somehow without Steve ever having seen anyone but Dr. West.

But even the strangeness of the embalmings — or the rather questionable practice of having Steve act as nurse — failed to instill doubt, or even fear, as much as sounds that he heard at night.

At first Steve wasn’t sure what to make of it. The sounds always came at night when he was in his fourth-floor apartment, but then there had always been sounds of one variety or another in the tenement where he and his ma used to live. While the clinic might be empty this time of night,
there were plenty of folks in general vicinity to be making noise — babies crying, couples fighting, or young lovers enthusiastically making time in the small hours of the morning. With that in mind Steve considered the eerie sounds an overall improvement, at least in terms of volume. But even so, no decrease in decibels could allay the pure horror and dread he felt when those nigh inaudible noises crept up the stairs.

The sounds themselves were faint and unintelligible. It took Steve nearly a week and a half to realize that the nights he heard them coincided with the nights that Dr. West was busy embalming the body of some poor departed soul in the makeshift basement mortuary. Still, Steve attributed his worries to his overactive imagination. While the moral ambiguity of illegally embalming someone had faded, the utter repulsion he felt at handling the dead, poking their lifeless bodies, and draining them of fluids had not.

And honestly, Steve couldn’t imagine what he would say to Dr. West. It wasn’t that he couldn’t bring it up to the man, but rather he lacked the words to describe the unutterable terror that gripped him in the small hours of the morning when the faint sounds of some inhuman braying came up from downstairs. The sounds themselves, as well as Steve’s apprehension, defied description or understanding.

It didn’t help assuage his fear that he still hadn’t been asked to help Dr. West with more than the basic preparations and lab work. Dr. West apparently formulated his own embalming fluid and while there were notes to take, he had always shooed Steve away shortly after switching on the pump.

But in the daylight hours it was easy to set all that aside, because overall the job seemed to be turning out for the best. Steve was boarded and well-paid, and Dr. West kept the small kitchen stocked for him. So for all his misgivings Steve ignored the nighttime terror of the basement noises and continued on with his work because he wasn’t entirely sure what else there was to do.

Steve took ill on the Tuesday of his third week in Dr. West’s employ. A second wave of the flu had hit Brooklyn as it was early spring, and Steve had caught it right off from the first people to carry it through the door of the clinic despite Dr. West having provided him one of the few doses vaccines he could procure. Dr. West of course gave him time off. No sense in him spreading it to the healthier of his patients, he had told Steve. So Steve had taken to his bed, the fever making his bones ache and his skin crawl where his sleep shirt rubbed against his back.

As Steve stumbled down the stairs to the first floor late into the first night of his fever to empty his piss pot and get some water, he heard the noises arising from the basement clearly for the first time.

The inhuman sounds chilled him even in the heat of his fever. As his panic grew, Steve felt the urge to run as fast and as far as his body could take him. Unfortunately, that wasn’t far and he ended up on the floor of the clinic bathroom, his hands pressed over his ears.

He wasn’t even aware that he was screaming until Dr. West appeared in the door.

“Your fever must be getting the better of you, Mr. Rogers,” he said sympathetically, but in his fevered state Steve swore Dr. West looked delighted at his plight.

Nevertheless, Steve was too weak to do much more than let Dr. West help him all the way back to his room. Steve got himself back into bed and not long after, Dr. West returned with water and Blosser’s powder for Steve’s asthma.
“Sit up now, Mr. Rogers,” Dr. West told him.

Steve was familiar with the routine and obediently inhaled the powder that Dr. West offered him.

“Good, good,” he praised.

The bitter taste of the powder was only a momentary discomfort, one quickly forgotten as he relaxed and his breathing eased. But as the minutes passed the room began to feel strange. He imagined the sounds from the basement right there in his room. He screamed and thrashed weakly in his bed, exhausted from not having eaten since the previous day.

“Easy, Mr. Rogers,” soothed Dr. West.

Steve shook his head, trying to get the screaming to stop, desperate for the horrible unearthly wailing that emanated from the basement to cease.

“You’re having a reaction,” Dr. West told him. “Hold still. I’m going to give you an injection.”

Dr. West tied a tourniquet around his arm and swabbed the crook of his arm. Too weak to resist, Steve tried to relax, not eager to jerk about while there was a needle in his arm, but it was a difficult feat while that horrible wailing echoed in his ears. He barely felt the prick of the needle, but his arm felt cold as the liquid went in. Soon, Steve felt the medicine begin to drag him down to darkness.

“Try to rest, Mr. Rogers,” Dr. West directed.

But Steve didn’t hear him. Instead, he listened only to the bone-chilling sounds of terror that closed in on him as the medicine pulled him under, into an unwanted sleep.
By the morning, Steve’s fever had broken, at least for the moment, but he felt heavy and tired, the drugs that Dr. West had injected him with still pulling him into a stupor that he couldn’t quite shake. His arms and legs felt leaden, almost numb, and he had difficulty coordinating himself well enough to walk.

Once he gained his balance and managed to shrug on some semi-presentsible clothing, Steve ambled down the stairs. Careful to avoid any patients, he went to the small kitchen in the back of the clinic, knowing that he had to eat while he was able, before the fever came back… before the insanity of the nightmarish sounds of the night returned and he couldn’t stomach the thought of eating.

But even the utter terror of the night before seemed less real, less overwhelming, in the light of day. It had to have been a combination of fever and the Blosser’s. He’d overdosed on Blosser’s before and knew it would give anyone horrible hallucinations since it contained belladonna, among other things. Still, he’d never experienced anything so awful and was in no hurry to repeat the experience.

So he ate what he could, some leftovers from the refrigerator and a bit of stale bread from the bread box, and then rinsed his face in the sink. From the plethora of clean sheets in the cabinet downstairs, Steve grabbed a set, and wanting to be free of the sweat and grime on his skin, filled a pot with water and grabbed a towel, but by the time he made it all the way back up the stairs, the rest of his energy was gone. He was forced to subside into bed with the hope of dredging up the energy to at least change the sheets later in the day.

Steve slept on and off until just after dusk, finally waking around dinnertime with enough energy to clean up as he had earlier desired. His fever was making a strong come back though, so he changed the linens without delay before going down to throw his things into the laundry.

Mrs. Mueller from down the street was in the washroom taking care of Steve’s duties since he was sick. He greeted her with as much enthusiasm as he could muster and then wobbled off to the kitchen. There was a pot of lukewarm chicken soup on the stove that he knew had been left out for him.

But there was also the smell of the embalming fluid that Dr. West had taken to using in the past week. The formulation was different, the fumes reminding Steve of benzene or some similarly aromatic compound. Maybe toluene? Steve hadn’t really been able to decide, but it always made the basement air thick and heady. In his current state, Steve was grateful to be on the main floor of the clinic, above the mortuary where the fumes pooled. Between the embalming fluid and the carbolic acid, which he could tell Mrs. Mueller had been using earlier in the day, Steve’s already inflamed lungs couldn’t take much more before the irritation brought on another asthma attack.

He finished off a meager bowl of soup and then staggered back up the stairs, his skin already growing irritated from the touch of his clothes as his fever spiked. He collapsed into bed, and shortly thereafter, unconsciousness.

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It was sometime after midnight, when Steve startled awake. He was drenched in sweat again and the room tilted slightly whenever he tried to move. It wasn’t long after that he heard the sounds. In his disoriented and fever-weakened state, he thought he saw figures in his room. They wore the
clothes of the dead people he had helped embalm, and they loomed around him, their dead eyes so dark that they seemed to absorb light from the space around them, casting shadows across their faces.

They reached for him with hands grown misshapen and monstrous, gnarled claws grabbing at his clothes. He could smell them too — a mixture of toluene from the embalming fluid, carbolic acid, and death. Death, as Steve had learned, had a unique reek to it. It was mix of piss, shit, sickness, old age, and pork that had begun to turn. It wasn’t always pungent, but it was always the same. In Steve’s room, the smell of death and Dr. West’s embalming solutions rolled off the monsters and filled his nose.

But even as Steve recognized the creatures that closed in around him, they were changed. Their features had distorted, and they continued to shift even as he tried to pinpoint the changes, as though his mind was unable to conceive of their forms.

And the noises. Crowding around him, they shrieked at him in a frightful chorus. Their cries were inhuman; no one and nothing that Steve knew of could make those sounds but even so, they did. It was a cry that was at once both unintelligible and entirely clear to him — Steve had done something to them in death, and they were back to exact their toll.

He crawled back onto the bed, too weak to even try to run, and they crowded in closer. His stomach lurched violently, and he leaned over the bed to vomit, only just missing the piss pot which he momentarily lamented as it would have been rather convenient for later.

Still, they leaned in. Steve’s breathing grew shallow, his lungs tight. He pressed his hands over his ears, desperate for respite from the odious howling of the dead things in his room. His desperation was so great, in fact, that he covered his ears rather than try to fight off the reaching hands.

Steve had no idea how long he remained trapped, hiding, cringing away from them, before Dr. West appeared in his room. To him, it was like one long moment — that moment on the precipice when someone first begins to fall, the sudden upset in balance, the first leap of his heart — except it lasted forever, and he never really fell, the monsters never really grabbed him, their repellent hands reaching and reaching and reaching towards him forever across an abyss that seemed both untraversably immense and infinitesimally small.

“Mr. Rogers!” shouted Dr. West.

After several repetitions of his name, Steve opened his eyes and blinked, expecting the worst, but all he could see in the room was his employer. Slowly, he relaxed and uncovered his ears.

“This fever…” Steve muttered, and Dr. West nodded.

“I have brought more Blosser’s and another dose of morphine to help you sleep,” Dr. West explained.

Steve nodded shakily. The room was lit now, Dr. West having turned on the single feeble electric lamp — the only real amenity of his apartment. He waited with his back against the headboard and tried to relax. He had been afflicted with fever dreams in the past, the worst of them fueled by some horror story he had read or some deep-seated fear that he harbored. But nothing he had experienced compared to this.

Dr. West held out the lid of the Blosser’s tin, the dosage measured out and ready. Steve lifted a shaking hand to take it, but Dr. West shook his head.
“Don’t be silly,” he said quietly. “You’re ill.”

Steve bristled at needing the help, but all the same he leaned forward and inhaled while West held the tin. When he was done he leaned back again, feeling the tightness in his chest abate and the familiar swirl of the hallucinogenic properties of the powder take hold. Even in his exhaustion, Steve exerted all his will to keep his eyes open and the monsters at bay.

Dr. West listened to Steve’s chest and then leaned him forward just a bit to slip the stethoscope behind his back. “Well,” he said, looping the stethoscope around his neck, “your lungs sound as clear as they ever do.”

Steve nodded weakly. Even on the best of days, Steve’s lungs made an awful rattling noise like those of the women who came into the clinic from the textile plants.

Dr. West sat on the edge of the bed and tied a tourniquet around Steve’s arm. Steve let his head fall back against the wall, but he still felt the cold swab at the crook of his arm and smelled the alcohol as it evaporated and wafted up. The quiet snap of the breaking of an ampule drew his attention, and he weakly rolled his head so that he could watch Dr. West draw the medication into the syringe.

“Hold still,” instructed Dr. West as he lightly flicked the crook of Steve’s arm.

Too tired to care, Steve’s head lolled back to center, though not quite upright, and his eyes drifted shut despite his efforts. The pinch of the needle barely meant anything to him anymore. He’d been sick often enough and poked more times in his life than he could hope to count.

Almost immediately, Steve felt the insistent tug of the morphine. Its effects merged with the belladonna, and he felt the creatures begin to return. Steve forced his eyes open, hoping to forestall the phantasms’ approach. The dim yellow lamp light made them almost imperceptible, but out of sight did not mean out of mind, and Steve’s skin prickled at their presence.

At Dr. West’s urging, and then with his assistance, Steve scooted down the bed and laid flat. Dr. West drew the blanket up around him, though Steve didn’t want it with his fever so high.

“Do try to sleep. You’re wasting valuable energy fighting to stay awake. You’d do better to rest and let your body fight the infection,” Dr. West advised in his typically indifferent manner.

Steve nodded, almost unable to move, and Dr. West leaned back into chair that he occupied.

“If it will help, I can remain here for the time being. I will wake you if your dreams take an ill turn.”

Steve opened his mouth to protest that he did not need a babysitter to keep him from bad dreams, but found that he lacked the concentration to follow through with the thought. Instead, he abruptly fell unconscious into a darkness from which there was no reprieve, where hands and claws and indescribable limbs reached and grabbed and tore at him. In his mind he screamed but the sound was drowned out by the howls of their anguish that made his teeth ache and his ears thrum in time with his racing pulse.

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In the morning Steve awoke to two main things. Firstly, he was so weak that he could not hope to traverse the stairs to the main floor of the clinic, and he wasn’t holding out hope of doing anything other than sitting up enough to piss. Secondly, he had full-on pneumonia. His lungs ached and burned with each breath. He felt like he was drowning, reminding him of the time when he and Bucky had gone for a swim by Coney Island, except Bucky had swam and Steve had just gotten a
lung-full of water for his efforts.

After several exhausting minutes, Steve struggled upright so that his back was against the wall. The relief was instant. His lungs still hurt and felt uncomfortably full, but the constant panicky coughing and hacking abated significantly.

Had Steve not been trying to crawl out from under the effects of an opiate-induced sleep or had even slightly more energy, he would have been downright terrified of the implications. He’d had pneumonia twice in his life — once in the fourth grade and again two years ago. Both instances had been nearly fatal and both entailed more than a month of recovery. Though he lacked the energy to think of anything beyond a glass of water, Steve desperately needed Dr. West. Antibiotics were the only thing that could beat it back with any efficacy, especially given his already weak lungs. But Steve didn’t think of that. Instead, he closed his eyes, the light of midmorning erasing all memory of the night’s horrors, and he drifted back to sleep.

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The sun was on its way down when the door to his room opened and Dr. West stepped in. Steve always found him unreadable, his facial expressions never matching the situation at hand. So when Dr. West grinned at Steve he brushed it aside.

“Mr. Rogers!” exclaimed Dr. West. “You seem to have taken a turn for the worst. You haven’t even been out of bed all day, have you?”

Steve tried to answer but his throat was dry and his voice cracked. He moved his tongue around, trying to work up some spit, swallowed, and then tried again. “No, sir.”

Dr. West nodded. “Let’s listen to those lungs.”

But the listening didn’t last long and he didn’t make any attempt to listen on Steve’s back. “I wish you’d had the strength to come to me this morning. As it is now, you’ll be lucky to survive this. I’m going to go get some supplies from downstairs. I won’t be long.”

Steve nodded weakly, the gravity of Dr. West’s words rolling right off of him.

The next time that he woke was to a sharp pinch, again in the crook of his arm. He managed to look down and saw Dr. West taping an IV to his arm. Steve looked up at Dr. West.

“Ringer’s lactate with penicillin. I’ve got sulfa pills for you to take as well,” he explained.

Steve blinked and then opened his eyes to Dr. West putting the pills in his mouth. He held onto consciousness long enough to drink some water from an offered cup before passing out again.

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The next morning, Steve didn’t so much wake as fade in and out of consciousness. He remembered the stairs and he remembered something about being cold, his fever still not enough to take away the chill of wherever he was. He was lying down, too, which made him dizzy with oxygen deprivation. Unable to sit up and clear even part of his lungs, he felt panicked, though he was too weak to do anything about it. There was also a new ache, like lying on a hard floor. He’d never had enough meat on his bones to be able to withstand it for very long, and the dull pain of soon-to-be pressure sores was added to the laundry list of aches.

But over the myriad sensations of his body, all of which clamored for him to do something, he became aware of his sense of smell. His breathing was shallow, making it hard to think and even
harder to smell, but eventually he recognized the reek of death and Dr. West’s embalming fluid.

His mind worked in fits and starts, trying to process this information. Was he in the basement? Why would he be down there? Had those grotesque beasts had finally carted him away from his room to return the treatment that he bestowed upon their lifeless bodies? Where was Dr. West?

The chill of the room suddenly changed as a high watt bulb hummed to life over his head. Steve could feel the intense heat radiating down on his body and panicked. The only light like that was in the basement mortuary under the clinic. He was on the table.

With panic came adrenaline and renewed strength. He struggled to sit up but discovered he was held fast by several strong straps across his torso and arms. More straps held his legs, though his left was bent at the knee and laid out to the side, exposing the inside of his thigh where his pants had been cut apart at the seam. But even with the extra leverage of his left leg, he was unable to squirm loose.

A gloved hand settled on his shoulder and Steve blinked up at the form, half-expecting it to be a some undead creature. Instead, it was Dr. West.

“Dr. West, what’s going on? Where am I?” he asked, his voice croaky and shaking.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Rogers. Your pneumonia has turned to septicemia. By the time I found you last night it was apparently more advanced than I thought. The penicillin and sulpha pills did not work. Even if I were to take you to the hospital you would be dead in another twenty-four hours. Your heart just can’t handle the infection, weak as it already is, and you’ve got bilateral pleural effusion.

“However your death will not be without value. I have long needed a fresh, even living, subject for my experiments. It frustrates me that it must be you — intelligent help is exceedingly difficult to acquire, and I had hoped to keep you in my employ for quite some time. Nevertheless, you can serve me in this way,” Dr. West explained sympathetically as he removed the IV from Steve’s arm.

Steve’s heart beat so fast that he felt dizzy and the room began to spin.

“Easy does it, Mr. Rogers,” Dr. West instructed as he turned and began to gather supplies from the embalming cabinet. “No need to panic. The situation is already out of your hands. Don’t worry, though. With any luck you’ll be alive in time for dinner.”

“What- what the hell does that mean?” Steve coughed out.

“Oh yes. I suppose you wouldn’t know would you? I keep forgetting that you are not your friend, Mr. Barnes. He was so helpful in every aspect of my work, and I had no need to keep anything from him as I did you. At any rate, my work is in conquering death, more precisely the chemical processes of death, and returning not only the body, but also the mind, to a functional state.

“I have had brief success in the past reanimating the dead. The fresher the corpse, the better their mind works and the longer their reanimation — I should think you have heard their abysmal noises in your room at night. At any rate, I have made further alterations to the solution I will be using on you. It is my hope that you can be reanimated to go on in life, but we shall see. Or rather, I shall. Now let us proceed.”

Steve screamed in rage and panic, one loud piercing scream, before devolving into a fit of coughing and gasping from which he could not recover. Even so, it seemed not to deter Dr. West, who strapped Steve’s head firmly to the table.

“If you would like to know what I’m doing, just remember how I taught you to embalm. We’ll be
following those steps,” Dr. West explained in a cheery manner.

Steve had only a moment to clench his teeth before the first needle pierced his neck. It hurt far more than he would have expected, and he felt tears slide out of the corners of his eyes. He’d never cried in front of someone since he was five. Threat of death, beatings, saying goodbye to Bucky, and even burying his mom hadn’t been enough to make him cry before an audience. But this was too much, and he was too tired to hold it back.

Thankfully, Dr. West did not comment on his emotional state, instead saying, “Alright, let’s do the other side.”

Desperation mounted and Steve wished he could escape, his mind racing for any possible way to avoid this, but as the other needle slid into his neck he knew it was futile.

“Feel free to cry out if needed,” Dr. West commented. “I know the drain line is quite large and will likely be extraordinarily painful. Don’t hold back on my account.”

Even feeling hopeless, Steve tensed and struggled. The tape on his skin pulled as his neck corded weakly, and he could feel the cooling blood on his skin where some had trickled out as the needles went in. He let out a sob and began coughing again, the coughs only interrupted as the drain line was put in place in his thigh. But even as much as it hurt, he was unable to draw in enough breath to cry out. He grit his teeth and panted which simply exacerbated the situation. His struggles shot pain through his entire leg.

“I’m not sure how the solution will feel going in. If you feel so compelled, do let me know. I realize that you might be otherwise occupied though,” he paused a moment and then continued. “Oh, and since the matter is time-sensitive, I’ll be timing your death down to the second. A phenol injection to the heart is a quick and sure method. And, minus the injection itself, is usually painless or so I’m told.”

Steve vowed he would murder Dr. West and then track down Bucky and punch him in his stupid face for this. How could he have let West do this for so long? Reanimating the dead? What good Catholic would get wrapped up in something so nefarious?

It hit Steve then that Bucky had worked for West in order to have the money for Steve’s medical treatments after his ma had died. Steve was in this position precisely because Bucky had tried to save him by sacrificing his morals and good sense and probably his everlasting soul. And to top it all off, Steve had participated, too. He figured that dying like this was no more than he deserved since he’d be going to hell anyway.

The pump whirred to life and the icy cold solution hit his veins. But the sensation went from ice to fire in a split second, and as the solution circulated, every nerve in his body lit up. His mind blanked, unable to cope with all the sensory input at once. All Steve’s attention turned to survival. He felt the drain line open and his blood run down onto the table and his legs, and intense nausea gripped him. He vomited, but unable to turn his head he had to spit out what he could, the bile dribbling down his cheeks and chin. He swallowed the rest to avoid drowning.

As the infusion continued, he felt almost reinvigorated and struggled with renewed fervor. But just as he was beginning to make headway, Steve saw the needle. Dr. West didn’t bother with a sterile ampule, drawing instead from the bottle of carbolic acid that Steve used to clean the clinic.

“Good luck, Mr. Rogers,” Dr. West said with a grin, holding the dripping needle aloft.

Steve bucked and thrashed, ignoring the pain his movements brought from the needles in his neck.
and thigh. But Dr. West’s hand splayed out on his chest, holding him down as he pushed the needle in with aplomb and indifference. Tears rolled down Steve’s face, and babbling pleas began to fall from his mouth. As he watched West depress the plunger, Steve screamed until his lungs burned and he slipped into a darkness from which he knew he would not return.
Chapter 3

The universe erupted into an infinitude of colors, sensations, smells, tastes, sounds, and experiences beyond name or description. Agony mingled with ecstasy. The silence of the Void co-existed with the cacophony of the multitudes that writhed in the Void. Sweetness and bitterness. Light and dark. All of the universe existed at once in the blink of an eye that stretched into eternity and ended with a breath.

Steve’s body lurched and he gasped, drawing deep burning breaths into his lungs. His heart hammered violently, and each beat felt like the pain that comes with pressing on a deep bruise. Another breath and a host of smells filled his nose and mouth — of shit and piss, of vomit and blood, of sickness and rot, of embalming fluid and carbolic acid. The stench made him heave fruitlessly and his stomach rolled, sharp cramps seizing his abdomen. Bolts of pain shot through his neck, chest, and left thigh with every movement, while other more diffuse and nebulous pains seemed to spread throughout his entire body as his consciousness in this form grew.

Then came sensations of his surroundings. The cold of the table and the heat of the lamp competed as his body tried to establish a uniform temperature. There was the wet tackiness of drying blood on his neck and legs. His crotch and part of the legs of his pants were soaked with urine. Shifting on the table, he could feel that his bowels had emptied and he lay in his own excrement.

His mouth tasted of old spit, phlegm, sickness, and bile. Never in his life could he remember having been so thirsty, so desperate for water.

As the dazzling multitudes of the universe fell away and the harsh physical realities of his corporeal form and situation set in, Steve cast around, searching for a clue as to where he had landed. After ten breaths in his new form, bits of memory, visions from some long-past life, drifted into his consciousness. In five more breaths, the rest of the pieces crashed back into his mind, slotting into place and explaining his predicament.

A hand grasped his wrist, fingers over his pulse point, and without looking, Steve knew the hand belonged to Dr. West. His benefactor. His employer. His doctor.

His murderer.

“How are your mental faculties?” asked Dr. West cautiously.

Steve considered lunging at him, gnashing his teeth, shrieking like the dead things that had previously occupied this table. The shreds of the Void that lingered in him railed against this injustice — murder and then imprisonment in this woefully inadequate flesh prison. But Steve thought better of it, hoping that civilized behavior might earn him better treatment than would ravening attacks.

“I know where I am, if that’s what you mean,” Steve spat, unable to contain his outrage entirely.

Dr. West’s eyebrows went up, but he didn’t let go of Steve’s wrist, nor did he retreat in any way. “Is your aggression due to ire at me or was it acquired during your recent reanimation?”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Oh, this is an innate quality, I assure you.”

“Very well,” Dr. West assented. “I am simply surprised. Prior to your participation in my experimentation you have always been exceptionally civilized.”
“Only because prior to you murdering me I had no reason to punch you in your face,” Steve retorted.

Dr. West had the gall to look affronted, but only for a moment. “Well, I had thought you might thank me. You would otherwise be meeting an early demise alone in your room. I have given you a second chance. But your appreciation is irrelevant to the results. I have been successful, far more so than previously at least.”

A sharp retort about his eternal soul was on Steve’s tongue when he thought better of it. West clearly had no compunctions about murder and consideration for the soul seemed even less likely. An argument in either of those veins would likely be wasted. Instead, Steve devoted his attentions to the four avenues of egress from the basement: the stairs that led to the clinic, the door that led out into the back alley, and two windows on either side of the alley door.

Even if he were well, Steve wouldn’t be able to overpower or outrun Dr. West, who was at least six inches taller and fifty pounds heavier. But recently dying and then dead? Steve was pretty sure that any hope of escape lay solely in the province of patience and cunning, not strength or speed. That decided, he relaxed back onto the table as best he could to conserve what little energy he had.

Upon seeing Steve’s apparently changed demeanor, Dr. West smiled. “Well, I’m glad to see that your ill-thought-out desire to quote ‘punch me in the face’ has passed.”

Steve stifled a huff of annoyance, but said nothing.

After several more minutes of observation and a fair bit of note taking, Dr. West clapped his hands together in self-congratulation. “Well, it appears you no longer need these,” he said gesturing to the lines coming from Steve’s neck and thigh.

Steve would have turned his head to help West peel the tape away if he could have, but strapped into place as he was, he simply refrained from angry commentary. The needle came out with a bit of smarting, and Dr. West pressed his thumb over the insertion point.

“Best not to let that bleed, it being your carotid and all,” Dr. West explained.

The stench of his own filth regained Steve’s attention and he sighed, angry and put out that this was where he was stuck. He wondered how long Dr. West would keep him like this — strapped to the table, unable to move, and smelling like so many of the bodies that Steve had helped prepare during the last three weeks.

That he had participated in anything like this was not something that he wanted to consider, so he resolutely focused on recalling the Latin conjugations of “esse.” He had hated that in school; Latin always felt wrong. Not because it was a “dead” language, since in the life of a Catholic Latin was hardly dead, but because to Steve it was an empty language. It lacked the everyday use that gave a language the feeling of being lived in and human. Latin was like a new apartment that never developed the lived-in feeling because the landlord didn’t allow nails in the walls or a new coat of paint — it was uncomfortable, impersonal, immutable, boring, forever and ever, *in nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti* amen. But for once Steve appreciated it for what it was — unimaginative, unemotional, and dry. Everything that his current situation was decidedly not.

About halfway through Steve’s third attempt to remember the pluperfect “you plural” of “esse,” Dr. West removed his finger and walked around to the other side of the table to get at the other injection site. The needle in his jugular was removed in a similar fashion, presenting Steve with another several minutes of silence in which to contemplate his existence. Besides his immediate situation — the desperate need for a bath and then escape from West’s tender ministrations —
there was the fact that his soul had gone on, at least temporarily, to a further existence. The only problem with that was that this “further existence” was decidedly nothing he had learned about in Mass. So if what came after death wasn’t what the Church had told him — neither Heaven nor Hell — then there probably wasn’t really much point in being Catholic or sticking with the more superstitious Catholic beliefs.

Itwent without saying that Steve planned to keep his morals, the ones that he knew to be good and right — no lack of God would take that from him — but this experience had opened a few new avenues to him. The thought that followed — that he never had to worry about his everlasting soul now, or Bucky’s for that matter — nearly made him laugh.

Of course his amusement was utterly gone when Dr. West unceremoniously yanked out the giant drain tube in his thigh. Rather than a bit of smarting, it simply hurt. Steve clenched his jaw and hissed through his teeth, his eyes scrunched shut.

For the large-ish wound that was left in its wake, Dr. West applied an actual bandage, much to Steve’s surprise. But after a moment of thought Steve realized that he was the shining example of a successful experiment. Of course Dr. West didn’t want his prized lab rat to die its final death before all the results were collected. Exsanguination would just be shoddy work at this point.

“Would you happen to be able to cough up any phlegm?” West asked curiously.

Steve noted internally that he had stopped thinking of West as “doctor.” It seemed a fitting development — the bastard hardly functioned as a doctor, killing rather than healing. West was a lunatic, not worth the ground he walked on or the air he breathed.

But even in his internal rage, Steve processed West’s question and noted that his breath came easily, he had no need to cough, no asthma to speak of. In fact, he could breathe more freely than any other time he could remember.

“No,” he asked quietly, his venom temporarily extinguished by the shock of the state of his lungs.

“Well, I would like a sputum sample to compare to the sample from before. I’ve been culturing it, and I’d like to measure the effects of the solution on your infection. Don’t worry, though. It can wait about an hour. If you can’t cough anything up by then we’ll just do a lung puncture,” West explained. And oh hell no, Steve had to get out of there right fucking now.

Unfortunately, no amount of struggling seemed to be making a difference. He wished now that his fever hadn’t broken because the sweat would likely have been quite useful in slipping free. As it was, he had dried off under the baking heat of the lamp and was acutely aware of being uncomfortably sticky virtually everywhere on his body.

He made a few attempts at coughing, but his lungs seemed miraculously dry so he tried to resign himself to another painful stick to the chest. Resignation seemed preferable to the constant fear and panic that had gripped him, those emotions being exhausting and ultimately useless.

“Sorry for all the needles,” West commented as he approached Steve, tying a tourniquet around his arm. “I’m afraid it’s going to be like this for a while yet. I have many analyses to run and it’s important to check your blood regularly. I want to know how your body is reacting to the solution and how much of it remains in your system as time passes. Hold still please.”

Steve rolled his eyes and sighed loudly. “Hold still,” as though there were some alternative. He was still glaring at West when the man taped a cotton ball to the crook of Steve’s arm and turned away with the blood sample to go fiddle with some piece of lab equipment that Steve had never before
seen him touch.

Slowly, over the minutes, the fear of the situation began to ebb, and Steve was left with anger that quickly burnt itself out, leaving only annoyance and boredom. He thought to where Bucky was now — Camp Lehigh at basic training. He’d heard men sometimes died in basic — heatstrokes, live fire accidents, exposure to the cold in survival classes. If Bucky was dead, Steve wondered if he would have felt his friend’s soul among the nameless writhing masses that he had encountered in the great hereafter, but then thought not. Being dead hadn’t been a personal experience where he knew who he was; it had been an existence devoid of memory and identity. He had joined the weeping myriads of Yog-Sothoth in the Void that was at once all of both space and time. It was only after he had been reanimated that he had remembered himself to any degree, his personhood returning to him as he was splintered from the multitudes of the Void.

Were Bucky in the hereafter, as Steve’s ma surely was, all that had remained of him would have been his soul. Even if he had encountered Bucky’s unique soul, he would neither have recognized Steve nor paid him attention for his gaze would have been turned to the sights of the Cosmos like all the others there.

Steve understood that. He had gazed into the Void, too. He wanted to gaze upon it again, to have his humanity peeled away and to be cast devoid of self into the all-knowing Nothingness, but at the same time he knew that he had eternity to experience that. He could be human, for now, and return to death when the time came.

Still, the all-knowingness had left him with some interesting information. He had directly experienced Yog-Sothoth and the fate of the dead. But also, and possibly of more immediate interest, Steve now realized that there were monsters on Earth. Not merely the dead creatures whose sounds had plagued his nights — sounds which now felt no more frightening than an alley cat banging around in a garbage can — and not a deranged man defiling, and now creating, corpses in his basement, but ancient and evil beings whose speech alone drove mortal minds to madness. Steve wondered what he could do with that information now that he, and likely he alone in the world, possessed it.

Maybe the evils of the Earth could be eradicated, or at least their armies disbanded, though those goals seemed lofty and success improbable. Steve would settle, quite happily, at killing West and ridding the world of his particular brand of lunacy.

Time slipped out of Steve’s mind. The basement had no clock and its curtained windows offered no light by which to gauge the hour, and West brooked no conversation by which to measure the passing minutes, not that Steve truly wished to speak with him. So it seemed only moments had passed while Steve lay, contemplating his mortal existence and what he should be doing with it, when West was suddenly standing next to him again.

“After this, I’ll stop poking you for a while,” he said. His tone brooked sympathy, but Steve realized now that West had none. Any show of solicitude was simply West’s clinic speech, placating patients and family in times of great distress. But Steve could tell it was nothing more than a script designed to elicit compliance with frightening and painful procedures.

“There’s going to be a big pinch. Just breathe normally,” West instructed.

Steve glared daggers at the man as he rubbed an iodine swab over his insubstantial right pec. The needle itself still produced some anxiety, but after the one to the heart — which had been much longer — Steve was more angry about the situation than anything. He grit his teeth and breathed through his nose, still glaring pointedly at West, as he drew on the plunger of the syringe.
Nothing but air filled the tube and once it was full, West gave up, withdrawing the needle and setting it aside.

“It seems that your lungs and chest are clear of fluids. Your pleural effusion seems resolved as well as your pneumonia. I’m not entirely sure what to make of that result. But it bodes well for you long term.”

“Long term?” Steve asked.

“Well, you’re the first to make it longer than two minutes before dying again,” he explained.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Steve shouted. “You killed me for what you thought might be a minute of reanimated life?”

“Mr. Rogers,” West said in his most reproachful tone. “We have been over this. You would have died anyway. Your death was for the betterment of science. Don’t be intentionally obtuse, dear man.”

Steve bit back a retort about someone in the room being obtuse though it certainly wasn’t Steve. “How long was I dead?” he asked instead.

“Ninety seconds before I pushed the reanimation solution,” West replied.

Something about that, about having his death measured, timed, planned — it left Steve unable to draw breath. Tears stung his eyes, and he blinked them away, trying desperately not to cry, not again. What was done was done, no sense in dwelling, he decided. But still the mounting panic and sorrow and helplessness of this entire situation clawed at him.

West stopped what he was doing as Steve’s frenzied breathing grew audible in the quiet of the mortuary. He put on his stethoscope and listened for a moment before studiously watching Steve’s face. After a minute of observation, during which time Steve felt more anxious than before, West spoke. “I understand that mortal terror frequently produces emotional outbursts so I ignored your fit from earlier. But what causes your emotional distress currently? You are no longer under threat. I’m not going to kill you again, if that’s your concern. And frankly, you’re healthier than you were before by all appearances.”

“Fuck you,” Steve spat out.

West’s eyebrows went up and he nodded. “Very well, then.”

Steve watched him turn around to go back to his experiments. Angry that his obvious distress was being ignored he called out, “When do I get a bath? And you said something about dinner before you killed me. I do at least get that, don’t I?”

West sighed audibly and turned around looking very put out. “Yes, you can have dinner, and I’m sure that we can arrange some sort of bath. The problem remains that you will very likely attempt to kill me upon your release from the restraints. I will think on the situation and once I’m sure that you can be safely released, I’ll see to those needs as well as a fresh set of clothing.”

“You didn’t already have plans?” Steve shouted in disbelief.

West seemed to very narrowly avoid rolling his eyes. “No, Mr. Rogers, I did not. As I have already informed you, I did not expect you to live more than a few minutes. But here we are, aren’t we? Now if you could be so helpful as to be quiet, I can try to think of a way to resolve this situation.”
Steve groaned and shifted angrily on the table out of a petulant desire to throw something. His breathing, while a bit calmer, was still accelerated and his panic, not yet gone. He focused on his anger — something he had an abundance of at the moment — to distract him from the utter helplessness of his predicament.

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Hours had passed and hunger and dehydration had begun to set in. Steve’s stomach was loudly stating its need for food and his mouth was so dry that his tongue was starting to crack. Steve was contemplating risking some kind of punishment for disturbing West, anything to get some water for the horrible pounding in his head, when West snapped his notebook shut.

“Alright, that’s enough for today,” he declared, as he walked towards the stairway that led up to the clinic.

Steve worked his jaw and bit his tongue to get enough saliva in his mouth to speak. “Oh come on. You’re not really just gonna leave me here in my own piss and shit, are you?”

“You really are a snappish young man. Are you certain that this was a personality trait of yours prior to your reanimation?” West asked testily as he paused on the stairs and turned around to face Steve.

“Quite.”

“Well, be that as it may, you are highly unpleasant. At any rate, I’m going out to the hardware store to acquire some needed materials. After that, I will return and make my preparations for your release. Does that meet with your approval, Mr. Rogers?”

“Not really, but I guess it’ll do. Can I have some water before you go?”

He heard footsteps as West descended the stairs back down into the basement. “Are you dehydrated?”

“Never worse in my life,” Steve answered honestly.

West pressed his thumb against Steve bony ankles and pinched up skin. Then he peered under Steve’s eyelids and into his mouth. “Yes, you are quite dehydrated. Here, I’ll make the choice yours. A drink of water or a bag of Ringer’s.”

The drink of water was so appealing, but Steve knew the relief wouldn’t last. A quick swallow of water, all that Steve suspected West would have the patience to pour into his mouth, would soothe his tongue and throat but nothing more. On the other hand, Ringer’s would provide both hydration and a bit of energy.

“Both?” he asked hopefully.

“Yes, alright. I can accommodate that. I do suppose that you were on your deathbed and quite ill only a few hours ago. I’ll be back.”

And with that, West clumped up the stairs, muttering to himself about something Steve couldn’t quite make out. He was half concerned that West would go off on his errands, leaving him to shrink up under the exam light in the basement, but after only another minute, West trudged back down the stairs.

Steve did his best not to scowl when West dumped the supplies on Steve’s bare and recently poked
chest. “I suppose the crooks of your arms have been poked enough in recent days. I guess we’ll go with your forearm then.”

Steve reminded himself that West did not actually have any sympathy, that he was simply playing a part, but he had to admit that it was nice not to be stuck yet again in a bruise.

“There we are,” West said as he hung the bag on a pole.

Steve watched as he was able, since he still couldn’t lift his head, as West got a cup and filled it from the tap. He was prepared for most of the water to go all over his face, but instead West set the cup aside and undid the strap over Steve’s head. Gently, he slid a hand behind Steve’s head and lifted Steve up to meet the cup with his lips.

Despite the not too tender mercies of West, he was more patient than Steve expected, not hurrying the process along or choking Steve by accident.

“Better, yes?” he asked

“Quite,” Steve agreed, and then added, “Thank you.”

He meant it, though he hated that fact. But anger aside, there could be no harm in being polite to his captor so he rested on that, rather than feeling dirty for thanking the maniacal bastard to whom he felt so frustratingly grateful.

This time when West turned to leave, Steve said nothing.
By the time that Steve heard the front door to the clinic open, he had been forced to piss himself. It didn’t particularly add to the indignity of the situation, as that particular ship had long since sailed, but he hadn’t found it pleasant either.

In any case, Steve was disappointed when the footsteps turned up instead of down as West mounted the stairs. He listened until his ears were no longer able to make out the goings-on above him, though at one point he did hear a great banging that echoed down. Thankfully, West wasn’t too long upstairs before Steve could hear feet scuffling on the treads and whine that one of the risers gave out between the first and second floors when he stepped too close to the edge of the tread. And then West was bustling into the room.

“Everything is in place,” he declared with great enthusiasm. “You can retain your room upstairs, I’ve successfully outfitted it to meet our needs for the time being. So let’s get you ready to head up there.”

Steve raised his head to watch West, pleased that his field of vision had improved so dramatically without the headstrap. But instead of gathering supplies, West drew an ampule out of his lab coat pocket and broke the top off.

“I thought you were done poking me for a while,” remarked Steve as he watched West draw the contents into yet another syringe.

“It occurred to me that the safest way to get you from here to your room would be to sedate you. I’m not keen to carry you as you are though, so I’ll give you a wash down once you’re out. You should wake in about two hours. On the upside, I won’t be poking you,” West explained. Steve watched as West punctured the tubing from the IV and depressed the plunger, the cold drug seeping into his arm a few moments later.

It took a minute for the drugs to hit, but when they did Steve knew it, time seeming to slow as if everything were moving through molasses. He watched drowsily as West gathered a stack of hand towels, an unpleasant looking brush, and filled a basin with water from the tap across the room. When everything was settled, he pulled up a stool and sat next to Steve, watching and waiting as the sedative took effect.

Steve’s body felt heavy, and he was tired like he hadn’t slept in days. He wanted to sink into the table because even lying down wasn’t enough to abate the sensation of ultimate exhaustion. He turned his head slowly and blinked up at West who smiled eerily.

“How are you feeling, Mr. Rogers?”

“Tired,” he slurred.

“Mmm,” replied West with a nod. Then, he took Steve’s hand in his. “Can you squeeze my hand?”

Steve lifted his head with great effort and looked at his hand with furrowed brows. The hand-shaped thing at the end of what must be an arm certainly seemed like it was his, but the fingers only moved a little when he tried. He blinked and his head thunked back onto the metal table uncomfortably.

“That’s fine, Mr. Rogers. It just means the sedation is working. Relax into it.”
Steve nodded, only aware of the word “relax” which seemed like very much the right thing to do. He was dimly aware of the IV in his arm being removed and then the straps of the table being loosened, but it all seemed so far away. He closed his eyes and let himself drift off.

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Waking up yet again, Steve found himself in his room on the fourth floor, afternoon light filtering in through the window. He blinked and felt around. He was clothed and blessedly clean, though the thought of West stripping him naked and cleaning him was more nauseating than his previous state had been.

He sat up then, and took in his room. The first thing he noticed was the heavy chain coming from the wall and terminating in a band around his ankle, and he pulled his leg up to examine it. The manacle was thickly wrapped in strips of cloth, something strangely considerate in Steve’s opinion, but underneath the wrappings was a solid, rusty leg iron, each side of the joint fixed with a lock. He sighed and looked around. There was an old chamber pot by the wall and a small desk with a chair, none of which had previously been in his room.

But most importantly, at least at the moment, was the full plate of food, the glass, and the pitcher of water set out on the desk. Eating didn’t seem like something the dead would be interested in, but then Steve didn’t have a lot of experience in the business of being dead. Furthermore he wasn’t really dead, was he? He was up and moving, breathing and thinking, his heart beating steadily in his chest. He figured that the specifics were unimportant, and would most likely wait until after a meal and some sleep. Slowly, because the sedative still had him woozy and a little off balance, Steve crawled out of bed and staggered over to the small desk. He flopped down in the chair and focused on eating until the plate was empty and the pitcher half drained.

Full and rehydrated, Steve finally focused his attention on the medieval device keeping him prisoner. He stood, and the manacle sat heavily on his foot, loose enough to irritate the top of his instep but not so much that he could remove it. The chain dragged noisily behind him as he walked across the bare hardwood floor. He sat down where West had clearly pried boards off the wall and then replaced them. After a moment of examination, Steve got up, went to the table, took the spoon, and then came back to the wall, using it to pry at the boards. They came away with little effort and then Steve was left to examine the utter hopelessness of the situation — the chain was wrapped around the chimney and padlocked in place.

Steve briefly entertained the notion of breaking the chimney apart, but it would take months of work to scrape away enough mortar to weaken the chimney. Nevermind that said scraping would have to be done clandestinely and with a spoon. There was no way that West wouldn’t eventually notice, assuming that he didn’t catch Steve in the act at some point. Steve sighed and replaced the boards.

The curtains were drawn back to let in some light, and Steve walked towards them with the vain hope that he could throw open the sash to call for help. But the chain wasn’t long enough for that, stopping around six feet short of the window and no amount of leaning or stretching would be enough to reach and open the window.

Temporarily defeated, Steve trudged back to the bed. He sat there, trying to put together some plan of escape. There had to be a way out that Steve simply hadn’t considered, but nothing came to mind, and the more blanks he drew, the more frantic his mind grew until his breath came in hitching sobs, tears streaming down his face. Steve pulled his legs in close, wrapping his arms around them.

But as soon as he did it, Steve sniffled and wiped his eyes, angry at himself for feeling so hopeless...
after only a few minutes. Of course the easy and obvious escape routes were blocked, but so what? When had something like ease ever played a part in his life? Giving up this easily, giving in to the situation, was stupid and pathetic. Bucky would punch him in the shoulder and tell him to get his shit together and stop moping. His mother, God rest her soul — whatever the hell that meant at this point — would sternly remind Steve that life wasn’t about what was easy but what had to be done. She had always firmly believed that with an open mind and an open heart the opportunity that was needed would present itself — well with that and a fair amount of prayer. Steve wasn’t feeling particularly like praying, still trying to wrangle what he had seen and been through into something he could understand, but he knew his mother was right. He had to keep his head up, his wits about him, and bide his time.

He wiped his eyes again, drawing away the last of the tears, and let go of his legs, crossing them on the bed instead. That position only lasted a few moments before he readjusted, one of the locks digging into his opposite calf. He tried to turn his thoughts back to escape, but his brain quickly rebelled, the panic from earlier shutting down any useful thoughts on the topic.

Instead, Steve decided to draw, so he clunked over to the bookshelf, grabbing his carrying case and sketchbook. Back on the bed, he fished out the charcoal, shutting out all his other thoughts, and let the picture flow out of him.

When he stopped and looked critically at what he had drawn sometime later, he shuddered. It was a rendering of a starscape. To someone who didn’t know what they were looking at, the drawing, while well executed, was nothing spectacular. But Steve knew that it was the Void.

On the third day of captivity, Steve made one poorly thought-out attempt at escape. He listened for the sound of someone coming up the stairs and then carefully, holding the chain off the floor to keep his movement silent, he crept over to wait beside the door which was the full extension of the chain’s reach. He readied himself for the attack, laying down the chain, planting his feet, and using both hands to take up a leg which he had liberated from the chair.

His heart was racing and he breathed shallowly. This might be his chance to escape, and he knew he had one shot to swing the leg.

The footsteps hit the third floor landing and then turned, coming up the last flight. Steve tightened his grip as the door creaked open, and he swung, putting his entire weight behind the blow.

West caught the leg one-handed and glared at Steve for a moment before wrenching it away and throwing it down the stairs.

“That was rude,” he stated angrily. “I have been a considerate caregiver so far, good meals, fine accomodations, I even went to the trouble of furnishing your room before I brought you up. And yet, here you are, trying to kill me. I’m not sure that you weren’t negatively affected by the reanimation; these violent tendencies are hardly typical behavior for you, Mr. Rogers.”

“Well, you hadn’t murdered me, kept me prisoner, or used me for medical experiments either. Maybe my opinion of you has changed,” Steve shot back angrily.

West stepped through the door and slammed it hard behind himself. “Do not test me, Mr. Rogers.”

“Oh no,” Steve deadpanned, his eyes narrowed. “Are you going to kill me again?”

West huffed in exasperation and set the dinner plate down on the table. “Sit on the bed,” he
ordered brusquely.

“No.”

West’s eyebrows went up. “I believe I’ve misheard you.”

“No, you didn’t. I’m done playing guinea pig.”

West laughed and went to sit on the bed himself. Steve stayed motionless by the door, the chain still taut, and watched. West drew a syringe, though not the kind he brought for samples, and an ampule out of his lab coat pocket.

“I can simply drug you into compliance again. I’ll keep you like that if I need to. I hear that some people, usually those with weak constitutions such as yours, become highly addicted to these substances and will do whatever is requested of them in order to get more. Would you prefer that to be the basis of our relationship?”

Ice spread through Steve’s veins. West would do it, he knew. Steve might be able to fight the addiction, but he wouldn’t be able to fight West. And worse, he wouldn’t even have the company of his own mind, instead drugged into a perpetual stupor. It would prevent any further plans of escape, he would be too addled for that, but it would also weaken him significantly. The fear of such a fate already had him taking a step forward towards West without conscious intent.

He stopped after the first step and stared. Maybe he could bargain something. Sedatives, particularly the addictive ones that West was promising, were harder to come by in the last few years as laws had begun to crack down on their import. Keeping Steve addicted might be an option, but it would be a costly one.

“I want more art supplies and some books to read,” Steve said. It wasn’t a particularly useful move in terms of escape, but the thought of nothing to do for an indeterminate period of time was nearly more terrifying than the captivity itself.

West glared at Steve, but didn’t move. “What makes you think I would give you that?”

“Because it’s cheaper than getting that much heroin. That is what you intend to use isn’t it?”

West frowned, and the muscles around his jaw tightened for a moment. “And what will you be giving me in return?”

“I won’t attack you anymore, and I’ll let you draw my blood without a fight,” Steve promised.

Silence followed that, but Steve continued to stare into West’s eyes, the intensity of the madness there nothing compared to the incomprehensibility of the realm of Yog-Sothoth.

“Fine, but don’t think this little incident will go unpunished,” West replied.

Steve nodded, unsurprised, and swallowed, hoping that whatever West had planned wasn’t completely unbearable. Then, mustering his courage, he walked to the bed, sat down, and offered his arm to West.

*****

The next day and a half definitely drove home West’s point. West arrived at breakfast without food or water, and silently stuck Steve in the arm. He didn’t return until after dinnertime, again with just the needle.
By the following morning, Steve’s head throbbed, and his heart was skipping nearly every other beat. He swore his heart nearly stopped altogether when the doorknob turned. But West was stern faced and empty-handed. Steve wondered wozily if West really was going to kill him again, his experiment being complete, but he was too worried about the answer to actually ask.

When the door opened sometime in the early evening, West walked in carrying a larger than normal dinner and a pitcher of water.

“Harboring any more delusions of escape?” he asked cheerily.

Steve’s tongue and throat hurt when he tried to speak and his head felt a little swimmy. “No, sir,” he answered obediently.

“Good. I would hate to have to continue this lesson. It would likely end in more of that needle-poking you so hate. Now, go ahead and eat and drink. I can wait.”

Steve climbed out of bed and took the tray off the table, setting it on the floor with shaky hands. The maimed chair had been removed and a replacement did not appear to be forthcoming, probably also part of West’s “lesson.”

He settled, his chained ankle outstretched to avoid putting pressure on the manacle, and drained half the water from the pitcher in one long pull. After that, he was too full of water to eat all of the dinner, which he replaced back on the table. Then he moved quietly to the bed and held out his arm.

West shook his head. “Your arms look atrocious. Let’s try your foot instead.”

That was when Steve decided his arms didn’t hurt that bad.

*****

After that very unpleasant episode, Steve’s life settled into one long monotonous slog punctuated only by his newfound hobbies (and of course needles). The bargained-for art supplies arrived after another few days, West apparently having had them ordered. He got a new sketch pad, watercolor paper, colored pencils, charcoal, watercolors, and brushes. It was more than he had ever owned or used combined, and far better quality. He also received three books from the library, a much less costly endeavor.

The regular blood draws continued, but if nothing else, West had switched to much smaller needles and varied the draw sites after discovering just how easy it was to blow out Steve’s veins.

At least it had been easy initially. For the first week and a half, Steve looked like he’d been shooting heroin — his arms, and then feet, littered with bruises and angry red marks where he’d been stuck multiple times in the same place. But after a month or so, the pricks had started healing in less than half the time and the bruises that did remain had all faded to yellow and green. After two months, the marks faded entirely between punctures.

Steve wondered at the change because nothing on him had ever healed quite so quickly, but it wasn’t something he particularly wanted to dwell on. West had changed his body without his consent, and beyond that he still had no say over what happened. Just thinking about the pain and inevitability of the routine had added a layer of despair to his situation, but he did his best to put on a brave face. Needles hardly constituted torture after all, he reasoned.

Still, things were changed, and that was hard to ignore. For one, Steve could now hold his breath better. It wasn’t long, but two minutes was no great effort, and he’d made it up to five one time,
though he nearly passed out from the effort. To Steve, who had spent his entire life gasping for air between his heart defect and his asthma, it seemed like a reasonable improvement.

But his new found talent for breathing was much less pressing than the perpetual sounds from the mortuary. They had begun again in earnest several days after his own death, and though he couldn’t hear the otherworldly shrieks any better than before, since his ears were still too weak to pick them up properly. Nevertheless he could still hear them, their screams echoing in his mind now. Knowing what they were screaming, what they had brought back with them from the Void and the curses that they spewed forth, was worse than when their horrible wailing was merely incomprehensible. Yet as before, when daylight came, the hideousness of the night’s utterances faded, and he was left with a vague sense of unease. However, much unlike before his murder, Steve knew the source of his disquietude.

Still, after a time, Steve grew somewhat inured to the unutterable horrors of his life. Of course it was around that time that a new sense began to niggle at him. Possibly it was that he was so preoccupied with the other frights that he hadn't noticed before, or perhaps it had taken time to develop, but in either case Steve realized that he now had a sense about where West was at all times. It was uncanny and completely illogical — he couldn’t hear West any more than anyone else could hear him dragging his great cast iron chain about the room. But he knew. He knew when West went out, when he was in the basement, when he was in the kitchen. His presence became like an itch that couldn’t be scratched, constantly scrabbling for attention in Steve’s mind.

At first, he thought that it was a product of fancy and boredom, nothing else. But it soon became evident that it was more than that. Steve could predict with unfailing accuracy when West had gone out to collect another poor departed soul, when he had gone to the library (this came with physical evidence as books were usually forthcoming shortly thereafter), and so forth. But as with every other part of his new, and horrifying existence, Steve did his best to put it out of his mind, turning instead to happier thoughts. Usually Bucky.

Bucky was still in training somewhere upstate. The last letter he’d gotten said he’d be there until mid-July before getting a weekend of leave and then being finally mobilized. If nothing else, Bucky was safe, safer than Steve was at the moment, and that was something to hold onto, even if it were only a temporary assurance.

Another something to hold on to was art. Steve began to devote himself to his art, partially due to the help from the instructional books West continued supplying him from the library. He made decent watercolors and increasingly vivid charcoal drawings. He’d never before worked in watercolor, any medium besides charcoal being prohibitively expensive, but with nothing better to do, he gave it a go, sometimes for hours a day.

When Steve did something particularly impressive, West even complimented his work, telling him that in time he could sell it in galleries if he had the inclination. Steve had had to stifle the urge to laugh at West when he’d suggested that, instead giving West a few of the pieces in question, if only to appease his captor. Steve wasn’t sure how, exactly, he would be selling anything anyway, not if he were still trapped in this stupid tiny room. But as he had no use for the growing stacks of art on his bookshelf, giving it away was no great loss. Even so, the praise still felt good, since it came from the only person he had seen or spoken to in over two months.

But praise or not, Steve did not share with West, or even let him see, his work on particular themes, the most important of these being his family. Steve was deep into a recreation of his parents’ wedding photo, one of the two photos that he had of his father, when West came bounding up the stairs. Steve quickly flipped to a new page of his sketch pad and was working on a bird when West burst into the room.
“Excellent news, Mr. Rogers!” he shouted, flinging the door closed behind himself. The afternoon was still early so West must have closed the clinic before normal if he were up here.

“You’re letting me go?” Steve deadpanned.

“Among other things, yes!” West exclaimed. “Though, not just yet, but soon. At any rate, look!” he said holding out a letter.

Steve, stunned into silence at the pronouncement of his impending release, took the letter and began to read.

Herr Herbert West,

Your research has much potential, and we invite you to join us to continue your research. Your laboratory will be fully funded, including access to as many test subjects as you require. Please indicate your interest to the courier of this missive. Travel arrangements will be made once your acceptance is noted.

Regards,

Obergruppenführer Johann Schmidt

Unsure of what he just read beyond the implications that many more people would undoubtedly suffer at West’s hands, Steve held the letter back out to West who took it joyfully.

“The idiots at Johns Hopkins and Columbia have denied the validity of my work for years! But now, someone is listening!” West nearly jumped with excitement, clearly barely containing his exuberance.

“They’re Nazis!” Steve shouted. “Surely you can see that” he stopped then, realizing exactly who he was talking to. “You’ll fit in well,” he conceded quietly.

“Yes! And finally I will be able to expand and improve my work! Oh, how I’ve waited for this day!” West shouted, seemingly unaware of the cloud of judgment coming from the vicinity of the bed.

Steve stared, still in shock but also with a growing sense of horror. His suffering had been, to the best of his knowledge, the worst that West had inflicted upon anyone, but the thought of it being spread was more than Steve could stand.

“What happens to me?” Steve asked quietly. West was frequently obtuse, and “letting him go” could actually mean killing him.

“Once I leave, you’ll be free to do as you please. As I will no longer have a need for the clinic, you could continue to live here until the building is repossessed by the bank.”

“Do you plan to unchain me prior to your leaving or do you just mean I can live here until I die of thirst and starvation?”

“Oh, I’ll make sure you’re freed once I’m safely away. I no longer have need of you. The level of solution in your veins has been stable for over a week now. I will continue to test it for now, but I do not believe you contain any further data of value,” West said, still grinning maniacally.

“How long until you go with this ‘Johann Schmidt’?” Steve asked, still disbelieving of the promise of freedom.
“Next Monday,” West answered with a clap of his hands. “This calls for celebration. I shall buy us an expensive dinner. You choose the venue. Obviously, you won’t be going. But I will go out and get it for us. Do you have anything you wish to eat?”

Steve’s mouth gaped open. “Um, uh, cheesecake, I guess. That’d be nice.” Cheesecake was always a favorite of his and Bucky’s if they ever had the money to split a slice.

“Excellent!” West called as he bounded down the stairs.

The stairs squeaked and groaned as West descended, seemingly taking them two at a time, and Steve set his drawing aside, staring instead at the far wall. The mingled hope and excitement of freedom turned sour with dread of West having means and sponsorship. Something had to be done, West had to be stopped. Steve resolved to do whatever he could, even if it meant killing West before he could be freed, even if it meant that he would starve or die of thirst.

But by the time that West had returned with dinner, Steve had still not come up with a suitable way to kill West. His old heavy bronze chamber pot had been replaced with something of less blunt force potential after the chair leg incident — namely a bakelite cookie jar with a fruit design glazed onto the side of it. It had no practical use as a weapon; In fact, virtually everything that could be used was either bolted to the floor or removed. That left hand-to-hand combat which, given Steve’s last attempt, could only go poorly.

The return of West, some indeterminate amount of time later, was not unanticipated, Steve’s sense of West’s proximity alerting him long before the man ever entered the clinic. Steve smelled him coming up the stairs before he heard him, the aroma of steak wafting up the stairs like a siren call that made his stomach rumble and his muscles quiver with anticipation.

West handed Steve his portion and sat on the floor by the wall, eating his own portion and nattering about all of the preparations that he had to make before his departure. Steve listened out of a sense of desperation, hoping against reason that he might be able to use some of the information to the end of stopping him.

The steak, which had smelled so good, tasted bland and uninteresting next to his terror that West would be unleashed on the world. The rare treat of good meat, fresh vegetables, and dessert was completely lost on Steve given his current preoccupations. Before he knew it, Steve was alone again, his fancy dinner over and he no closer to escape or stopping West.
Monday rolled around and Steve sat in his room, sweating as the summer sun beat in through the closed window. West was leaving, and apparently doing so without killing him yet again, something which Steve was quite pleased about. When Steve had gotten up the gall to ask why, West had admitted that he simply didn’t want to destroy his most successful experiment to date, nothing more. Something about his continued existence being predicated on West’s monumental ego was not entirely reassuring, but Steve kept that thought to himself.

The clinic clearly hadn’t been opened that day. There was a distinct lack of life in the building, though Steve wasn’t sure how he knew since his hearing had not experienced such a precipitous improvement as did his healing ability. At any rate, he knew West was down there. He’d been up only an hour or so earlier to bring Steve a hearty breakfast and give him a few final directives, which mostly boiled down to “the keys are on the counter, lock up if you go out.”

Steve was entirely tempted to go out and not come back in for any reason, but he also had no better place to live at the moment and he wasn’t so stupid as to render himself homeless without a solid reason. He sighed and continued to watch the wall, counting the nail heads that were visible on the wood panelling.

When he’d made it about three feet from the corner, which amounted to exactly twenty-two nails, Steve sensed West beginning to trudge up the stairs. Steve drew a deep breath and waited anxiously. West’s general state of madness rendered him impossible to predict — murderous for the sake of experimentation, inflicting torture to control his experimental subject, but then considerate of Steve’s boredom and lack of freedom in ways that almost made him seem normal at times. All that to say that the possibility of death remained.

The doorknob turned and Steve’s hands balled into fists, ready for a last attempt at survival should it come to that. And then West stepped in carrying a block of… ice? Of all the things that Steve had expected, this was decidedly not on the list, and his list had become quite extensive as of late.

“The keys are in here, the ones to your manacle I mean. You don’t really have a quick way to chip them out so you’ll have to wait for it to melt. Shouldn’t take too long with this summer heat. At any rate, I shall be long gone by the time you have freed yourself. I wouldn’t suggest calling the police, as they’re likely to simply lock you away in an asylum for the stories you’d tell.

“My ride is waiting downstairs. Good luck, Mr. Rogers. You’re an intelligent man. I’m sure you’ll find employ somewhere suitable. I’ve enjoyed working with you,” West said with a smile and an outstretched hand.

Steve fought down the urge to punch West. He couldn’t stop him now, and there was really no reason to get himself killed in the last moments of his captivity. So he took West’s hand and put on a fake smile, something that Steve had learned West couldn’t perceive in his madness.

“You too,” he said.

West clapped him on the shoulder and then turned to make his way down the stairs without another word.

Steve sighed, sat on the floor, and watched the ice melt.
Steve walked down the sidewalk, blinking hard in the direct sunlight. The air was both fresh and stale at once, a factor of the close packed quarters of Brooklyn and the industry buildings not far from the clinic. But the wind blew strongly enough, refreshingly enough, that to Steve it seemed the purest air he’d ever had the pleasure of sampling. Between the fresh-ish air, the bright sun, and the general pleasure of freedom, it didn’t seem to Steve to take any time at all to make it to the Brooklyn Bridge.

His calves burned on the few stairs that it took to make it to the main walking platform, though his left leg less so than his right. Steve sighed, knowing that he owed the weakness to two months of confinement; his left leg’s relative strength owing to the manacle and chain. But those thoughts were easy to put out of his mind.

Up on the bridge, the wind came up in great gusts. It seemed to wash away the stagnant air, so long upon Steve’s skin, like a hot shower stripping away dirt and grime. He felt clean, the smog notwithstanding, and paused to lean against the railing and look towards the morning sun. Closing his eyes, he listened to the sounds of the world moving around him — voices, cars, trolleys, the horn of a tugboat, the bang of hammers on wood at a construction site a few blocks away, the piercing cries of seagulls yammering for a snack. It was a gentle cacophony, the sounds of mortal life — sweet, chaotic, and woven together into a melody that soothed Steve’s nerves after his prolonged incarceration.

After a time, the warmth of the sun on his face became unpleasant. He had been too long inside, having lost what little tan and protection against the sun that he had. Reluctantly Steve turned, going back across the bridge towards Brooklyn.

Steve walked until his legs were tired, which took less time than he wished. Having no particular destination and no pressing matters to attend to, Steve turned back to the clinic. He was careful to slip in the back, the front having signs clearly posted that said “Closed for business.” It wouldn’t do him any good to attract attention to his presence.

He made himself a sandwich and looked around at his surroundings for a place to sit and eat. There had never been a table in the kitchenette. West had always eaten at the desk in his study, and Steve had sat on an empty exam table or eaten in his room. Neither his room nor the exam rooms held any appeal, so he hopped up on the counter and set his lunch in his lap.

The clinic still smelled like life. People had been in by the dozens just three days ago, and something of their presence remained. But even as Steve focused on that feeling, he felt it slipping away, the emptiness closing around him. Steve shuddered and wolfed down the rest of his lunch.

He sat on the counter feeling full but tired, and utterly bereft of meaning or indeed of anything to do. As awful as it had been, West’s ever tangible presence in his mind had been his only company. But all morning that ever-present connection had been slipping farther and farther away, leaving him alone in a new yet no more pleasing way.

All of the sudden, Steve’s connection to West suddenly began to stretch rapidly. Steve followed the sensation with his eyes, though he could see nothing but the opposite wall, as West disappeared into the east. Towards the Nazis and Germany.

The horror of what West was heading off to do struck him again, and Steve’s resolve to stop him at all costs returned in full force. It took a mustering of courage, but after several deep and satisfying breaths, he hopped down from the counter and went to West’s office. Steve wasn’t holding out any hope of finding something useful in whatever notes he found — if indeed any were left to find — but he had to at least look.
The office, unlike most of the rooms in the clinic, was almost spacious, but bookshelves and filing cabinets lined the walls, closing in on Steve. He was aware they were the source of his claustrophobia, but that did not lessen the fear that made his stomach turn. The faint smell of embalming fluid and West’s own particular odor lingered in the room. Steve closed his eyes for a moment, focusing on his surroundings, and reassuring himself that West was not lurking nearby, about to spring out and attack him for this trespass.

Although reassured of his own solitude, Steve moved furtively as he checked through the office. The first three filing cabinets yielded patient records, the fourth financial records, and the fifth was locked. Steve fished around in the desk for the key, finding it under a wooden tray so snugly fit into the pen drawer so as to appear to be integral to it.

The top drawer of the cabinet rolled out effortlessly, and Steve peered inside, only to find it empty. The second drawer held cast-off pages, some with typos and others covered in the distinctive scribbles that passed for writing with most doctors. These he pulled out and organized neatly in piles on the desk. There were also two untouched notebooks, a case of inkpots, and a mostly empty box of pen nibs. Steve appropriated these as well, knowing that setting most of these notes into order might well require a rewriting of the majority of them.

Steve moved on to the third drawer, which was empty. But the fourth was not. Inside there were more than two-hundred folders marked on the tabs with dates. Steve pulled them out in bunches and sat down on the floor with the stacks arrayed in front of him.

Subject: Male of European descent
Age: 47
Cause of death: Probable heart failure
Height: 5’ 9”
Weight: approx. 160 lbs
Approx. length of death prior to infusion: 16.25 hrs
Infusion volume: 2 L
Blood drain volume: 1.73 L
Approx. Length of Reanimation: 110 sec
Notes: Approx. 20 sec after the solution was administered, the subject’s heartbeat was detected. Breathing resumed after 27 sec. At 35 sec the subject appeared to gain consciousness, the eyes opening and gazing about the room. The subject began to struggle violently at this time, hissing and growling, and emitting noises much as the other subjects have. However, this one, much as the past three subjects, hurled some vulgarity of death, chanting:
Y’AI/NG’NGAH
YOG-SOTHOTH
HEE-L’GEB
F’AI THRODOG
UAAAH
This is the best transliteration of the words that I may make. These words seem to have some meaning to the creature, but the subject was unable to answer any of my questions and its consciousness soon subsided into guttural cries.
Some 75 sec after administration of the solution, the subject entered respiratory arrest, subsiding into unconsciousness around 95 sec. Final cardiac arrest occurred at 110 sec.

Steve read the report twice more before setting it down. He was shivering and his hands were shaking. The words recorded in the report, though not spoken aloud, reverberated in his bones and sent chills up his spine. He remembered the cold of the table seeping into him, chilling him until he thought he might have died of hypothermia. But it was the horrors of the past subjects that gave
the table its chill he knew, having somehow made the table supernaturally cold, impervious to the 
heat of the lamp or his body, whether living, or dead.

The table.

Steve was somehow drawn to touch it, to feel the cold against his skin. He wanted to hear the call 
of Yog-Sothoth in the Void, the call renewed by the notes found in the cabinet, now echoing in his 
mind. He wanted to be connected to the tortured dead who had gone before and come after, though 
the logical part of his mind told him that this was senseless.

As if possessed by some greater purpose, uninterested in reason or logic, Steve sprung up from the 
floor, ran out of the office, and rushed down the stair to the basement. He froze the moment that 
his feet hit the floor and he looked around. The bravado from moments before was gone. He was 
suddenly a scared young man, standing in a room of unnatural horrors, in the scene of his own 
murder. He swallowed and flipped the switch on the wall.

A small bulb in the far corner, above the mop sink, flickered timidly, but it was enough for him to 
make it to the work area. The drapes had been tied back, most likely in the service of moving out 
the more important equipment as several large pieces were missing. Steve fumbled with the switch 
on the back of the lamp and started when it buzzed to life. Heat rose around it, little waves 
distorting the air, and Steve stared through this bent reality at the table.

It was clean, as it always was between uses, and Steve reached out to touch. Unsurprisingly, it was 
cold. But it wasn’t so cold that he felt as though he would be pulled into death at any moment. It 
was just a table. No colder than the counter which he had stumbled back to lean against, or the air 
of the room.

The realization that the table was simply a table took Steve’s breath away. Not because he 
expected anything else. On the contrary, he had known that this would be the result, though clearly 
some part of him wanted it to be otherwise. The shock, then, came from the realization that if the 
table was not preternatural, neither was West. West was simply a bastard, a genius yes, but more 
importantly a bastard. West had no supernatural anything about him, just an implacable desire to 
best death regardless of what he had to do in order to achieve it.

It wasn’t a new line of thought for Steve, in fact it was well worn. But reading the notes and 
adding them to what he knew of the experiments, both firsthand and from his nightly auditory 
torment, and then a visit to the mortuary, it felt new. And not just new, but unbearable, intolerable, 
immeasurably more horrifying.

West hadn’t just murdered him and brought him back to life. He had done it methodically, 
carefully, and knowing the torment of the reanimated, he had done it without regard for Steve’s 
potential suffering. And he had documented it all meticulously, as though Steve was no more than 
a lab rat.

Steve was overcome by the need to flee the basement, to bound up the stairs to escape and never 
return to this subterranean hell. But he also knew that if he left he would never work up the nerve 
to come back. Mustering every ounce of willpower, Steve calmed himself with the promise that he 
would never again descend those stairs if he could gather his wits enough to search for anything of 
value while he was there.

The search, which sapped the remainder of Steve’s energy, turned up nothing whatsoever. Both 
frustrated and relieved, Steve mustered a last burst of speed when he turned out the little sink 
light, bolted up the stairs, and locked the door to the basement. He then sagged against the wall and 
slid exhausted to the floor. He was scared and wished that Bucky was around to help him make
sense of it all.

But Bucky wasn’t there and Steve was no longer holding out hope that he would see Bucky alive again. When Bucky first left for training, Steve had thought he’d see him again, but now death no longer seemed so unbeatable, no matter how hard someone fought. Men just like Bucky were coming home in boxes everyday, and Steve had begun to steel himself to the reality that Bucky would likely be among them sooner or later.

For a moment, a sense of helplessness and the inevitability of mortality overwhelmed Steve, holding him immobile like the straps on the table that had once held him immobile. Sitting on the floor in the hall, the idea of somehow stopping West seemed beyond anything he could be capable of. But he knew that capable or not, the responsibility fell to him.

Steve staggered to his feet and went back to the office. The piles of folders loomed dauntingly and exhaustion overwhelmed Steve. Leaving everything as it was, he shut the door against the horrors there and stumbled back up the stairs. Once in his room, Steve threw open the window for the first time since he had died and fell asleep on his bed.

*****

Steve, worn out by the previous day’s exertions, slept through dinnertime and well into the next morning. He arose and made for the kitchen. The only disappointment of West’s distance, which had grown significantly since the late afternoon of the previous day, was that Steve now had to cook his own meals. Blessedly, the refrigerator was well-stocked as promised, and Steve had plenty of ingredients from which to draw.

While a quiche that would be breakfast for two or three days to come was baking in the oven, Steve went back to the office with the egg timer. He sat in the same place as the day before, the small electric light in the ceiling glowing steadily. Steve thumbed through the folders, opening each only long enough to ascertain the basics of the record before snapping them shut and setting them aside, not keen on repeating the panicked reactions of the day before.

However, most folders were empty, with only a date on the tab, but no content. Some records had no notes at all, save for the results of a few lab tests and times of death. Only a few contained the kind of detailed notes Steve had found in the first folder. He was counting the folders dated within the last year, when the egg timer dinged and Steve jumped back, hitting his head on the corner of the desk.

“Shit,” he muttered.

He stalked back out to the kitchen, extracted the quiche from the oven, and set it on a trivet to cool before retreating back to the files.

Based on the file folders that he had, there were one-hundred and sixty-two test subjects within the past calendar year. References to “Mr. Barnes’ indispensable assistance” appeared in no fewer than twenty-six of those. Steve set the stack of those folders aside and sighed, letting his head flop back against the desk intentionally this time.

Honestly, Steve couldn’t tell what to make of Bucky’s participation in West’s experiments. He had hoped before that, much like himself, Bucky had been relegated to preparation of the corpses only, but the records made it clear that Bucky had done much more than simple embalming.

Steve’s stomach growled, but the smell of quiche mingled with the remaining odor of embalming fluid and his hunger evaporated nearly immediately. Foregoing breakfast for the time being, Steve
tried to put Bucky out of his mind as yet another loose end that he might not be able to tie up. There were seven more files to be read in the second stack that he had pulled from the drawer, and he was determined to get through at least that much before taking a break. But the seventh and final file was not what Steve expected, detailing instead the reanimation of a cat.

Animals, unlike people, could disappear in droves from the streets of Brooklyn to no one’s great disappointment and that was apparently the source of this particular subject. He scanned the file quickly and set it aside, flipping quickly through the stack in front of him, his disgust quickly overriding his exhaustion. Bucky had apparently been tasked with collecting the cats for West’s experiments and finding suitable ways to render them dead. The further back in the reports Steve went, the more crude the practices became, going from phenol injections to the heart such as the one Steve had suffered, to drowning, to an awl to the base of the skull, to having their throats slit. Steve wasn’t exactly an animal lover, but he would never abide by torturing them either, something Bucky had been clearly complicit in.

After fifty files, the reports began to detail dogs. After another seventy-four, rabbits. Most of these files were intact with all the pages accounted for. Steve read only a few, the results as fruitless as the human experiments, the exception being himself of course.

But nowhere was there any reference to the solution or its chemical makeup which was what Steve had wanted. He wasn’t much of a chemist — he took the requisite semester in high school and managed to burn his hands to a sickly yellow with nitric acid at least three times, something which he remembered vividly due to the intense pain. But besides becoming more careful with chemicals, he hadn’t possessed any interest in the subject and only passed with an A due to determination. After the class ended he promptly forgot everything.

Still, he could read, and finding some particulars about the solution that was used on him could provide useful information, both for himself and to help stop West. And in lieu of stopping West, he hoped maybe he could undo his work.

Frustrated and hungry, though without appetite after the morning’s reading, Steve put all the files back in the drawer just as he had found them and went to the kitchen to plate up a bit of quiche and think.

*****

It took Steve until the end of the day to sort through the cast-off papers that he found in the second drawer of the filing cabinet. Most of them were remnants of hastily scribbled notes from experiments, nearly entirely illegible save for the few that were written by Bucky, something which Steve struggled not to dwell on. Other sheets were pages of notes that had been typed up for the official report, but had been botched at some point and then relegated to the trash drawer, as Steve thought of it.

“Subject is combative and frequently displays outbursts of anger and violence. It attacked me with a chair leg today. Thankfully, the subject’s strength has not improved due to reanimation. Interestingly, the subject, whose faculties remain diminished, is capable of great artistic feats. It would be my current assessment that subject is operating on a primitive level of thought, much like the Neanderthal. It is capable of drawing and speech, but is not developed in any civilized capacity.

“It negotiated, though without any capital with which to bargain, for art supplies and books after attacking me. I acquiesced in order to better observe its behavior. It assured me of its compliance in exchange for these items, though its weak constitution means that its resistance presents no clear obstacle for continued observation.
“If possible, I will procure the subject’s art for inclusion into the file at a later date.”

Steve stared at the paper, but didn’t read it again. Reading about himself — a “subject,” an “it,” no more than a thing — reminded him of the table. No matter how hard he had struggled, West had been uninterested in Steve’s pleas. He could recall the sting of the needles in his neck, the stab of the drain tube in his thigh, the excruciating burning of the embalming fluid in his veins, and terrible, unbearable fear as West drove the needle into his heart.

His hands were shaking and he blinked hard to hold back the tears. Very deliberately, Steve laid the page back on the desk, smoothing it with both hands and angrily wiping his eyes. He had a job to do — understanding and stopping West. Crying wouldn’t solve that and it wouldn’t change what had already happened. Dredging up as much determination and energy as he could, Steve picked up the next sheet and began to read.
Chapter 6

The Thursday after West left, Steve had gone out for a walk after another failed attempt at enlisting in the Army. He was still living alone in the clinic for lack something better, and he wanted to walk somewhere that felt more like home while he tried to figure out the steps that came between Brooklyn and standing over West’s corpse.

Without thinking, Steve’s feet had landed him outside the Barnes’ family home. From the street, Steve could hear Winnie’s excited voice and the reply of Bucky’s gentle tenor through the open window. Steve felt like the world had inverted, the clock turned back. Every bad thing that had happened in the last two months was washed away with the only thing in the world that could sound like family anymore.

He hadn’t meant to go there, in fact he had planned on staying a reasonable distance away from them. Bucky was supposed to be home sometime that week, but there was so much that had happened since Bucky left. Steve didn’t know what he would say, what he could say.

“Hi, Buck. How was basic? Since you left, your former employer, the one you were defiling corpses with, murdered me, then brought me back to life, and held me captive. Just thought you should know.” It was petty and blaming Bucky couldn’t fix it. Besides, Bucky was going off to war. His pack would be heavy enough as it was; why should Steve stuff all his shit in there, too?

Steve knew he should walk away, go back to the clinic, and not come back out until he was sure that Bucky was gone. But Mrs. Barnes had always been a second mother to him, Mr. Barnes his only father, and Bucky his closest friend, not to mention the gaggle of little sisters that made Steve read them bedtime books and help them with their homework. The pull of warm embraces and happy voices was enough that his chest ached right in the same place that West’s needle had gone into his heart, and without meaning to, he turned up the steps of the rowhouse.

He knocked lightly on the door, and it was opened only a moment later by Becca, who screeched in glee and yanked him inside, slamming the door behind them.

“I found Steve!” she shouted, dragging Steve further into the living room. Steve flushed at the attention, but grinned as the smaller Barnes girls barrelled into him all at once.

Bucky laughed as he got up from the sofa. He was all lean muscle and had gotten himself a decent tan with a splash of freckles across his cheekbones. “I think it looks more like Steve found us. Your old landlord said you’d moved out about three months ago. What happened?” Bucky asked as he waited behind his sisters as they disentangled themselves from around Steve’s waist.

Steve’s brain froze for a moment. He was overcome with anger at Bucky for what he had helped West do in that basement, fear for what Bucky might do now if he knew what Steve had become, the intense need to tell someone about the hell he had just survived, and the knowledge that in the end none of it mattered because West was gone and in another day Bucky would be too.

“Found a place a little ways away. It was cheaper. Got a roommate. Sorry I didn’t warn you first,” he lied as he leaned in for a well needed hug.

Bucky wrapped his arms tightly around Steve, holding more firmly than usual. He knew Bucky would never admit it, but Bucky clearly needed the hug as much as Steve did. They held onto each other as long as they could without making a scene in front of Bucky’s folks.
“What’re you doing tonight?” Bucky asked when they parted.


“Nah, Stevie. We got plans,” he replied with a grin.

*****

“Plans” turned out to be the World Exposition of Tomorrow. The whole futuristic sci-fi schtick was more Bucky’s thing, but it was interesting enough. The dames that Bucky had dragged with them were less so.

Steve followed along, checking out the exhibits and demonstrations, but mostly just watching Bucky smile and laugh. Tomorrow he’d be spending the entire day with his family before he reported in just before dinnertime. So tonight was it. It was goodbye.

Steve tried to enjoy it, doing his best to ignore the past because what had happened to him — and whatever role Bucky had played in that — no longer mattered. All that mattered was the present and the future. But after two months of captivity and medical experimentation, Steve was forced to admit that the past had left its mark. This evening with Bucky was everything Steve had longed for — companionship, distraction, normalcy — but he just couldn’t get his head into it. For one thing, after so long without people or conversation, the entire event was overwhelming on a purely sensory level. For another, there was the constant sinking feeling that came with the knowledge that West was out there somewhere, preparing to kill and torture others to who knew what end. Steve had never really found out what the end goal of reanimating the dead was; he only knew that West was obsessed with it, but he felt like there had to be more. Engrossed in memories, fears, and half-formed plans, Steve missed most of the evening lost in thought.

“Hey, pal. What’s going on? You look like someone died,” Bucky asked when they got a moment away from their dates.

Steve shook his head, hating how close to mark Bucky was. “Just got a lot on my mind, Buck. Don’t worry about me.”

Bucky frowned and slung arm around Steve’s shoulders. “I always worry about you, punk.”

Steve smiled a little weakly and went without resistance into the one-armed embrace. “You too, jerk.”

Bucky pulled him along for a short while, and Steve went willingly, happy to feel someone alive against him. No one had touched him after he had died in the basement except for West. He savored the contact and the affection; it was both more than he could handle and not nearly enough.

“So how many times have you tried to enlist since I went off to basic?” Bucky asked after a minute.

“Only once,” Steve answered distractedly.

He was staring off into middle space, not really paying attention, but apparently Bucky followed Steve’s gaze directly to the enlistment office. Bucky stopped walking and let go of Steve, moving instead to stand in front of him where he could look him in the eye. “Don’t tell me you just decided to try again,” he growled in frustration.
It took a moment for Steve to follow Bucky’s train of thought and then he rolled his eyes. “Come on, Buck. We all gotta do our part. I just wanna do mine,” he said, parroting the old fights they had before Bucky had gotten drafted.

Bucky pursed his lips and shook his head, and recited his worn lines as well: Steve could serve by helping the war efforts at home, Steve could do this, Steve could do that. The argument was less of a debate and more of a dance, each leading and following, sticking to the script, their moves well-practiced and easy. By the end of it, Bucky had visibly resigned himself to Steve’s antics, though he would never admit to that.

“Come on. I’ll buy you a funnel cake, and then I gotta walk those girls home,” Bucky said.

Steve nodded, glad that their pretend argument was over, and followed Bucky to the funnel cake stand.

Saying goodbye to Bucky was harder than he expected, especially since Steve no longer harbored any irrational hope that Bucky would be any more likely to be coming back than anyone else. All of Steve’s long ruminations on mortality during his captivity, which created this lack of positivity in the first place, paid off by also taking the sting out of the thought of probable death, though only just.

Bucky, not trying to pretend like things weren’t what they were, walked him back to the enlistment office and left him with a hug, a real hug, not the half thing in the living room that hadn’t been enough for either of them, before heading off to collect his dates.

As soon as Bucky was lost to the crowd, Steve turned and made his way inside to the old familiar reams of paperwork. He worked through the intake forms with the ease of practice, this time listing his address in Midland Park, before stripping down to his boxers to wait.

After what felt like a short wait of only an hour, his perception of time somewhat changed after two months chained to a chimney, Steve was called back to an exam room where an MP watched as a nurse took down his basic information. Then she was gone, and he was left with this guard, something he knew must not be normal. But even so, Steve’s tolerance for “not normal” was extraordinarily high so he waited and picked at a loose thread on the edge of the exam bed.

Steve didn’t have to wait long before a dishevelled middle-aged man with glasses, obviously a doctor, stepped in and shooed away the MP.

“So, you want to go overseas and kill some Nazis?” he asked, in a thick German accent.

“I don’t want to kill anyone, but I do want to stop them,” Steve answered firmly. “They’re doing horrible things over there, much worse than just a war.”

The look of disbelief and annoyance faltered for long enough that Steve could see something that hinted at personal pain in the man’s eyes. But as soon as Steve saw the look, it was gone.

“You’re right,” the man agreed gravely, and extended his hand. “Dr. Abraham Erskine. I work with the Strategic Scientific Reserve.”

“Steve Rogers.”

The man nodded and opened the folder. “So how would Steve Rogers from Midland Park, or it is Paramus, or New Haven? How would he know about those things when most of the military does
not?”

Steve looked down. “It’s complicated.”

“Indeed,” agreed Dr. Erskine. “Well, at any rate I would like to know why you feel so personally responsible for stopping what they are doing. I heard you and your friend earlier. You didn’t tell him why you care so much, but I would like to know.”

Steve swallowed and then lied through his teeth. “I know a woman. Her name is Ethel Rosenbaum. She came over last year and was my neighbor for a while. She said some things.”

Honestly, Steve was just guessing, but the immigrants all seemed to be Jewish, the recent ones anyway, and Steve figured where there was smoke, there was fire.

The doctor nodded. “And you think you are the one to stop such atrocities, then?”

Steve shrugged. “I mean, it’s better than doing nothing. No one deserves to suffer like that. No one.” That sentiment, at least, Steve did not have to fake.

Dr. Erskine nodded. “Come with me. I can offer you a chance, though it is only a chance.”

“I’ll take it.”

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Running, Steve discovered that he might not take sick anymore, and he might be able to breathe deeper, but by no means was his asthma cured. Also, his joints still ached. And his spine. And he couldn’t always hear the drill sergeant. Or see the diagrams in class. He was woefully and terribly unprepared for the rigors of boot camp, especially after two sedentary months, but he kept that fact to himself and pushed on.

Blessedly, it only took a week of that nonsense before Dr. Erskine officially picked Steve for his candidate. That was also when Steve found out what he was in for.

The screen door to the barracks slammed closed behind Steve and he turned to see Dr. Erskine walking towards him, a bottle of liquor in one hand and two glasses in the other. Steve had been moved to this barracks earlier, away from any other recruits, without explanation.

“An experiment? Tomorrow?” Steve asked, desperate to have misunderstood Dr. Erskine’s declaration.

Dr. Erskine nodded from the adjacent bed and arranged the bottle and glasses on top of the foot locker. “Yes, a serum designed to make you stronger, faster, smarter.”

“And I’m the first test subject?” Steve asked, his eyebrows crawling further up his head.

Dr. Erskine tipped his head back and forth a little. “More or less,” he answered with some hesitation.

“And what happened to the first subjects?” Steve asked, closing and setting aside the book he had been reading.

“Subject. There was only one. And it worked to a degree, but it amplifies what’s inside. Good becomes great, bad becomes worse.”

“So why me?”
Erskine picked up the bottle and looked down at it with a sigh. “I suppose that is the only question that matters,” Dr. Erskine replied. He tilted the bottle towards Steve so that he could see the label. “This is from Augsburg. My city. So many people forget that the first country that the Nazis invaded was their own. You know, after the last war the… Germany struggled. We… we felt weak. Germans, they felt small and they wanted someone to blame. And then Hitler comes along with the marching and the big show and the flags and the…and the…” Erskine waves his hand and frowns. “And he…he hears of me, my work and he finds me. And he says ‘You.’ He says ‘You will make us strong.’ Well, I was interested. So he sent the head of Hydra, his research division. A brilliant scientist by the name of Johann Schmidt.”

The name of the man from the letter strikes terror into Steve because it means West wasn’t just recruited by some underling in a far-flung division. He was recruited by the foremost scientist with all the clout to actually follow through with the promise of “full funding.” Steve panicked, realizing the sheer magnitude of the damage he could do, but Dr. Erskine kept talking and Steve’s mind was pulled along with the horror of the story he shared.

“Now, Schmidt was, is, a member of the inner circle, and he was ambitious. He and Hitler shared a passion for occult power and Teutonic myth. Hitler used his fantasies to inspire his followers. But for Schmidt, it was not fantasy. For him, it was real. He became convinced that there is a great power hidden in the Earth, left there for him by gods who lurk beneath the oceans. When he heard about my formula and what I hypothesized it could do, because at that time I had not yet tested it, he could not resist and he injected it into himself.”

“That’s what you meant — good becomes great, bad becomes worse. I’m guessing he became worse?” Steve ventured, horrified at the way that everything about the nightmare he was living less than two weeks ago was becoming exponentially worse by the second.

Dr. Erskine nodded. “Yes. That is what I meant. So you must promise me, Steven Rogers, that whatever happens tomorrow, you will stay who you are. Not a perfect soldier, but a good man.”

After Dr. Erskine left, Steve laid back on his bed unable to sleep.

Good becomes great, bad becomes worse.

Erskine’s words circled through his mind. Steve wasn’t like other humans, maybe not human at all. He had been, for however briefly, one of those dead things that had screamed out the horrors of the Void and the twisted words of Yog-Sothoth, rending the borders of the mortal world with madness. What horrors inside Steve would be amplified by the serum? And if he died, who would stop West?

He could tell Erskine no. He could beg off and back out. He’d have his 4F stamp by breakfast and be off base by lunch. But he would also be no closer to Germany or West than he had been a week ago. This experiment was his chance, and he was determined to take it because he had no other choice. But hope, however tempered with realism and fear it was, clung to life in his chest because his mother had always told him that open minds will find the opportunity that others miss, and she had never led him wrong.

The morning was a flurry of activity. He got another physical and more blood work, and was then bundled into a car with a couple of MPs and Agent Peggy Carter, the SSR officer who was apparently the British contribution to Dr. Erskine’s project. Agent Carter, much like Dr. Erskine,
seemed more inclined to judge Steve on the basis of who he was, rather than his unfortunate health problems. Steve liked Carter; she was spit and vinegar and utterly unwilling to look the other way, even when it was convenient. That, and it was funny as hell when she socked Hodge in the jaw.

She understood what it was like to be judged and dismissed, not based on ability, but based on appearance, though Steve suspected it was mostly fair when it came to him. Carter’s abilities far outstripped his own. She told him about her experiences with MI6 and then the US Army, neither of which were particularly kind. In turn, Steve told her about all the alleys that he got beat up in, as they drove through Brooklyn.

There were enough stupid men that Carter had punched and even more alleys that Steve managed to get bloodied up in, that they were in happy spirits when they arrived at Brooklyn Antiques. Steve had walked past the little shop a thousand times and never given it a second thought. That they were only about ten blocks from the clinic was something that he kept bottled neatly up, right next to his fear that what they were about to do would turn him into a monster.

He followed Agent Carter in mute amazement. All the spy craft things — secret doors, passphrases, underground science facilities — seemed to come right out of a comic book. Steve almost laughed at the hilarity of it all, but he knew better than to open his mouth. It would only make him look naive, immature, and possibly hysterical, none of which were good qualities in a super soldier candidate.

“Good morning, Mr. Rogers,” called Dr. Erskine from the lab floor. The doctor signaled at Steve to join him, and Steve nodded at Agent Carter before he set off down the stairs.

A nurse pulled Steve aside, gathering a few last-minute vitals before devesting him of his shirt. She ushered him onto the platform, and into the coffin-like machine that took up the center of the room.

“Hold still, please,” the nurse murmured only a second before sticking him the arm.

“What was that?” Steve asked curiously.

“Penicillin,” Dr. Erskine muttered from where he stood next to a dark-haired man at a control panel that looked suspiciously like Howard Stark from the World Exposition of Tomorrow, though with his terrible eyesight, Steve couldn’t be sure.

Steve nodded and looked up at the observation window on the floor above the experimental area. It was hard to tell which was worse — being trapped alone in a basement with only West to witness his humiliation, or having an audience. He swallowed, trying to push back down the bile in this throat, and lowered his eyes to a blank wall across the room.

Dr. Erskine was speaking into a microphone, explaining something to the audience which contained at least one public official that Steve could name by sight alone. Steve didn’t particularly listen to the doctor, and in any case, a nurse was pressing plates against his chest and arms before the speech was done.

“Commencing microinjections.”

Steve looked at the vials attached to the armature of the machine. The quantity in those definitely precluded “micro” anything. A switch flipped and a series of thin needles slid from the plates deep into his arms and chest muscles, or as deep as they could go on his rather lacking frame.

He hissed between his teeth and bunched his eyes closed. The serum followed, pushed through the needles and into him not a second later. Steve gasped involuntarily and opened his eyes. It was like
stepping out of a dark room into full sunlight with no chance to get acclimated. Everything in the room was bright and loud and so much all at once that felt dizzy.

Dr. Erskine was saying something and then the whole apparatus began to move upright and close around him. Steve breathed hard, desperate not to panic or faint or piss himself during the process.

Finally, the shell closed and the movement stopped. Someone knocked on the tinted viewing window and a voice, Dr. Erskine’s, called out, “Mr. Rogers? Mr. Rogers can you hear me?”

Steve blinked, but still couldn’t make out anything on the other side of the glass. He didn’t feel confident, and he didn’t feel brave. He felt fucking scared, like he was watching West stand over him with the syringe full of phenol, only this time he could say stop. Except he couldn’t, not if he wanted to get to West.

Unsure of what to say, and mortified as he recalled the loss of his bodily functions on West’s table, he shot off the first sentence he could cobble together with his bladder and bowels at the forefront of his mind: “It’s probably too late to go the bathroom, right?”

A small chuckle came from outside the window and the sound of patting against the glass, rather than rapping knuckles, followed. That was it, then.

The lights on the inside of the pod blazed to life, and Steve’s head throbbed. The whine of electricity became a hum and then a roar as the lights glowed brighter and brighter. Heat poured out of the bulbs and his skin began to sting. It was like being on the beach and feeling his skin burn. But the sting continued to build until he felt like his whole body was engulfed in flames, his bones and guts and everything burning at once.

Frantic knocking came from outside the pod, and Steve realized that he had been screaming. He could hear the voices coming from outside the pod, louder now and more intelligible even over the loud roar of electricity. They were panicked and yelling to stop the experiment.

“No!” Steve shouted. “I can do it!”

He clenched his jaw, his teeth aching from the pressure, determined not to scream if it compromised his chances of finishing this.

After a couple seconds of waiting, the intensity of the lights began to climb again. The pain in his body whitened everything else in his mind, and he flexed against the strain of whatever was happening to him. The lights had grown so bright that Steve’s universe was reduced to the white light that burned him through. It wasn’t like the embalming or the phenol; those things were terror and agony. Instead, while the serum and the lights hurt, it was a clean hurt that felt like purification, renewal, beginnings. His need to scream and fight ebbed away like the way that night gently gave way to day, and he was enveloped in pure white light that left no darkness, no hidden corners, no unspeakable horrors that brought all who saw them to madness. It was emptiness and weightlessness, and Steve felt that once the light had burned him away, he could simply float up into the emptiness.

He felt as if he were on the edge, about to step beyond the border of life into something else, something beyond even the Void, when a series of loud explosions reverberated around him. He heard shouts of panic as people reacted to the danger around them. Then the light faltered and stopped.

The loss of the light, of the freedom that he almost achieved, poured over him like thick black oil, and he despaired for a moment, before falling back into his body. Exhaustion and pain were
instantaneous, and he sagged against the confines of the pod. A soft whirring sound caught his attention, though he was too tired to open his eyes, and then the doors opened letting in cool air. People were waiting, and they touched, grabbed, pulled him down and out of the coffin.

Dr. Erskine, Agent Carter, and an entire swarm of personnel surrounded him, and Steve marvelled at the difference of everything in his body. “You did it,” he murmured with surprise.

“Yeah, yeah, I think we did it,” agreed Dr. Erskine.

“How do you feel?” asked Agent Carter.

Steve looked around the room, something he hadn’t been able to do as effectively before. “Taller,” he decided.

“Well, you look taller,” she agreed.

Steve nodded distractedly and looked around the room again as the observers from the balcony came down the stairs to join the crowd around Steve. He didn’t care about them though. He had gone through the transformation and come out the other side still human. No one yet was pointing out that he had extra eyes, pointed teeth, tentacles, or other unspeakable horrors. Barring any of those things suddenly appearing, Steve was in the Army now, no 4F looming over his head.

His relief at the experiment’s success, and therefore West’s impending demise, was short-lived. An explosion from the viewing room shattered the windows and knocked everyone to the floor. In the mayhem, several gunshots erupted, and Steve turned to see Dr. Erskine clutching his chest on the floor while life left his eyes. Then, the man holding the gun snatched the last vial of serum and bolted.
Chapter 7

It had rained early that morning and the streets were wet. Steve hadn’t noticed before, too caught up in conversation and anxiety to really pay any attention. But as he ran, his bare feet slipped and slid on the blacktop and sidewalks sending him crashing into buildings, cars, one lamp pole, and through the front glass of a bridal gallery. The glass from the window ribboned the skin on his arms and he could feel the sting on his feet, but by the time he looked down as he sped out of the shop with a hurried apology, there were no cuts to be seen and not a single drop of blood spilt.

He ran harder, his heart thundering in his chest, loud and strong, nothing like the feeble flutters that it used to beat out when he got into fights or walked too fast. His lungs drew in deep breaths but didn’t burn, and the stitch in his side that, in the past had come with labored breathing, failed to manifest no matter how hard or fast he ran.

Soon he had caught up, taking great leaps from car to car until he had latched onto the roof of the taxi that the attacker had stolen. When erratic driving and tight turns failed to dislodge him, the man began to shoot through the roof. Steve felt a bullet clip him, but the next moment the car went rolling and he jumped clear only to then bump down the street himself. But his injuries seemed less urgent, overshadowed by the fact that a man with a gun had taken a boy hostage.

Steve gave the man a wide berth, unsure of what he could do with a child in the equation. But the child was an encumbrment and the man wasted no time throwing him into the harbor. Steve ran up, determined to save the boy though he was well aware that he was being intentionally diverted. But the boy bobbed in the water, and shouted “Go get him! I can swim!”

One problem solved, Steve tore off down the pier. The man was only just descending a ladder to a submarine, which had been moored none too covertly alongside the pier. Even moving faster than he could have previously imagined, Steve couldn’t get there before the man closed the cockpit and the submersible began to dive.

Steve dove into the water, desperate to catch up, but sick with the knowledge that the sub was moving too fast to catch. He knew he didn’t have long, swimming this hard after a run like that the one he’d just had — he would run out of air soon. But the longer he swam, he realized that the burning need for air never came. Just like when he was running, he felt fine, no matter how hard he did or didn’t breathe.

Steadily, he closed the distance to the u-boat, and finally was close enough to cave in the glass cockpit. Like before, he felt the sting of the glass as it tore his skin apart, the salt water adding to the pain, but Steve pushed through, grabbing the man and launching him out of the water and onto the pier.

Steve was right behind the man as he bolted up the ladder. He was still trying to shake off the shock of the landing — spluttering and coughing, and struggling to stand — when Steve grabbed him by his collar and shook him.

“Who the hell are you?” Steve demanded.

“The first of many,” the man sneered. “Cut off one head, two more shall take its place. Hail Hydra!” Before Steve could make sense of what he was seeing, the bastard flicked loose a false-canine and bit it. Steve looked on, confused and mildly upset but mostly frustrated, while the man foamed at the mouth and convulsed in his hands before dying.
He dropped the body then, and stood up. The vial that had been stolen from the laboratory lay shattered and spilled on the pier several feet away, likely broken when the man made his impromptu landing. Steve put his hand on his side where the bullet had grazed him, but the only evidence left was a small hole in the fabric of his shirt, the blood having been washed away in the cold ocean water. Marvelling at this, he looked down at his hands and stared. Not a scratch or a scar marred the skin that only seconds before had been cut and torn by the glass of the submarine cockpit. He realized, too, that he was big, bigger than he had ever expected, and his body was sturdy and durable.

Several months ago, Steve would have been glad for the change for multiple reasons, but the words of the secret agent, as Steve now realized he was, echoed in his mind.

_Hail Hydra_

Hydra — the Hydra that conducted scientific research for the Nazis, the Hydra that hired West to continue his work.

He had one purpose, more immediate and pressing than before. He had to stop West and Schmidt, and this new body would help him to do that. Grief making his chest clench, he thanked Dr. Erskine for that chance even if it was only a chance.

*****

“Are you fucking kidding me?!” Steve shouted.

The door had closed behind the senator and Colonel Phillips, and they were far enough down the hall that Steve knew they couldn’t hear the outburst.

“Steve-” Agent Carter said, her hand outstretched as if to placate him.

“He gave me two choices: be a lab rat or a dancing monkey. I signed up for this experiment to help, not be someone’s pet. I could go over there and help, but instead I’m going to be wearing tights and singing with chorus girls,” Steve fumed.

“Steve, this is hardly the worst outcome. Even if you went to Alamogordo-”

Steve turned and looked her in the eye. “You have no idea what it is to be nothing more than a test subject. I don’t care what it does for the cause, you’d have to kill me to get me back in a lab,” he said quietly.

Agent Carter and Mr. Stark stilled and looked at him. “You’re not talking about Dr. Erskine,” Agent Carter stated.

Steve turned and looked back the door, as though it had personally wronged him by letting his captors get away. “No. Dr. Erskine never would have treated anyone like that,” he agreed.

“Steve-”

“Don’t,” he snapped. “Just don’t.” He sounded tired, even to his own ears, and the words didn’t carry the fury of only moments before.

Agent Carter’s face softened, sympathy coloring her features. “I’m afraid that we don’t have that luxury. I am all that stands between you and a protracted stay at Alamogordo. I understand why you wouldn’t want to go back to something like that, but I need a damn good reason to keep you away from there, something I can give to them, even if it isn’t the whole truth.
“The ‘dancing monkey’ routine was my idea and it was the only idea that gave you a choice in the matter, though I know that it’s hardly dignified. I know the senator. His patience won’t last forever; he wants the super soldier program to succeed now that he’s seen what it can produce. This is temporary at best, so if you know something, anything of value, I’m going to need it. Even if you don’t think it’s relevant, I might. People experimenting on human test subjects is something the SSR needs to know about, and it might be enough to buy you a longer reprieve, long enough to prove yourself more useful in the field than in a lab,” Agent Carter explained.

Steve looked down. “How do I know that telling you won’t get me to Alamogordo even faster?”

“Because I won’t tell anyone what you say if I thought that it would,” she answered simply.

Her tone made Steve want to believe her, but trust hadn’t gotten him far lately. Still, he didn’t seem to have a choice.

“Not here, not where someone could overhear,” Steve said.

“I know just the place,” Stark said.

*****

Stark’s usual upbeat demeanor was gone, replaced with a grim set to his mouth and a snifter of brandy in his hand. Agent Carter sat straight-backed, clutching her own glass of alcohol and looking deeply disturbed. Steve had been careful to leave out the least believable of the details — the bone-chilling screams, the Void, Yog-Sothoth — sticking instead to the facts of experiment and his captivity.

“Two weeks ago you were still a prisoner, and even so you signed up to go through another experiment. Why?” Stark asked.

“I told you: I don’t have any other way to get to Germany and stop him. And besides you two, who would have believed anything I just said,” Steve countered.

“Hell, I’m not even sure I do yet,” Stark said, draining the rest of his brandy.

“I believe you, Steve, and I understand your desire to find him yourself. He tortured you, at the very least, but you’re not a trained operative or soldier,” Agent Carter said. She tone was sympathetic, but her face was stern, brooking no argument on Steve’s part.

“I know how to find him,” Steve said. It would be a hard sell, he knew, but it was the only thing he had, the only reason they had to include him. He just wasn’t sure how he could prove it.

Both Stark and Agent Carter were watching him intently when he looked up.

“Well, don’t announce something like that and then not explain yourself,” Stark exclaimed.

Steve looked back down at the glass in his hand. It was his fourth glass of whiskey; he couldn’t feel it in the least, beyond the warm slosh in his stomach. “I don’t know the location, and I wouldn’t be able to pinpoint it on a map, but I can- I can follow him, almost like a bloodhound, but not with scent.”

“Are you saying that you can sense where he is?” Stark asked incredulously.

“Something like that,” Steve answered.
“Alright,” Agent Carter said as she set her glass down. “And if we take you to Germany, you can track him down?”

Steve looked up and met her eyes. “I know I can.”

She turned and looked at Stark who sighed. “I’ll set up the USO tour. It’ll be easier to get you over the ocean if it’s on the up and up. You sell some war bonds first, do a little touring, then we can send you and the USO troupe over there for morale. If you turn up missing over there no one will lose too much sleep over it, because there won’t be a way to look for you in the middle of a war zone.”

Steve nodded. “How long is this song and dance bit gonna take?”

Stark shrugged. “Probably a solid six months before you could hope to get rotated into the overseas tour.”

“We don’t have that kind of time,” Steve protested.

Agent Carter looked down at her lap. “You’re right, we don’t. But our other choices are limited. The SSR only has so much clout, and the political game we play to continue our funding is a precarious one. If we were to push too hard or too fast, the entire division could be closed and that might do more harm than good long term, even considering West. Smuggling you out of the country isn’t worth the risk.”

Steve frowned but said nothing. This choice, like so many others, wasn’t his. He would play the game in the same way that he had shaken West’s hand at the end of his captivity, though it had been distasteful to say the least. And he would play along the same way he had with Erskine’s experiment. In this situation as well as those, he had an objective to complete; the discomfort of what he had to do to get the job done was immaterial.

*****

The chorus girl schtick — complete with tights, musical numbers, speeches advertising war bonds, and an actual troop of USO girls — was better than confinement to a lab, but only just. Some doctor or other still showed up once a week with a black leather bag and a set of vials. Every time, he reminded himself that this was in the service of finding and killing West and rolled up his sleeve. But it was harder to remember his goals when he got called into a hospital the morning after a show three months into the tour.

“You’re being admitted. You’re next scheduled show isn’t until Friday night, and you’ll be undergoing testing until then,” the MP said, shoving a piece of paper with orders at Steve.

Steve took it and read it over, knowing this was probably part of the compromise between Senator Brandt and Agent Carter.

“Let me grab my bag,” he said to the MP.

*****

Steve had to admit that, compared to West, things could be much worse. Sure he’d had to run the anthropometric gauntlet again, as well as sit for a full physical and all its attendant pokes and pricks, but he spent most of his time doing psychometric tests — math, reading, special aptitudes, general IQ, personality inventories. Some trials were more physical — running, swimming, weight lifting, jumping — but that was better than sitting around trying to parse calculus when he’d only made it through one semester of trigonometry.
The only test that he was uneasy about was the cold pressor test. Even after all the inventories he had taken and passed, the doctors still treated him like an idiot. They didn’t bother to cover up the protocols on the sheet of paper that they clearly had no intentions of sticking to:

*The patient will immerse his/her arm into cold water for 1-2 minutes. Ask him/her to verbally state pain threshold and pain tolerance. Allow voluntary withdrawal of the limb from the water at any time.*

But the instructions that Steve got were less merciful.

“Place your leg in the water up to the knee. Please note your pain rating during this test. Do not remove your leg unless instructed,” ordered the doctor without bothering to meet Steve’s eye.

Steve nodded anyway and carefully lifted his leg into the tub. It took a bit of effort on his part not to jostle the myriad leads that ran from his other leg, arms, and chest in the process, but he finally got situated and sat on the stool beside the tub.

The first minute was uncomfortable, but manageable. However, as the minutes ticked by, Steve was gripping the edges of the seat and breathing hard through his nose, his jaw locked.

“How much longer?” he asked, his voice strained.

“I’ll let you know,” the doctor answered blithely, not even looking up from his clipboard to address Steve.

Somehow that made it worse. If Steve had a goal, a definable length of time he had to suffer this, it would have been easier. Instead, he was forced to hang on for what could be, in his pain-addled mind, hours longer.

“Your instructions say to allow voluntary withdrawal,” Steve stuttered out in between panting breaths.

At that, the doctor did look up. “Those are guidelines for typical test subjects. You are not a typical test subject. For the moment, your compliance is still technically voluntary. Let’s keep it that way, shall we?”

Steve breathed hard and focused on the far wall, trying to block out the ticking of the clock which marked every single second of pain. He knew that anyone else would have gone numb from the cold long ago, but his new body seemed unwilling to give up. Instead, his nerves continued to blare out a warning indicating potential tissue damage due to cold exposure at ever increasing intensity as his leg went cold all the way through. His bones seemed to throb, sending bolts of pain into his knee which radiated out from the meniscus into the warm flesh of his lower thigh.

Slowly, though, the pain levelled off and Steve was able to relax into it enough to block out the worst, at least in the short term. Having had chronic pain for most of his life he knew that ignoring anything beyond the next hour would take more mental and physical energy than he had. Pain was exhausting at the best of times, but Steve didn’t expect for the test to go on long enough to wear him completely so it seemed like a reasonable use of his energy.

To pass the time he closed his eyes and began to count the stars, the pattern of the cosmos burned forever into his mind in death. He drew constellations in his memories, something that the inhabitants of the Void could never do, their eternal gaze focused on the infinite knowledge written in that sky, their individual and thinking minds burned away by the vastness of the horrors of Yog-Sothoth. Steve knew that what he recalled was only an after-image of that place, all that his mortal
mind could comprehend and retain without the complete loss of his sanity. Still, it was beautiful, and he gazed upon it like a child finding bunnies in the afternoon clouds.

“Mr. Rogers, you may remove your leg,” the doctor instructed.

Steve’s mind snapped back to reality, or at least this particular reality, and he happily withdrew his leg from the tub.

“Describe your pain level and sensations.”

It took a moment to refocus on the leg that he had so carefully shut off from his mind. *It hurts like the thousand young of Shub-Niggurath gnaw at my leg*, thought Steve. “It’s, uh, tingly, and my bones ache. It feels like I’ve got cramps from the knee down that won’t let up. My knee hurts too, up into my thigh. I’d give it a five, maybe.”

The doctor seemed miffed at this answer, but nonetheless he dutifully recorded it. “Very well, the nurse will disconnect you from the electrocardiogram and you may get dressed. We’re done for the day.”

“Yes, sir.”

But some part of Steve warned him that “done for today” didn’t mean “done.”

****

“They did what?” shrieked Peggy, as she had begun insisting Steve call her. “How long did they make you do that?”

“Uh, it was an hour. I think,” he answered, knowing damn good and well that it had been closer to two.

“Oh for god’s sake! That moron Brandt thinks that measuring everything about you is going to somehow give his scientists the formula for the serum. The man’s probably never so much as set foot in a laboratory. He has no right to be making decisions like this,” she fumed.

“I’m okay,” Steve reassured her, more amused by her outburst than he was upset by his treatment by the doctor.

“This time you are okay. Steve, I’ve heard them in meetings. They know your healing factor is increased. Some of them want to know by how much. They want measurements, and I’m not sure how far they’re willing to go to get them, but it’s farther than Howard and I think is reasonable,” she warned.

Steve wasn’t stupid. He knew they were interested. Every time someone stuck him for a blood test, which was ridiculously often in his opinion, there were doctors watching the puncture, recording the time it took to clot and then for the mark to vanish altogether. The crooks of his elbows twinged in remembered pain.

“So what’s the play then?”

“The play is for me to somehow undercut Brandt and get you to the lines, make it impossible for him to deny your transport. You might be a product of his funding, but you still belong to the Army and they’re the ones who send down your orders. I’m sure that someone still owes me a favor or ten. Until then, hang in there and let me know immediately if you get any more orders,” she said. It was phrased like a command, but Steve heard the fear in her voice, the worry that any favors called
in would take too long or simply not be enough. He couldn’t pretend that he didn’t have the same fears.

“I’ll let you know. But I’m scheduled non-stop for the next month and a half, with only two two-day weekends. Here’s to hoping that’ll be enough.”

Peggy paused and then said, “I’m sure you’ll be alright, Steve. Take care.”

The line clicked off, and Steve was left with the foreboding of her words. She didn’t believe it would be enough to stop them, not in the slightest.
Chapter 8

Steve heard from Peggy only twice in the next month and a half, once to tell him that Brandt had been temporarily appeased, and again to tell him that she was making headway on his overseas USO orders. The tour was ridiculous and somewhat humiliating, but he was determined to get to Germany so he smiled and gave it his all.

A distinct benefit of acquiescing to their plan was that he got very comfortable and convincing when he had to lie. The women he toured with were all too happy to help him practice, hating the men who organized the tours just as much as Steve did. Nevertheless, his ability to lie didn't do him any good when the tour took a two-week break and another pair of MPs showed up, orders in hand.

Steve didn't get a chance to call Peggy while the MPs watched him pack, but he did hug Margie, one of the ladies with whom he performed, on the way out, slipping an already prepared letter into her hand. He just hoped that the call to Peggy went through in time.

*****

By the time the cavalry arrived, Steve was of the opinion that Peggy had taken far too damn long to mount her rescue mission. Unwilling to kill or maim an entire unit of MPs, not to mention ruin any chance of getting to West by ending up in prison for a dozen counts of manslaughter, Steve had finally given in to the demands of the doctors. However, it merited saying that “giving in” was misleading since Steve’s eventual acquiescence was done at gunpoint. So when Peggy and Howard burst through the door with several armed SSR officers, Steve was already strapped to a surgical table.

“What the hell do you think you're doing?” yelled Peggy, her escort moving to immediately intercept all medical personnel and separate them from Steve.

Steve smiled dopily under the mask on his face. “It’s about time,” he muttered. His interjection went entirely ignored both due its muffled quality and irrelevance to the matter at hand.

“We’re under orders from Senator Brandt, ma’am,” answered the doctor in charge. He was usually a very direct and authoritative man, but as the object of Peggy’s angry glare, he quailed.

“And did he order you to leave your good sense and ethics at home, as well?”

The doctor’s mouth opened and closed like a fish on land.

“Son, I think it’s time you rang that senator of yours,” Howard suggested, moving his hand in a shooing motion towards the phone on the wall across the room.

The man, at least three decades older than Stark, glared, but hesitated only a moment before doing as he was told. As soon as he was out of the way, Peggy turned her attention to Steve and rushed forward.

“Oh my god, Steve. What have they done?” she gasped.

Steve mumbled an “I’m fine” that was mostly unintelligible through the mask on his face. Peggy scoffed and grabbed several large gauze pads which she pressed hard to Steve’s right thigh. The pressure hurt like hell and grit his teeth, trying not to show too much distress.
“You are not fine at all, Steve Rogers. Do you see these cuts? Some are—” she stopped herself and took a deep breath. “It doesn’t matter how deep they are, the point is that you’re wounded.”

Steve blinked and flexed his thigh a bit. It did hurt, he’d give her that. And it had hurt when they’d cut him, but he’d forgotten it quickly enough, the chloroform and nitrous oxide mix that he was breathing had kept him uninterested and relaxed, though not unconscious, as it would have rendered a normal man. His leg was sticky too, which, after some intense thought, he determined to be blood which had run down his thigh and onto the sheet of the bed.

“Christ, Peggy, look,” Howard said, touching Steve’s other leg lightly. “There are newly healed marks here, too.”

Steve turned his head to see Howard looking down at him with concern. “Hi,” he slurred out.

“Yeah, hi to you too, pal,” Howard said. His voice was heavy with sarcasm, but it covered disgust, fear, anger, and concern which was given away only in the pinched corners of his mouth and the deep creases on his forehead.

It took a lot of effort, but Steve reached up and grabbed at the mask on his face.

“Oh, no you don’t,” admonished Peggy. “We’ve got to get you put back together first. Leave it on for now.”

“Uh, miss?” chanced a nurse from where he was restrained behind an MP. “He heals fast enough that stitches won’t be needed.”

Peggy glared at him, but pulled her hand off the series of gashes in Steve’s leg. True to the nurse’s word, the wounds were clotted and only half as deep as before.

“Fine. Howard, you cut off the anesthesia and remove the mask. I’ll unstrap him. Anderson,” she shouted to one of the MPs, “find Mr. Rogers’ clothes.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he answered, and lit off dragging the overly talkative nurse with him.

Steve drew a few deep breaths, clearing his lungs and blood of the unnatural gases with great efficiency. He sat up on the table and groaned through clenched teeth. “Shit, this hurts a helluva lot more without the gas.”

“Yes, I bet it does,” Peggy agreed.

Howard put a steadying hand on Steve’s lower back from the other side of the bed. “Besides clothes, what do you need?”

Steve looked down at his lap, his boxers bunched up around the tops of his thighs. They were blood-stained and soaked in sweat, though he didn’t feel hot and couldn’t remember sweating.

“Maybe a shower once these cuts close.”

He didn’t really think a shower would cut it, the unintentional pun making him groan internally. This was his first experience with torture in the mortal realm, something that surprisingly didn’t harken back to the unnamable horrors of the multitudinous dimensions and monsters that inhabited them. The banality of it all made him nauseated. It was business, nothing more, and he was nothing more than a thing to them. He swallowed the sudden abundance of spit in his mouth as his stomach rolled. His increasing dread and horror were interrupted by the phone ringing which provided him both distraction and a reprieve from Peggy’s close observations.
The doctor answered and began speaking cautiously. “Yes… yes, sir… of course.” He lowered the
phone and held it out. “Senator Brandt wants to speak with you, ma’am.”

Peggy patted Steve on the knee and stalked across the room. She snatched the phone and snapped,
“Senator Brandt.”

She listened to Brandt talk for about five seconds before losing all patience. “Now you listen here.
I have video and photographic evidence that doctors under your orders are performing involuntary
medical experimentation on US citizens, members of the military no less. Now— oh do shut up,
will you? The Nazis are performing experiments much like this right now. Are you going to allow
yourself to be run through the press with the likes of Hitler? Because I promise you that I can and
will make all the insinuations I like about your behavior. You will sign Mr. Rogers’ USO tour
orders and send him overseas and you will continue to fund the SSR. I assure you that if you fail to
meet either of these requirements, you will spend the rest of your life in disgrace, if not prison. Are
we clear?” There was a brief pause and then Peggy smiled. “That will be all, Senator.”

The phone clicked loudly in the receiver, and she turned a pleased smile on Steve. “I do believe
that we have resolved this issue permanently,” she declared.

Howard laughed and shook his head. “You’ll never catch me acting out of turn with her,” he told
Steve with a smile.

Anderson returned with a stack of clothing that Steve recognized as his own.

“Take the medical personnel to separate exam rooms for individual debriefs,” Peggy ordered.

The MPs herded all of the nurses and doctors from the room, leaving Steve with just Peggy and
Howard.

“How much longer before your leg heals?” Howard asked.

Steve shrugged. “I kind of lost track of time there for a while, but maybe fifteen minutes?”

“Steve, why didn’t you fight them off?” Peggy asked.

“I would have had to kill them to escape. It seemed… it seemed like too high a price. If I did that
I’d be in prison; who would stop West then? I knew Margie would get through to you, I just had to
stick it out.”

Peggy shook her head and looked down. “I’m sorry, Steve.”

“Hey, don’t blame yourself,” Steve reassured her. “You didn’t make them do this.”

“I got a question of my own,” Howard said, shifting a little uncomfortably. “How come you
inhaled the anesthesia? I know you don’t need to breathe unless you want to talk.”

Steve hadn’t ever given away that bit of information, not even to the two of them. Then again,
Stark wasn’t the pre-eminent scientific mind of the century for nothing, and observation was the
better part of science. “Seemed preferable to just lying there screaming. It wasn’t a lot, but it did
make it more bearable,” Steve answered, trying to sound as unaffected as possible.

“Shit,” replied Howard.

“Yeah, shit,” agreed Steve. Then, changing the subject, he said, “So about those orders? When do
we ship out?”
Peggy smiled deviously. “If all goes well, tomorrow night or the morning after. All you have to do is play along until we can get an Allied flight onto the mainland, and from there we have resources in place to get you to West.”

“In the meantime you wanna teach me how to fight? I was only in basic for a week after all,” Steve asked.

“It would be my pleasure,” Peggy answered.

“Oh, this I wanna see,” Howard said with a wry smile.

*****

The week that followed was so busy that the trauma of torture didn’t even begin to sink in for Steve. He was whisked away from the hospital, flown to London, and then to mainland Europe where he donned his tights, sang his songs, and danced his way to the front lines in less than a week. Peggy and Howard found reasons to get themselves sent with him in close proximity, and Steve found himself regularly engaged in lessons of varying kinds. Stark trained Steve on all the new fancy tech that he’d drummed up, including giving Steve an oversized and very sturdy pie-tin buckler. Peggy beat Steve round and round the camps and courtyards, giving him one-on-one, full contact armed and unarmed combat training.

For the first time in Steve’s life he was able to mimic, retain, and master a physical activity. Four days with Peggy did more for Steve than four years with Bucky, though no fault lay with Bucky. Steve’s new mind could meet or exceed what his new body could do. But studying, no matter how fast he learned, only went so far.

“Steve you have no practical experience,” Peggy lamented over dinner. “You may be smarter, faster, and stronger than any other man on the field, but they know what they’re doing, you don’t.”

“So what do you propose?” asked Steve.

“Nothing. Just that you don’t get overconfident out there. That’s about all I can tell you,” she answered grimly.

“Yes, ma’am,” Steve answered without a hint of sarcasm.

*****

“Tomorrow’s base is the closest to the front you’re going to get with this cover. Are you ready?” asked Howard.

“Sure.”

“Good,” Howard said with a grin. “Can you sense him yet?”

Steve nodded. He’d felt the pull get stronger when they’d first left the ground in New York. Since he’d made it to the mainland, West’s existence had gone from something that stirred a righteous desire to see justice done to a burning, itching sore that was with Steve at every moment of his day. “He’s not far now. On foot, I could probably get to him within two days.”

“And by air?” Howard asked.

The thought hadn’t even crossed his mind. “A couple of hours maybe?”
Howard grinned. “I’ll gas up the Beechcraft,” he said with a clap of his hands.

They were close, Steve could feel it. Even if they weren’t, the sudden dogfight in which they found themselves was a decent indicator that they were close to something worth attacking. He pulled the goggles down over his eyes, nodded to Peggy and Howard, and then threw himself out of the plane.

The parachute, while new to him, was fairly easy to operate, though he still landed a bit bumpily in the middle of a forest. He let himself down from the tree canopy where he’d gotten tangled and then retrieved the parachute. The effort took precious minutes to complete, but come dawn, his parachute would have announced the exact location of his arrival had he left it. Once retrieved, Steve rolled up the ‘chute and stuffed it into a hollow log, before setting out to chase after the homing beacon that lead him ever towards West.

Howard had really done an excellent job of making this easy for Steve. He only had to walk ten miles, something easily covered in a couple of hours, before he spotted the first signs of a base. Steve slowed his approach, and spent the better part of a couple hours watching the guards and the search light. There was a definite pattern. Quickly, Steve pieced together a plan.

Using only his hands, he tore the fence apart as quietly as he could and slipped in. A couple of handy trucks and a few stupid guards later and he had made it into the main work area. He took a moment to observe, crouched behind a trolley laden with metal ingots and scraps. All across the factory floor there were dynamos with coils of something he had never seen before. The coils glowed blue, and Steve could sense the horrible energy radiating off of them.

Azathoth.

From somewhere in his consciousness he recalled this name, and he shuddered as it entered his semi-mortal mind. This was the Stone of Space and all that was contained therein, and these people had somehow gotten their hands on it. Its power was unlimited and drove all who beheld it to madness. Steve knew that whatever they wrought with it could not be used for anything of virtue.

The urgency of the situation struck him, and he crept out of his hiding spot. There were POWs working in some of the stations nearby, and he slipped quietly alongside one wearing a US army uniform.

“Hey, soldier,” Steve whispered. The man startled and turned, but before he could speak, Steve held a finger to his own lips. The soldier nodded dumbly and Steve went on. “I'm gonna get you all out of here.”

The soldier pointed across the factory floor at a door. “Barracks are through there.”

Steve nodded. “Stay at the ready,” he instructed before slipping away.

“Barracks” was a definite misnomer, “cages” was far closer to the unfortunate reality. Most of the barred cells were filled with about ten men each. Seeing their dirty faces, some sporting makeshift bandages and all showing signs of abuse, Steve was abruptly reminded that horror existed on a rather grand scale on Earth, too.

“Who the hell are you?” called one of the men.

“I’m Captain America,” he called over his shoulder, not bothering to turn around. The man had inadvertently caught the attention of the guard on duty. Without a moment to spare, Steve snapped
his neck, the crunching sound new and unfamiliar. He ripped the keyring off the belt of the dead
guard and began opening cells.

“Who the hell are you?” Steve asked the man who had ruined the element of surprise.

“Corporal Michael Walker, sir,” he answered with the energy of the very young or the very
innocent. Steve concluded it was the former based on the young man’s recently broken nose and a
bruise on his cheek in the shape of a boot.

“Alright, Corporal, what unit are you with?” Steve asked as he tried yet another key while
carefully bottling up his emotions on the matter of Corporal Walker’s already spoiled youth.

“The 107th, sir,” Walker announced.

Steve nearly dropped the keys and looked up at the young man. “The 107th?” he echoed.

“Yes, sir,” the Corporal replied proudly.

Steve swallowed and looked back down at the keys, trying and failing to casually move to the next
key on the ring. “You wouldn’t know a Bucky Barnes by any chance?”

This key worked in the lock, and the door swung wide, the other prisoners issuing out. Steve
handed the ring off to a sergeant who began to work on opening the other cells. The young man
stared back at Steve, the lines of happiness and good spirits were gone, replaced by a darkness that
Steve saw on the rare occasion he dared to look into a mirror.

“Sarge got real sick. There’s an isolation ward that-a-way,” he said, gesturing toward the west side
of the compound. “They said they’d fix him up, but don’t nobody come back from there. Been gone
since day before yesterday.”

Steve thanked the kid and clapped him on his shoulder to send him on his way. His first instinct as
he turned towards the ward, was to get Bucky the fuck out of there. He could feel West and he
knew without a doubt what was happening in the isolation ward across the factory.
Chapter 9

The escapees made quick work of their captors using pipes, wrenches, and a few of the completed energy guns, laying waste not only to the guards but also to any equipment that looked vulnerable. It was enough of a distraction that no one actively pursued Steve, though he did have to put down several Hydra soldiers who were near enough to consider him a threat.

He burst through the door on the far side of the plant’s main floor and pulled a hard right, his momentum carrying him into the wall when he went wide. The wall gave but Steve did not, and he sped down the corridor. The plant, compared to most every building he had ever been in, was enormous, but it took Steve no time to find the lab where West was working.

A record player was crackling out Glenn Miller in the corner, and West was humming the sax line to “In The Mood,” when Steve burst in the door. Apparently, the series of doors and passageways, not to mention the music, had kept the din of the revolt from reaching him. His eyes widened as he took in Steve, but after a moment he smiled.

“They told me that the serum actually worked on you, where it was less satisfactory on other subjects. I do believe I agree,” West observed. “How has it impacted your propensity for violence?”

The question flew past Steve, his eyes instead fixed on the figure on the table.


Steve tore his eyes away from Bucky. “What the hell did you do to him?”

West smiled, apparently delighted that someone would ask him about his work. “Well, you see, he is much like you are, I suppose. But there were modifications. Mr. Schmidt had some unique contributions he wanted to make to the process. I must say I was hesitant at first, but he is my employer after all. So you see—”

A group of armed guards rushed the door behind Steve, and he broke out of his frozen state. With unnatural speed and strength, he pushed the door shut, barring it with his body.

“Herr West!” a German soldier shouted from outside.

West frowned. “I do believe I need to go. It wouldn’t do to disappoint my benefactor. We can catch up again later, Mr. Rogers. Good luck!”

And with that, Steve was forced to watch West disappear through another door on the other side of the lab. But the Germans outside continued to beat the door, unaware that their precious doctor had already made his escape.

Steve listened through the door, trying to determine the exact number of soldiers he was going to have to fight, when a muffled concussion rocked the door. The thought crossed Steve’s mind that it felt like a small grenade, though grenades were already small and there wasn’t a reason to make them smaller. It reminded Steve of that time, three summers ago, when Bucky had worked at the railyard. He had gone up there around quitting time to meet Bucky so they could grab some dinner on the way home. Bucky had dragged Steve over to the mechanics’ shop so he could watch how they blew tractor tires onto the rims with a little gas and a match — a dull whoosh and a push-pull of air… just like whatever was in the hallway.
The soldiers outside the door were no longer fighting. It was silent, save for one rapidly approaching set of steps.

“Hey, Cap?” called a cheery voice. “It’s Corporal Walker. I’z just comin’ to check up on you. You alright?”

Steve sighed and opened the door, putting on his best “I’m confident” face from the USO tour. “I am, thanks to you. You go on and catch up with your unit, Corporal. I’ll get Barnes.”

The kid nodded, though he looked concerned at the sight of Bucky, and hustled off down the hall. Steve turned his attention back to Bucky, hurrying across the room and carefully removing the IVs and unbuckling his restraints. West was getting away, but then their window of escape was closing. A choice had to be made: Steve couldn’t get Bucky and kill West. Besides that, most of these men needed medical care pretty badly, Bucky among them, and Steve, for all he wanted to kill West, simply couldn’t leave them when they were on the brink of freedom.

Mind made up, Steve pulled Bucky to his feet but he slumped like a lead weight in his arms.

“Hey, pal. It’s me,” Steve said encouragingly, more for himself than Bucky.

Bucky blinked a few times as his legs got their act together and stared. “I thought you were smaller.”

Steve couldn’t help the dry laugh that Bucky’s observation pulled out of him. “I joined the Army.”

“Ah, yeah,” Bucky said, nodding his head clumsily. “That’ll do it.”

“Come on, we gotta go,” Steve urged.

As they hurried down the hall, Steve could hear the sounds of battle outside. Inside, things were not entirely better. The fight might have been taken outside as gentlemen were wont to do, but the facility was coming down around them. Controlled explosions that began on one side of the factory floor were slowly starting to work their way across, blast after blast going off in succession.

“Shit, they’re detonating the place,” Steve realized. The floor was blocked by burning debris, but the catwalk seemed traversable, and Steve nudged Bucky and pointed.

They scrambled to the stairs, taking them two at a time. Bucky had regained some degree of coordination, but he still stumbled every few steps, catching himself on the rail of the catwalk and leaning against it to help himself along. But they were going to make it. The bridge that cut from one side of the factory to the other was just up ahead; all they had to do was cross it and they could get to an exit.

“Captain America! How exciting!”

Steve pulled up short and Bucky stumbled, leaning against him for a second before righting himself. West and a German officer stood on the other side of the bridge. This was his chance Steve realized, he could kill this idiot officer and then finish West once and for all. Apparently the officer underestimated who he was facing and began to cross the walkway towards them. Steve started across too, leaving Bucky behind him.

“I’m a great fan of your films,” the officer started in. “So Dr. Erskine managed it after all. Not exactly an improvement, but still impressive.”

Steve had heard plenty of West’s monologues during his murder and captivity so he had no time or
patience for that nonsense. He swung hard, landing a hit right across the man’s face, but rather than knock him over the railing, or at least knock him out, the man smiled.

“You have no idea what you are dealing with, Captain Rogers. No matter what lies Erskine told you, you see I was his greatest success!” the man cried as he lunged back at Steve, knocking him down and causing him to lose his gun over the side of the bridge.

West grabbed a lever that made the two halves of the bridge separate and retract, and Steve lost his opportunity to continue the fight as the officer leapt away before Steve could get his feet back under him.

“Herr Schmidt!” West exclaimed as another explosion boomed closer. “We must hurry!”

The horror of realizing the identity of his adversary came at the same time that Schmidt peeled away a mask, revealing something utterly inhuman. The main features were still there — nose, mouth, eyes, and almost ears — but everything was wrong. His head was narrowed around the eyes so that they were almost on either side of his head. Greenish-gray scales accentuated the skin around his lidless yellow eyes, and his too-small auricles lay back against his head, rather than sticking out, reminding Steve of frogs and toads with their flat membranous ears. The nose, too, was flattened; his nostrils opened farther up the dorsum of the nose than was wholly natural and the entire thing formed the apex of the frank angular formation of the head. But the mouth was worst. When Schmidt spoke Steve could see rows of teeth that lined his mouth to the back of his throat, and his fixed and inflexible lips made him almost fish-like.

“You don’t have one of those, do you?” Bucky asked from behind Steve.

Their looks of shock and horror seemingly had no quelling effect on Schmidt’s enthusiasm, and the non-man grinned menacingly. “I am a child of the Deep Ones — born upon the land to mortals that I might grow and return to my ancestral home beneath the waves. But humans destroyed my home out of fear and jealousy, and most of my kind were murdered. I was among the survivors, and I know now that the only way to ensure the future of our kind is the subjugation of your species. We will take your women as our own, and they will bear us children to replenish our ranks!”

“If you’re so superior, why did you need Erskine or West?” Steve interjected hoping to taunt Schmidt’s clearly inflated ego into divulging information, or at least into talking long enough buy Steve some time to kill him.

“By the time that the war had begun, I had been too long upon the land. I was growing weak with the need to return to the sea, my project far from complete. Erskine’s serum promised a way around that, and in me Erskine made greatness. You see, I am everything you are, Captain Rogers, and so much more.

“Your friend, Sergeant Barnes, has joined our ranks through the work of Dr. West, and you could, too. We would welcome your allegiance with open arms, you need only let your former employer finish the process that he started. What do you say, Captain? Will you join the ranks of Father Dagon and Mother Hydra? Will you serve the Deep Ones in exchange for immortality and the privilege to serve the Great Cthulhu?”

“No, Steve. No, don’t do it. You don’t know what West will do,” Bucky warned Steve.

The walkway had retracted all the way by the end of West’s speech. Steve stood at the edge of the walk, gripping the railing and caught between the horror that Bucky had been experimented on to some unknown end and the knowledge that this entire state of affairs was far beyond the working of lunatic scientists.
“The only privilege I want is to kill the both of you,” Steve shot back. Behind West and Schmidt a door opened, revealing an elevator, and frustration gripped Steve, their escape suddenly assured.

“That is regrettable,” Schmidt called as he stepped into the elevator with West.

“Damn,” Steve muttered as the door closed.

The handle to extend the bridge was on the other the side of the factory floor, but the crane gantry still stood a few yards down from where the bridge had been. It wasn’t Steve’s first, or even second or third choice, but it was better than trying to run through the flames that licked up at their boots from below. Steve could run across, pull the lever, and then Bucky could cross the bridge safely. But no sooner had he come up with this solution than a falling beam took out the section of the catwalk with the lever and motor, leaving the gantry as the only viable option for them both.

“Let’s go. You first,” Steve said.

Bucky was still wobbly, and Steve was scared that Bucky wouldn’t make it to the other side. But somehow, luck or otherwise, it was only a matter of fifteen seconds before Bucky was safely over. Steve stepped forward, one foot on the gantry, when another, closer blast, rocked the gantry. It shifted, and Steve stepped back onto the catwalk just in time for the gantry to collapse into the conflagration below.

“Go! Get out of here!” Steve shouted across the gulf between them.

Bucky’s eyes went wide, as he shook off the last of the drug-induced stupor. “No! Not without you!” he screamed at Steve, an edge of panic making his voice brittle.

Steve didn’t have to think on Bucky’s words to know that he was serious. Bucky would wait for Steve, even if it killed him. He motioned for Bucky to move out of the way and bent back the bars of the catwalk to give himself a clear shot. And then, with a running start, he jumped.

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It was at least forty-five miles from the Hydra base, which was just outside Kreishberg and nestled in the Austrian Alps, back to the nearest Allied front, which was just a few miles past Azzano towards the coast. The company rested the first night against the leeward side of a cliff. It was early spring, and the snow was still deep, but they couldn’t risk the light of fires. The men huddled together in small groups, the weakest and wounded in the middle, and anyone with the stamina took watch in shifts.

Bucky, even after the warm reception from his men, kept to the edge of the camp alone. His winter gear was gone, and he shivered violently in this threadbare shirt. Steve, after talking to everyone and organizing as much of the camp as he could, sat with Bucky.

“Hey,” Steve said gently.

Bucky looked up, like he was surprised to find Steve sitting next to him. “Hey, Steve.”

“Bucky, I heard Schmidt — what he said they did to you.”

Bucky shook his head. “It’s nothing I can’t handle.”

“Never said otherwise, but you don’t have to handle it on your own, is the thing,” Steve said, gripping Bucky’s shoulder.
“Look, Steve,” Bucky replied, his voice biting as he shook off Steve’s hand. “I know you care, you always care. But you don’t understand, and I’m not going to be the one to help you figure it out. Let it go.”

Steve drew a deep breath, but didn’t say anything. After a moment, he raised his hand slowly to Bucky’s neck, gently brushing over the needle marks on his jugular and carotid. “These hurt like a bitch, but the drain line, god it felt like he stabbed me. I would have screamed if I could have gotten enough air, but I was so sick that by the time he stuck me, it was all I could do to stay conscious.”

Bucky pulled his knees up, but didn’t look at Steve.

“Being embalmed hurt so much; felt like I was being burned up from the inside out. I—” Steve stopped. He wanted to tell Bucky that he understood, he wanted to relate. But he couldn’t just share this like he was relaying the latest gossip to Bucky, like it meant nothing. This was personal and just the recollections of it put knots in his stomach and made his chest ache.

He contemplated stopping there. Certainly Bucky got the idea — Steve was tortured, too. But Bucky was sitting there, stock still and blanched white. His shivering was gone, replaced with pure and utter terror, and Steve didn’t know how to make it better, surely didn’t know what would make it worse.

“I cried when he killed me, Bucky — the shot to the heart — I was so scared that I just cried,” he finally admitted. “I tried to stop him from leaving, I really did. I’m so sorry that I didn’t get to him in time.”

The white of Bucky’s face was being replaced again with pink, and he was trembling again, though not from the cold. “Fuck,” he whispered. “I worked for him, Steve.”

“I know. You never told me, but he came to hire me on after you left. I know what you did for him. I read the files — rabbits, cats, dogs…. people. I worked for him, too, for a while.”

“Fuck. I should have stopped him. I knew what he was working on, I just didn’t think he’d do it. He paid well, and I knew he was crazy, I just didn’t think he could do it,” Bucky admitted. His fists were clenched bloodness and his neck cored.

“I’m not mad at you, Bucky. I mean, I was kinda upset about it for a while, but I understand. It wasn’t your fault,” Steve said gently.

Bucky turned suddenly, his eyes fixed on Steve’s. Tears ran unbroken down his face. “How is it not my fault?” he whispered. “He killed you, Stevie. He killed you…”

The anger suddenly gave way to sobbing, and Steve pulled Bucky into his arms, knowing that Bucky was really crying for the both of them. Bucky’s hell was fresher than Steve’s, and he vividly remembered his own breakdown after West’s experiments. By the sound of it, Bucky had been through worse, but if Bucky would rather talk about Steve, then they would talk about Steve.

“Worse things have happened to better people. There’s no use dwelling on it, Buck. We’ve got each other and before all of this is said and done, we’ll kill them both,” Steve promised.

The camp around them quieted as Bucky’s sobs, muted against Steve though they were, echoed off the cliff face. Bucky wasn’t the only man to cry in their company, but he was the first NCO and that fact alone was enough to drain the enthusiasm of their liberation from everyone else.
Another two days hard march brought ninety-three men into camp at the Allied front near Azzano. They were forty-one fewer than Steve had led out of the camp, injuries claiming most of them and exposure and malnutrition carrying off the rest. They hadn’t had a choice but to leave them where they fell. Sometimes, when a soldier collapsed and was deemed beyond all hope, they helped him along, granting death as gently as possible.

Though to him it felt like joke, Steve was the ranking officer. As such, he took it upon himself to perform the lion’s share of those mercy killings. The men around him already looked so haunted that he wasn’t sure they would make it back to camp if any greater burdens were placed upon them. But doing what needed to be done — merciful or not — cut to the quick.

Corporal Walker had been the first. The young man had taken a good old-fashioned bullet to the gut during their escape. He’d put on a brave face, but they hadn’t made it more than a mile from the base when he went down. They hadn’t been able to risk the report of a side arm, so Steve said the Lord’s Prayer with him in hushed tones and then snapped his neck in one smooth motion before the kid could work himself up about it. A couple of the guys laid the Corporal behind a snow bank, and they trekked on.

Their arrival hadn’t come as a surprise to Steve. He’d heard the sounds of the camp from a mile away, but actually being in the midst of such liveliness and excitement was overwhelming. During the march through the mountains, Steve spent a lot of time thinking about death, mortality, Yog-Sothoth, and the Void. But those thoughts had been far from restful, his actions even less so, and Steve still needed time to process what he’d seen and what he’d had to do.

Instead of quiet, he was met with the exuberant cheers of the company. The contrast between death and jubilation was jarring.

“Let’s hear it for Captain America!” Bucky shouted beside him. Steve could hear the forced enthusiasm, but they were NCOs and they had a job to do, roles to play. Steve slapped on a showgirl smile and pretended that he was excited, proud, relieved, and happy even though more than a dozen terrified faces burned in his mind as their lives were extinguished in his hands. As he stood there looking at bruised and dirty faces while shaking hands and patting backs, Steve realized that his own death was the least of all the deaths he would encounter in this life.
They spent two days at the camp just outside Azzano before they could hop a flight out, and the trip took another full day before they made it back to London. Peggy and Howard had pulled at a Gordian knot’s worth of strings to get Steve and his hand-picked team back to SSR headquarters in one piece. Steve could feel West, and he knew that where West went Schmidt was likely to be. Knowing now that he was up against so much more than just West, Steve was forced to reconsider his solo mission to West in lieu of a team.

The idea of being a team seemed to settle relatively quickly for the rest of the men, and not two hours after landing in London, they found themselves in the bar of their hotel.

“Three cheers for Sarge!” Falsworth called.

Bucky smiled sheepishly and lifted his stein to the toast, but as soon as he drained his cup he begged off for bed. Steve understood. He’d managed to get a little alone time for himself, his rank earning him a pup tent of his own, but Bucky had bunked with the enlisted men, rebuffing Steve’s attempts at conversation or even proximity.

But Peggy had gotten all of Steve’s new team rooms at a small inn in London, provided they all share with a roommate. Steve and Bucky had ended up together just out of habit as everyone else paired off. So tired, overwhelmed, and unable to get drunk, Steve finished another round and then headed up to join Bucky.

The room was silent and the lamp off. Bucky was sitting, knees to chest, on his bed, just looking out the window. Steve let Bucky get used to the idea that he wasn’t alone in the room anymore, using the small bathroom to change out of his uniform and brush his teeth. He then sat at the foot of the other twin bed, across from Bucky.

Steve wasn’t sure what to say or where to begin, so they sat in tense silence until Bucky spoke.

“Steve, Schmidt said Erskine made you, but all you told me about was West. I need to know what happened. To you, I mean. I need to understand.”

Steve swallowed. “Yeah, I can do that.”

Bucky didn’t move when Steve started talking, and Steve could tell it was best if he stayed where he was. The story wasn’t a long epic that required hours of telling, fifteen minutes was enough, but by the time he’d gotten it all out he felt like he’d been telling the story for days. Even mentions of the Void in this reality bent space and time, or at least that was Steve’s perception, and the room felt singular, removed from the rest of existence in its own space-time outside that of Earth. Even past the end of his speaking, the night seemed to flow around them like a river around a rock,
tugging at them with the inexorable certainty of erosion, like small chunks of them were worn away by the current of the Void which lapped at the edges of their tenuous bubble.

Exhaustion from the pull of Yog-Sothoth’s realm nearly brought Steve to sleep before Bucky spoke.

“So there’s nothing… different about you?” Bucky asked.

The hesitation in Bucky’s question flooded Steve with adrenaline. “I mean yeah, sure, but you mean something in particular, don’t you?”

Bucky turned then, and in the moonlight Steve could see Bucky’s eyes — iridescent green, no longer blue. “You heard him, Steve. They turned me into one of them.”

“Show me, Buck. I promise I’m not going anywhere.”

Bucky didn’t nod, just began to unbutton his dress shirt with shaking hands. It took a minute, his shaking becoming fumbling as he grasped at the buttons, but he succeeded eventually and tossed the shirt aside. There were scales over Bucky’s sides, not the same shade as Schmidt’s scales, but green like Bucky’s new eyes. And in the middle of the patch of scales, between every rib, were long lines that looked like newly healed incisions — red, raised, and scabrous.

“Bucky, what did they do?” Steve asked. “Did they cut you?”

“I- I think they’re gills, Steve. I don’t know how I know. I just do,” Bucky said, no attempt to cover the utter terror in his voice.

“Do they hurt?” Steve asked.

“No, not like what you’re thinking. They ache like underused muscles, like when you’ve been sitting too long. I think I need to use them.”

Steve nodded mechanically, his mind spinning and turning uselessly as he stared at the angry red lines that started on Bucky’s chest and curved around onto his sides in between every rib.

“Steve-” Bucky said pleadingly.

Bucky had always been the one in control, the one doing the taking care of Steve, not the other way around. Bucky should never, ever sound confused, helpless, scared.

“What do you need me to do, Bucky?”

“Fill the tub?” he asked, sounding unsure of even that small request.

“Sure, Buck. I’ll get it started and come back for you,” Steve said, leaning across the bed and giving Bucky’s hand a squeeze.

A small bathroom, with an even smaller tub, adjoined their room. Steve chunked a couple of scoops of coal into the water heater and then turned on the tap on the wall. Once the water was running warm into the tub, he stoppered it and headed back out to Bucky who was still sitting in the same place he had been.

“I got the tub filling up,” he said softly.

Bucky nodded stiffly and got up, following Steve like a man condemned. Silently, Bucky stripped naked and stepped into the tub. Steve closed the lid of the toilet and sat down, waiting for
A shudder of relief wracked Bucky’s frame as he lowered himself into the water and his eyes slipped closed.

“Feel good?” Steve asked.

“Mmm,” agreed Bucky.

Steve smiled and leaned forward, elbows on knees. Slowly, the tub filled around Bucky until the water lapped up around his lowest set of marks. At that level the water was only six inches from the lip of the tub and Steve reached over to turn off the faucet. Bucky blinked and looked at Steve, the relaxation on his face evaporating as he steeled himself to complete the true objective of the bath.

He swallowed hard and scooted forward in the tub, his torso slipping further below the water until he was up to his neck.

“Does it help?” Steve asked.

But the further under the water Bucky’s ribs went, the more terrified he looked. “No. It’s worse. I feel like I’m drowning, like being above the water I can’t- I can’t breathe.”

“Can you dip your head under and see if it gets better?” suggested Steve.

Bucky’s eyes were wide. “I can’t. I- what if they’re not gills? What if I’m wrong?”

Steve reached out and laid a hand on Bucky’s arm. “Hey pal, listen. If those things turn out not to be gills then you just stick your head back up out of the water and take a deep breath. I’m right here. I’m not gonna let you drown.”

“Yeah, of course,” Bucky agreed. He looked at Steve, took a deep breath, and slid down under the water.
The tub was small and with Bucky’s head all the way under, his ass was pressed against the other end. Steve watched Bucky’s face, making sure that he didn’t go unconscious and drown, but even in the dim light from outside that filtered in through the bedroom door, Bucky looked fine.

Bucky blinked his eyes open after a few seconds, and Steve watched in surprise as nictitating membranes slid over the delicate organs. The thin tissue emerged from the corners of his eyes alongside his nose and eased out until it retreated under the skin on the other side of the eye. The membranes, “haws” his biology teacher had called them, were clear with beautiful gold streaks like filigree on a crystal goblet. Bucky blinked a few more times, mucous clearing from the new tissues on their first emergence. Then he looked around, before peering up at Steve, the green glow of his eyes streaked with brilliant gold that should look otherworldly, but instead reminded Steve of emeralds.

Steve tore his gaze from Bucky’s, focusing on his task of keeping Bucky safe under the water. He could see Bucky’s pulse fluttering in his neck, speeding up and getting more erratic the longer he went without air, but his prospective gills stayed sealed. After sixty-seconds had passed, Bucky’s hands were scrabbling against the smooth glaze that coated the tub. Steve felt that this was sign enough that Bucky needed to be done. He reached into the water to pull Bucky out, but Bucky wrenched out of his grasp. Steve paused, unsure of what Bucky needed or wanted or even how those two things were related. In the time it took him to decide to pull Bucky out, Bucky’s back arched and the seams of the gills split open all at once. Small clouds of pinkish blood puffed out into the tub, but no great hemorrhaging followed. Instead, the gills started to flutter, slowly and disjointedly at first, but after a few tentative breaths they synced up, Bucky’s chest moving normally under the water.

Steve sat back on the toilet and stared in horrified wonderment. “Well, I’ll be damned. They’re really gills.”
Bucky gave Steve a thumbs up and hung out in the water, his gills gently waving under the surface, even after the bath went cold. When he started to fidget, Steve snagged a towel from the linen cabinet under the sink. Bucky sat up, drawing out so that his lowest gills sat right above the water line, and tentatively tried a breath through his mouth. The breath didn’t seem all that deep to Steve, but then Bucky plugged his nose, closed his mouth, and blew like he was trying to pop his ears. Water rushed out of the gills, and Bucky repeated the process, each subsequent breath deeper than the last, each expelling less and less water until nothing more came out.

“How’s that for a party trick?” Bucky asked as he climbed out of the tub.

Steve handed him the towel and shook his head. “Can’t imagine anyone topping that. How do you feel?”

“Better. The ache is gone,” he answered, though the look on his face said that “better” might not be entirely accurate.

“I’m glad you’re feeling better,” Steve said, not eager to counter Bucky. But as they made their way back to their beds, the look of desolation and horror on Bucky’s face only seemed to grow.

“You want to talk about it?” prompted Steve.

Bucky dropped to sit on his bed and looked at Steve. “Do I wanna talk about how I’m part fish? Yeah, let’s discuss that. Go ahead, you start.”

Steve held up his hands. “Hey, I’m not saying let’s talk this out so that I can fix you or something. I’m saying that I get what it’s like to have your body turned into something else and if you wanna talk about it, well I’m here.”

Bucky finished drying his hair, dropped the towel on the floor, and leaned forward. “You were cured of everything that was trying to kill you. You’re an Adonis. I saw the way Carter looked at you in the bar. But me? I was turned into a fucking monster and you saw how she looked at me — it wasn’t all your good looks, pal. Dames can tell when something ain’t right about a man. So don’t go telling me that you get it.”

“I’m sorry, Buck. I really am.”

“Yeah, pal. Me too, me too.”

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They didn’t talk about Bucky’s transformation at all the next day or the day after that. They carried on as they always had — best friends as well as anyone around them could tell — but as soon as they were in their room at night Bucky locked the bathroom door and filled the tub while Steve sat in silence on his bed. Steve had spent months wishing that he could talk to Bucky about what he’d been through and now that he had him, Bucky couldn’t even stand to be in the same room with him.

West took everything good that had been left to Steve, as well as most of the bad, and replaced it all with things far worse than he could have imagined. Steve closed his eyes, trying to picture the star-filled expanse of the cosmos, but the image was barely formed in his mind when he heard something. He listened, and after a few seconds the sound repeated itself.

Quietly, Steve got up from the bed and made his way to the bathroom door. The noise was louder on that side of the room and definitely coming from the bathroom.
A pained moan, louder this time, came through the door, along with the stuttered tapping of metal against porcelain.

“Fuck,” Bucky muttered.

The raw desperation of that one word filtered through the wood paneling louder than the word itself. The air was redolent with the smell of blood, and Steve couldn’t take it, just standing there listening anymore. “Bucky?” he called, knocking on the door.

“I- I’m fine,” came the reply.

“Bucky, I don’t believe that for a second. What’s going on?”

“Fuck off, Rogers,” Bucky shot back.

“If you don’t want to talk about it, that’s your choice, but if you can’t tell me why the room out here smells like an slaughterhouse then you’re gonna need to be taking that ticket home tomorrow instead of heading out with us.”

The threat sat sour in his stomach. The last thing he wanted to do was push Bucky away, not for something he had no choice in, not as a punishment, but West and Schmidt had to die and Steve couldn’t let anything, not even Bucky stand in the way of that.

After a long pause, the doorknob clicked and then turned. Steve stepped into the bathroom and he was surprised to find that the lights were on. Ever since they’d gotten back to London Bucky’s eyes had seemed sensitive to light and he’d taken to wearing sunglasses even inside, though Steve suspected that as mostly to cover his unearthly eye color. But his hands — those explained the recent addition of gloves to his wardrobe.

A thin webbing grew between his fingers all the way up to his second knuckle, at least it did between most of his fingers. But between his left index and middle fingers the membrane was shredded, flayed bits of skin hanging from his fingers, and hesitation marks were evident on both fingers.

“I can’t cover it with gloves anymore,” Bucky explained simply.

Steve nodded. “I can do it if that would help.”

Bucky stared him down. “Why aren’t you running away from me in terror? I’m a freak.”

“I am too, people just can’t see it. I know that’s not the same but it’s the truth. And besides, after Yog-Sothoth, gills and some little finger flaps aren’t exactly nightmare material,” Steve said with a shrug.

He thought that Bucky was going to kick him out again, yell at him for just not getting how bad it was, and the silence stretched until Steve thought it might snap. An apology was on the tip of Steve’s tongue when Bucky laughed. It wasn’t a joyous thing, but there was humor and relief.

“Goddamn, Steve. I guess I was wrong about Erskine fixing you. You still got no sense of self-preservation. Come on, you wash up and let’s get this over with.”

They ended up each on their own beds with an end table between them. The Gideon’s Bible was under Bucky’s hand to keep Steve from carving bloody lines into the surface of the table. Steve took a minute to sharpen his knife and then wiped it down.
“You ready?”

“Fuck no. Let’s do it,” Bucky answered.

Steve put his other hand over Bucky’s, holding it steady, and swiped his knife along the place where the webbing grew out of the finger. For being nearly translucent, the membrane was as tough as sinew. Bucky had been silent on the first pass, the knife being so sharp that the pain probably only barely registered, but when Steve had to cut it again Bucky jammed his free hand in his mouth to muffle the whimpers that he was unable to silence.

Steve focused on the matter at hand, unable to give Bucky’s pained cries any attention, though his heart ached so fiercely in his chest that he felt sick. The second cut went much faster once he knew how much pressure to apply and he focused on technique. The flap came off without any real fanfare and Bucky gasped, doubling over at the middle.

“I’m not stopping unless you tell me to,” Steve warned as he shifted Bucky’s hand against the book. Bucky nodded weakly and Steve moved on the next membrane, the ache in his chest having turned to a Void of its own — dark, angry, nothing that men born of this realm were intended to face.

It only took Steve about five minutes to finish both hands, Bucky’s webbed feet not being particularly relevant to the situation, but by that time Bucky was bent in half at the waist. He’d folded up a pillow in his lap and buried his face in it to muffle his cries. Steve wiped up Bucky’s hands with an alcohol soaked rag and Bucky outright screamed into the pillow. Quickly, Steve wrapped Bucky’s hands in strips torn from a bath towel.

“Hey, it’s alright,” Steve said, setting everything aside. “We’re done. It’s over. Come on, let’s get you laid back so you can rest.”

Bucky went where Steve directed him, but he twitched and gasped as he bumped his hands on the bed. Once he was settled, Steve picked up everything and carried it away. Bucky looked beat but he wasn’t asleep, and it couldn’t be helping to look at the bloodied rags, the knife, the ruined Bible, and the bits of his own flesh that were plied on the table. He threw the detritus of their work into the small coal-powered water heater, and the evidence of their inhuman existence disintegrated into nothing, only the faint smell of burnt pork lingering in the bathroom.

Bucky was still awake and watching Steve when he came out of the bathroom. Steve sat on his own bed.

“Need anything?”

Bucky shook his head. “I just can’t believe you used the fucking Bible,” he said tiredly, though he smiled.

“Aw come on, Bucky. We’ve both been dead; you know none of that shit makes sense,” Steve pointed out.

“Fair enough,” conceded Bucky.

Silence fell between them again after that, and Steve slipped under the bed covers. He was nearly asleep when Bucky said, “West monologued at me too, you know, when he was doing… whatever.”

“Yeah? What about?”
Bucky shrugged. “His experiments. You, mostly. He told me what he did. I had hoped- I had hoped that he was just talking out his ass, trying to get to me, but I should have known better. He told me-”

Bucky broke off then. Steve could hear how Bucky’s breath rasped in and stuttered out, the universal indicator that he was trying not to cry in the face of something unbearable.

“You don’t have to tell me if don’t want,” Steve said, praying that Bucky didn’t call him on the hypocrisy from his earlier threat.

“No, you need to know. It’s important,” Bucky countered. “West said that Schmidt was making an army, one to subjugate humankind, and he was making it in his own image. Not human, not whatever he is, but some bastard cross between the two. Wanted to make soldiers that would serve the will of the Deep Ones, but without giving them the immortality that they supposedly have. I was the first of those soldiers — a reanimated fish-monster. They said it would make me one of them in time; I just had to wait for it to kick in.”

Steve took a moment to absorb this information, and then cautiously asked, “And are you turning into one of them?”

“Sure fucking looks like it, don’t it?” Bucky said with a sigh.

“That’s not what I meant, Bucky. I meant do you want to serve them or do you want to help me kill them all? Because however you look doesn’t matter to me. All I care about is what’s in your heart; who’s side are you on?” Steve asked.

“I want to kill every single one of them with my bare hands,” Bucky answered with conviction. “Just because they made me breathe water, doesn’t mean I want to be one of them. Not now, not ever.”

“Then, that’s all that matters in the end, isn’t it, Buck?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“What else did you want to tell me about? We’ve got all night, but once we’re mobilized again we might not get the chance.”

Steve could see, even in the dim light, that Bucky shook his head. “No, I’m alright, I think. I just thought you should know what those two are up to.”

“Thanks, Bucky. I appreciate it.”

“Go to sleep, Steve. We got a long day tomorrow,” Bucky told Steve. Carefully, he rolled over, his back to Steve, and Steve knew that their conversation was over.

It worried him that whatever brought Bucky to tears wasn’t something that he was willing to talk about, but then they bore a lot of things in war that they carried in silence. If he needed to, Steve figured Bucky would bring it up in his own time.
When Steve carefully unwrapped Bucky’s hands in the morning, not so much as a scab or scar remained. Bucky shrugged and Steve just shook his head in amazement before tossing the bandages in the water heater furnace.

Bucky still wore the sunglasses he’d procured — cutting away the webbing of his hands hadn’t done anything for the unnatural greenness of his eyes — and Steve managed to cover for Bucky in their first morning meeting at SSR headquarters by saying that Bucky’d been in solitary without light when he’d found him in the mountains. His eyes were just taking a while to adjust to light after a couple of weeks in darkness. Several of the team knew better, but they held their tongues.

Conveniently, everyone who didn’t know better seemed to accept this explanation at face value, grimly nodding and patting Bucky on the back. There were murmurs of praise for his bravery and strength when he’d had a ticket home but refused to take it. Bucky nodded and accepted their praise in an appropriately mirthless manner, but without any undue display of emotions.

They spent the day looking at the maps that Steve had drawn up, based on the map he’d seen in Kreishberg facility. Everyone on their team — that Dum Dum had decided to call the Howling Commandos, much to Steve’s chagrin — seemed to accept Steve’s unnatural ability to predict Schmidt’s movement as part of his heightened intellect or some other serum-related enhancement. Bucky didn’t quite buy that line and he glared at Steve, his eyebrows raised over the rims of his sunglasses.

The moment they shut the door to their hotel room barracks that night Bucky turned to Steve. “Alright, come clean. What is it you’re not telling everyone?”

Steve’s brow furrowed as he tried to figure out what Bucky was asking about. He thought about it while he unlaced his dress shoes but, coming to nothing, admitted his confusion.

“Oh, come on, Steve. You saw one map with pins on it — pins that you’re taking for bases — and now you’re the expert on their troop movements? And not just that, but somehow you know the location of their Hydra scientists? That’s a load of horseshit if I ever heard one. I saw the same map as you, maybe I didn’t memorize it with my new fangled perfect memory, but I know for sure there weren’t no goddamn troop movements on it, so what are you on about?”

Steve drew a deep breath in through his nose. “I can feel him, Bucky. I don’t know exactly when I realized it, but I can feel him. I can tell where he is like I know where the sun rises and where it sets.”

“West?” Bucky asked, his eyes nearly glowing with disbelief as he stared slack-jawed at Steve. “You can feel the sonofabitch?”

Steve nodded and leaned forward, elbows on knees. “It’s how I found the base outside Kreishberg, I was following him.”

“You didn’t come for me,” Bucky said quietly, his eyes suddenly dimmed to a dull mossy green by the realization.

Steve shook his head, feeling more guilty than he could have imagined possible. “I didn’t even know you were missing.”

The stiffness in Bucky’s posture changed. Where before he had carried it in his shoulders, his
whole body leaning towards Steve — all exhaustion and shell shock dragging him down — he was suddenly ramrod straight. His jaw was clenched and his neck cored slightly as he fought whatever was going on inside him.

“I’m sorry, Buck. I would have come—”

“You would have come for me after you had killed West. I get it,” Bucky said, his tone matter of fact — no anger, just acceptance and poorly disguised hurt. Steve wished he could take it all back and lie to Bucky, but it was too late, and Steve didn’t have anything to say in response. “I guess it’s okay, Steve. I haven’t been exactly truthful to you either.”

Steve looked up, his guilt temporarily overshadowed by interest and fear. “What?”

“You know when you asked me where my loyalties lie? When we were talking about what they did to me?”

Steve nodded a little numbly, terrified that he might have to kill Bucky right then and there. He glanced across the room to his pants where his knife was in his pocket. He didn’t need the knife, but a weapon could increase his odds of success.

“I’m still going to kill each and every one of them, you can stop eyeballing your knife, but I’m still one of them,” Bucky explained.

“I don’t follow.”

“Like you know where West is, I know where my people, those people,” Bucky corrected himself, “are. I could go throw myself off into the ocean right now, and I wouldn’t even have to think about it — I could just swim there, no problem. It’s like a homing beacon in my head telling where to find Dagon, Hydra, and Cthulhu and the colony. Ancestral knowledge, West called it — something you know without having to be taught.”

Steve swallowed and nodded. Bucky’s little slip up with the “my people” wasn’t something Steve was going to forget anytime soon, but he decided not to worry over it just yet. “That’ll be handy later,” he hedged carefully.

Bucky grinned viciously, his smile eager and dripping with the promise of violence, but his eyes were still moss green and unlit. Steve’s chest clenched at Bucky’s inability to cover his own grief. “Damn right it’ll be handy later. You and me, Steve. We’ll kill every last one.”

*****

The first two bases from Steve’s map weren’t exactly soft targets, but they sure as hell weren’t prepared for an actual assault. The Howlies — a nickname that Steve thought was somehow infinitely worse than the Howling Commandos — simply walked right into the first base and rounded everyone up without having to stop to reload. A few of the higher level idiots bit down on their cyanide pills, of course, but they managed to collect a fair few detainees to drag back to base for interrogation. The second base had apparently gotten a memo about preparedness, but unfortunately for them it didn’t arrive in time. Their newly constructed front gate still had wet mortar between the bricks and it toppled with minimal effort. After that, the scientists, techs, and various other personnel either fell on their swords or at least gave a slightly embarrassing attempt at combat. Still, Steve and the team dragged in nearly a third of the personnel.

The third base was fortified, though mostly through geographical features rather than actual tactical defenses. That one took a bit of work, and Steve managed to get himself shot in the stomach
pushing Morita out of the way when a scientist figured out how to fire a gun after several failed attempts with the safety. Steve had to order everyone else to go on ahead and secure the base since he couldn’t keep up. From the corner where he had concealed himself he listened to the gunfire and yelling, and tried to breathe quietly while his insides knitted themselves back together.

By the time that the base was taken, Steve was convinced of one thing in particular: healing at ten times the rate of a normal human — he was estimating the healing rate since he didn’t actually know how fast gut-shots healed on normal folks — hurt a helluva lot more than getting shot in the first place.

“You alright, Cap?” Dum Dum asked him once the firefight had given way to Jones yelling at various people in French and German while the others hustled the prisoners to a better holding location.

“Yeah,” Steve groaned as he took Dum Dum’s hand and staggered to his feet. He winced a few times as he stretched the newly closed wound, and then plastered on what he knew was an obviously fake smile. “I heal quick. It’s just sore now.”

“Uh huh,” Dum Dum agreed with minimal evidence that he believed Steve. “You’re still gonna take it easy. We’ve already called in the calvary so all we gotta do is wait and sit around looking pretty. Though you’re gonna have to take care that last part for us, seeing as how we look like shit.”

Steve snorted and then winced as he gingerly toddled down the corridor. Dum Dum found Steve a chair to collapse into and then went back to join Dernier in trying to subdue a very emphatic officer who apparently lacked a cyanide pill but still had all the zeal needed to bite down on one.

“Lean forward. The jacket’s coming off so I can take a look,” Bucky demanded, nearly startling Steve who was a little fuzzy around the edges from blood loss and definitely had not noticed his friend’s approach.

Steve did as he was told, the jacket peeling away easily, but the undershirt stuck into the top couple of layers of skin that had regrown a little too enthusiastically. Steve grit his teeth when Bucky finally peeled it free with a swift tug that set the wound to bleeding again. But even with that, he was more upset by Bucky’s proximity than by the pain and discomfort of Bucky’s ministrations.

After their hotel confessional, they hadn’t spoken to each other again, not one on one. Steve couldn’t blame him. If their roles were reversed, he didn’t think he’d take the news of Bucky’s fortuitous rescue of him that well either. “Oh, I hadn’t thought to check up on you out on the Front. I was just running my clandestine mission with my friends.” Steve hadn’t even thought to make sure Bucky was okay, and Bucky knew it without Steve having to say a word. Bucky would have understood the mission taking precedence, but his hurt over being overlooked, forgotten, was what lay between them.

“So you and Carter?” Bucky asked as he pressed the pad of his thumb against the freshly opened wound, a bandage clearly having unpleasant consequences.

“What- what about her?” Steve asked through clenched teeth.

“She’s got the hots for you,” Bucky said with a conspiratorial smile.

Steve grinned back, though it was a bit stiff. “She’s a looker all right, but like I told you, I’m not interested in that kinda thing anymore. Being dead and all that shit sorta ruined romance. What’s a bunch of flowers when you could gaze into the Void and let your living mind and all consciousness
be devoured under the blinding madness of all knowledge in space and time illuminated in your mind at once? It just seems banal is all I’m saying.”

Bucky stopped and stared at Steve for a moment before laughing until he was gasping for air.
“Yeah, okay. That’s fair. Fuck you’re weird but you’re not wrong.”

“What? You wouldn’t take her on a date if she asked?” Steve asked, grinning at the sight of Bucky smiling despite the pain.

Bucky shook his head and peeled off his thumb which stung significantly. “Nah. She’s a really nice lady, smart as a whip, too, but like you said, nothing beats being dead.”

“Well, I didn’t mean it exactly like that,” Steve argued.

“Nope, no take backs,” Bucky said with a wry smile. “Look the skin already closed up again,” Bucky pointed out after a few seconds. Looking down, Steve could see that the wound was certainly closed up again, though the internal damage was still working itself out.

“Look, Steve,” Bucky went on as he helped Steve wiggle back into his shirt. “I owe you an apology.”

The warm feeling that Steve got from the gentle ribbing moments ago, a tentative sign that Bucky might not hate him for all time, was suddenly muddled and all tangled up with worry and doubt.
“What are you talking about?”

“I didn’t get it, not at first. But it’s… I don’t know how to explain it. The knowing, about the Deep Ones — Cthulhu, Dagon, Hydra — it just grows inside of you. It eats up your consciousness, and things that once seemed important don’t even matter to me anymore. Sometimes it’s like there’s the mission — there’s finding them and killing them — and nothing else exists in the world beyond that. So I get it. You didn’t mean to forget me, and I can’t blame you when sometimes I forget me, too.”

Steve swallowed, a hard lump having taken up residence in his throat. Concern for what was happening to Bucky warred with the feeling that Bucky should not be apologizing to Steve for his own monumental fuck up. “I’m sorry, Bucky. I’m sorry that you understand and I’m sorry that I fucked up, and I- I’m not going to leave you behind again.”

Bucky barked out a small, bitter laugh. “Pal, like you could leave me behind if you tried. Now come on, we got these prisoners to whip into shape.”

With a forced smile and a quick nod, Steve took the hand up Bucky offered him, and carefully made his way to Falsworth for an update on their captives.

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Oberführer Walter Meier held his head high despite the livid purple finger marks on his jaw. Much to Steve’s surprise, the loud and emphatic officer from earlier had in fact possessed a cyanide pill. Only quick thinking and rather impressive hand strength on the part of Gabe had stopped the man from carrying out his plans of self-annihilation. Instead, he sat silently in the chair where he had been interrogated for the last five hours.

“This guy isn’t gonna talk,” Gabe observed from the other side of the two-way mirror as Peggy stalked from the room.

“You think?” Dum Dum grumbled.
Steve crossed his arms and stared. He knew Peggy was better at interrogation than he could possibly be, but he still wanted to have a go at the guy, maybe knock him around a little. No one got to the rank of Oberführer, or was issued a cyanide capsule for that matter, without having some useful intelligence information. The desire to knock the information out of him was strong, even knowing that torture never worked.

Gabe, Dum Dum, Steve, and Dernier followed Peggy to the break room where she tiredly, though gracefully, sagged into a chair.

“Gentlemen, I am at a loss with this man. He will not speak, save to babble about the eventual destruction of human civilization as we are subsumed as part of the breeding stock of the Deep Ones, and I’m not even sure what that means,” she relayed.

Out of the corner of his eye Steve saw Bucky look up suddenly. He’d stayed away from the interrogation citing exhaustion and general disinterest, though Steve knew that the stress of his personal trials were the real cause.

“What else did he say?” Bucky asked earnestly.

Peggy looked up from the coffee that Howard had wisely given her, her brows furrowed. “Does any of that stuff mean something to you?” she asked.

“It might,” Bucky replied noncommittally.

Peggy sipped her coffee and then set it down. “He said that he, and implied Hydra as well, were the proselytes of some deities known as the Deep Ones. I’m trying to recall the names he used. Hydra was one, and-”

“Mother Hydra, Father Dagon, and Cthulhu,” Bucky finished.

“Yes, that’s it. How did you know?” Peggy asked.

Bucky shook his head. “The officers at Kreishberg tried to convert me, they thought if they could turn me I’d turn my men.”

It was a bald-faced lie and Steve knew it, but it was a damn good one. Peggy and the others bought it with subtle nods.

“So did he say anything else?” Bucky pressed.

“He said that the war was retribution for the destruction of their home off the coast of, I believe it was Innsmouth, Massachusetts? And they wanted to take the world and give it to the children of Dagon — their only uses for humans were that of slaves and consorts, I believe. He said that if we submitted to our gods now, we might be spared the slaughter of Cthulhu and given the ‘honor’ of serving.”

“Alright, I think I know how to get through to this guy. Steve, Agent Carter,” Bucky said with a beckoning gesture as he took off down the corridor towards the interrogation room.

They were nearly there when Bucky turned, leading them into an empty meeting room. “I’ll interrogate this guy, but only Steve can watch or listen. I’ll make sure that you get all the information you need,” Bucky promised Peggy.

“Absolutely not. This information could be vital to the war. I don’t know how you propose to make him talk, but the method is of no importance to me, so long as he produces useful information,”
Peggy countered.

“Bucky, Peggy knows about me. I’ve told her about West and what he did to me. She’s protected me and she helped me to get over here in the first place. She won’t say anything,” Steve interjected.

Bucky glared at Steve, the sunglasses doing little to shield Steve from the probing nature of his stare. “I swear to god, Steve, if you’re wrong about her—”

“I’m not,” Steve assured him. Bucky had every right to be scared, and Steve would be terrified if their positions were reversed, but if there were anyone that could be trusted with this it would be Peggy.

“Fine,” Bucky said, and he turned and left the room before any questions could be asked.

Steve and Peggy followed, ducking into the observation room as Bucky opened the door to the interrogation room. An MP was monitoring Meier from the observation room, but Peggy ordered him out immediately. “Classified information,” she told him briskly.

Bucky took a moment to sit down at the table across from the prisoner, and Peggy whispered to Steve, “What was he talking about?”

“West got him, too,” Steve answered shortly.

“My god,” Peggy muttered to herself.

“Oberführer Meier, my name is of no importance. I am a child of Dagon,” Bucky said removing his glasses. Peggy couldn’t see, but Steve could imagine the nictitating membrane retracting just moments after blinking, his iridescent green eyes glowing like unworldly coals under the fluorescent bulbs.

Meier stared for a moment in clear surprise before bowing his head in obeisance. “Mein Herr,” he murmured.

“Look at me,” commanded Bucky. He stood from his chair and began to unbutton his shirt.

Peggy looked at Steve in askance, but Steve shook his head. “Not all of us came out looking like this,” he said, gesturing to himself.

Bucky held his shirt open, letting Meier look his fill, before rebuttoning it and sitting down again, never once turning around so that Peggy might see. “You know who I am now. The woman who asked you questions earlier, she works for me. She is a consort and carries the young of Father Dagon. You will answer all of her questions without hesitation and to the fullest of your ability. Do I make myself clear?” Bucky demanded.

Meier nodded frantically, “Jawohl, mein Herr.”

“If she tells me that you give her the slightest difficulty, I will disembowel you with my own two hands and feed you to Mother Hydra myself,” Bucky promised.

Then, without waiting for an answer, he put his sunglasses back on, stood, and strode out of the room, slamming the door behind himself.

The door to the observation room opened, and Bucky walked in, kicking it closed behind himself. Steve could see the tension in his neck and shoulders, but didn’t say anything. A second later
Bucky jammed in his hands in his pockets and turned to face Peggy, his smile stilted. “I think he’ll be more cooperative now.”

“Yes, it appears so,” Peggy agreed, looking into the interrogation room. “Is there anything I need to know if he should ask?”

Bucky shrugged. “Hell I don’t know. I just kind of winged it in there. Maybe just threaten him that you’ll come get me if he asks anything? If he asks about the spawn just feed him some line about the cravings and something weird you’ve been eating. The whole procreation bit wasn’t covered in the conversion lecture.”

“Fair enough,” Peggy said. She took a deep breath and then added, “Steve told me that you were also a subject of West’s-”

Bucky opened his mouth to speak, shooting a glare to Steve, but Peggy held up her hand.

“I have no desire to know anything which you do not wish to share, nor will I ever disclose anything I have heard or will hear about your experiences. Suffice it to say that I am sorry you have suffered at West’s hands and I appreciate your help with this matter, Sergeant. I’m going to file your Purple Heart paperwork,” she concluded.

Steve glanced at Bucky who was standing stock still, his face completely blanched. “Bucky?” he asked cautiously.

Bucky started slightly at that and swallowed. “Thank you, Agent Carter, but that won’t be necessary.”

“But that lighteness only seemed to go as far as the first couple of rounds of ale. Something about the way he held himself told Steve that there was more that Bucky wasn’t telling him. It took him about halfway through dinner to realize that Bucky was wearing the gloves again, and thinking back, Steve realized that he had been wearing them that morning as well. By the end of dinner,
Bucky’s hands seemed stiff, and he barely managed to conceal his grimaces when picking something up. So when he took an early leave from dinner, Steve went with him.

For the entire walk back from SSR headquarters to their hotel, Bucky didn’t look at Steve and didn’t talk. Steve didn’t want to push him, so he walked along beside him in silence. When the door to their room was shut and bolted, Steve turned to face Bucky who was trying clumsily at the laces of his shoes.

“Lemme see, Buck,” Steve said softly.

With trembling hands, Bucky pulled the gloves off. Steve reached down and took one of Bucky’s hands in his, gently running his thumb over of the nascent webbing that was growing between Bucky’s fingers. It was still small, but by nighttime tomorrow it would have grown back in enough that Bucky wouldn’t even be able to put on the gloves to cover his unnatural anatomy.

“You wanna do it tonight or wait until it’s grown a little more?” Steve asked.

Bucky sagged but didn’t try to retract his hand. “Tonight. The gloves already hurt.”

Steve squeezed his hand and let go. “Sure thing, Bucky.”

Having burned the Bible from their room Steve was forced to resort to a stack of newspapers that they had accumulated primarily due to laziness. He stacked them neatly, creating a pad nearly two inches thick on the end table. Bucky escaped to the bathroom as Steve prepped the supplies, and Steve heard the water faucet turn on when he began to sharpen his knife. The scraping sound had to be unsettling, knowing the pain it heralded, so Steve focused on his sharpening technique, turning his blade to just the right angle against the stone to get the best edge.

When the preparations were finished, Steve considered letting Bucky have a few minutes before they sat down to the unpleasant task, but reconsidered when he realized that any extra time would likely be spent in a state of panic and dread. The most humane thing Steve felt that he could do for Bucky was to get it over with. He went ahead and changed out of his dress clothes, throwing on an undershirt and some pajamas bottoms he’d picked up a few months back, and then he knocked on the bathroom door.

“Everything’s ready,” Steve said.

“Yeah,” was Bucky’s only reply. The resignation in his voice made Steve sick, and dragged him into unpleasant and vivid recollections of the torturous experiments that Brandt’s men had subjected him to.

Steve was still trying to get a grip on his own memories and emotions when Bucky came out of the bathroom. He sat on the edge of his bed and slapped his hand down on the pad of newspapers.

“Let’s get this over with.”

Steve couldn’t bring himself to reply to Bucky’s comment. As it was, Steve could barely bring himself to go through with it again, the horror of watching Bucky cry into a pillow while he sawed off bits of flesh from his hands was nauseating. Knowing what it was like to be on the receiving end made it all the more horrible. Steve was grateful that when he did pick up the knife, his hands were steady.

“Yeah, let’s get this over with,” Steve finally said, as much for himself as for Bucky.
Bucky’s breathing was still labored ten minutes after Steve made the final cut. The remnants of their field medicine were smoldering away in the water heater, and Steve sat on the edge of Bucky’s bed, not really doing anything other than just being present. It seemed to help. Bucky’s breathing had slowed almost as soon as Steve had settled in beside him, and Steve wasn’t above admitting, at least to himself, that the small touches they shared helped him, too. Sometimes, he longed for the nights on the Front where they slunk through ditches and down dirt roads to reach the bases that they were attacking. Those times afforded him more contact with Bucky. They shared a tent, and owing to the temperature, frequently a sleeping bag as well.

Those were the nights where he slept the deepest, feeling another living person against him — their breathing and heartbeat a balm against the pain of war. Steve’s body regulated to Bucky’s breathing those nights, and even though he didn’t need it, it felt good to remember what it was like before. It was easy, between the killing and everything else, to let the chaos overwhelm him and sweep away what had made him Steve, not reanimated Steve, not serum-enhanced Steve, just... Steve. Human Steve. And Bucky, with his strange eyes and gills, he always brought Steve back to the closest approximation of himself. Steve felt guilty for enjoying this, what little touch he could get out of Bucky, especially when it came after something so horrible. Steve knew that Bucky deserved more.

“How are we gonna finish this?”

“How are we gonna finish what, Buck?”

Bucky shifted and looked up at Steve. “You know, the fish people. How are we gonna kill them? I mean I’ve got gills—”

“I don’t have to breathe unless I wanna talk you know,” Steve interjected.

“Yeah, you’ve told me that about six different times, Steve. But it’s cold down there, and you told me about the test they made you do. You can’t handle the cold, so how are you gonna come with me?”

Unwilling to consider that too deeply, Steve turned the question back on Bucky. “And you can handle the cold better?”

“Yeah, sure. Sometimes, when we’re on a mission, I sneak away to take a nice night swim and stretch my gills. A lot of those ponds and streams are iced over. I just punch a hole somewhere and slip in for a swim. Doesn’t bother me at all,” Bucky said.

Steve was momentarily angry that Bucky would do something like that, but that anger took backseat to their more immediate problem: Steve really wouldn’t be able to go with Bucky. “Shit, I don’t know,” Steve admitted.

“Yeah,” Bucky agreed. “I don’t want to go alone, but I don’t know how it could work.”

Frustration and anger welled up, but before it could go anywhere Steve lit upon an idea. “What if
we found a way to transform me like they did to you? Give me the fish serum and all that?”

Bucky sat up. “No. Absolutely fucking not. We’re not even going to discuss it.”

“Alright, it was stupid idea anyway,” Steve conceded. He felt contrite for further upsetting Bucky after the hell of cutting away the webbing, especially given that there way no way to actualize the idea even if Bucky had agreed.

“Yeah, it was. Now move. I’m ready to go to sleep,” Bucky snapped back.

Steve vacated Bucky’s bed and climbed into his own. He considered an apology, but knew it would land flat so he flicked off the light and laid down.

“Night,” he called softly.

“Night,” Bucky returned. It was a strained response, Steve could hear the tension in Bucky’s voice and he was sorry to have put it there. But at least after this fuck up they were still talking, and for that Steve was grateful.

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Steve could feel him. West was close by and moving fast in their direction. Beside him, Bucky eyed the zipline suspiciously.

“Remember when I made you ride the Cyclone at Coney Island?” Bucky asked.

“Yeah, and I threw up,” Steve recalled without taking his eyes off the train track below.

“This isn’t payback, is it?” Bucky asked.

Steve grinned, momentarily taking his eyes off the train track. “Now why would I do that?”

From where he stood, Steve knew how long it would be until the train passed and he had a good idea of how fast it was moving. Behind him Gabe confirmed his suspicions, listening in to Hydra transmissions on a stolen radio. Steve put on his helmet and then clipped his hand trolley onto the zipline.

Dernier counted them out and on the signal Steve jumped. The cold wind rushed around them and Steve’s eyes stung with the cold. He blinked a few times on the ride down, trying to clear snow and frozen tears from his eyelashes.

They landed softly and then ran ahead to a ladder on the side of one of the cars. Gabe stayed up top, crawling ahead to the engine compartment, while Steve followed Bucky into the freightcar. It wasn’t like the trains that they had hopped once or twice, making their way to Atlantic City for the weekend. These were well built, no large sliding freight doors, no drafty planks pretending to be walls or ceilings. The inside was filled with fixed metal racks with walkways between them. It made concealment easier if he could get a rack between himself and his adversary should the occasion arise, but it was also more dangerous because the aisleways were narrow and didn’t afford a whole lot of cover if someone was coming at them directly.

The thing that didn’t even occur to Steve was that the doors could be remotely closed, so when they shut behind him he was cut off from Bucky. Steve could hear gunfire behind him, but he had problems of his own as a soldier, wearing the most ungainly contraption Steve had ever seen, pointed two large barrels of what appeared to be a flame thrower at him. He dove behind a stack of containers and the discharge from the gun blew a hole in the bulkhead behind him.
The stench of burnt metal mixed with the tang of sulfur fire, and Steve recognized it immediately. Energy from the Stone of Azathoth powered this weapon, as it did many of Hydra’s energy weapons. He counted the steps of his opponent and then jumped out, racing through the car. The soldier fired the energy cannon again, and Steve sidestepped the blast. He rammed the man with all his strength, bashing the helmet of the suit with his shield, before running back to help Bucky.

The door was jammed, probably locked remotely, but that wasn’t an effective deterrent once Steve smashed the control mechanism on the wall. He slid it and stepped into the gap between the two cars. Through the window, Steve could see Bucky in the next car crouched behind a stack of containers, firing at a Hydra soldier at the other end of the carriage.

Steve heard the telltale click of Bucky’s gun as he pulled the trigger again after the chamber was empty. Knocking on the glass, Steve got Bucky’s attention and drew his weapon. He opened the door to the container car and tossed his weapon to Bucky, rushing forward and forcing the soldier to step out into an aisle, giving Bucky a clear shot.

“I had him on the ropes,” Bucky explained as he lowered his weapon and the soldier crumpled to the ground in front of them.

“I know you did,” Steve agreed.

They needed to move forward to the engine room. Valuable time had been spent fighting these thugs and if they didn’t hurry, Gabe would be going in alone. But as they turned towards the front of the train, they were met with Steve’s first opponent.

Before he could bemoan the lousy job he’d done of killing the guy, an energy pulse hit Steve square in the shield, knocking him across the car. His head swam as he pressed himself up off the floor. He got a glimpse of Bucky standing in front of him, protecting Steve with his own shield, and then the cannon fired again and Bucky sailed past and out of a gaping hole in the side of the train.

The shield had been blown out of Bucky’s hand and lay on the floor of the railcar. Steve grabbed it and flung it into the bastard with the energy cannons, knocking him back into the other car. When Steve turned back, he saw Bucky clinging desperately to a handle on the flap of metal that hung open from the side of the train. Quickly, Steve scrambled out after him.

“Bucky!” Steve shouted. His voice seemed quiet under the roar of the train, and he wasn’t sure that Bucky heard him, though he was watching Steve intently.

Steve slowly inched onto the shaky piece of metal, his left arm reaching out though still too far from Bucky for him to grab on.

“Hang on!” he called. The piece of metal Bucky was clinging to offered no handhold for Steve. Bucky slid his hands down the bar towards Steve, almost within reach.

“Grab my hand!” he shouted. Bucky scooted the last few inches he needed to close the gap to Steve and reached, but the weight of him on the unsecured end of the bar tore the whole thing free and he fell. Steve missed his hand by mere inches.

“NO!!!” Steve screamed as Bucky tumbled down into the ravine below.

His stomach lurched and he gasped, his chest tight like his old asthma had come back full force. There were no moments to be spared for Bucky, Steve knew, but he couldn’t tear his eyes away from the canyon even though he could no longer see where Bucky was falling or even if he’d
landed. A tunnel loomed up ahead and Steve knew he had to get back in before this flap of train, like the many flaps of skin on Bucky’s hands, was painfully shorn away.

He clamored inside and retrieved his shield. The soldier with the cannon lay on the floor heaving great gasping breaths through what was probably a bunch of broken ribs. Steve told himself that he did it only to ease the soldier’s passing, his mind going back to Corporal Walker, but anger played a large part too. But unlike with the young corporal, Steve felt no sorrow when he drove his shield through the soldier’s neck armor. He wrenched the shield out, now partially rimmed in blood, and hurried on, unwilling to lose Gabe, too.

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Gabe, as it turned out, did not need Steve’s help. He had successfully stopped the train and rounded up everyone that hadn’t bitten a cyanide capsule in the meantime.

“Well, I see you’re doing just fine without me,” Steve commented as he took in the scene, trying for all he was worth to save his tears for sometime when he could be alone.

Gabe shrugged and grinned. “Gotta show them how it’s done. Hey where’s Barnes?”

Steve clenched his jaw and swallowed. “Didn’t make it.”

Gabe shook his head. “Goddammit.”

Steve opened his mouth to say something when he felt the itching in the back his head ratchet up a notch. His awareness of West instantly became the most encompassing it had been since Belluno, though it failed entirely to cover the emptiness Steve felt from Bucky’s loss.

“We’ve got one in hiding, maybe more,” Steve announced.

A little snivelling man with a round baby-face and glasses seemed suddenly interested in the floor when Steve began opening access panels. Steve watched him out of the corner of his eye, the way the man glanced at Steve to check his movements. Steve stopped and went to the man, dragging him forward by his bicep, his fingers digging in between the muscles and making the man squirm and hiss in pain.

“Where is West hiding? Don’t bother telling me that he’s not in this room,” Steve demanded.

“He’s there,” the little man admitted, pointing to a stack of cases against the far wall.

West was bunched up inside, curled around a small case that he clutched in his hands. The case Steve pried free and set down on the floor, but he was far less careful with West, simply grabbing him and tossing him to the floor.

His side-arm had been lost when Bucky was flung out of the train, so Steve put his hand out to Gabe. “Give me your pistol,” he ordered. Gabe complied, looking confused.

“On your knees, West,” Steve barked.

The older man scrambled to obey, locking his fingers behind his head without having to be asked. “Mr. Rogers, it’s been more than a year. I have heard incredible stories about your heroics. I must say that I-”

“Shut up,” Steve said dryly. “What’s in the case?” he asked.
“More of the serum. Not like yours-”

“The kind you made for Schmidt, for the Deep Ones,” Steve finished. If he completed the sentences and controlled the narrative then no one needed to know about Bucky, or about what Steve was planning to do to himself.

“Yes,” West answered.

“And the little man over there — who is he?” Steve demanded, his suspicion of the man rising as he watched their interactions so intently.

“I did finally procure a worthwhile assistant. His name is Arnim Zola. Quite handy,” West commented.

“Well, it’s been a great reunion, but I have my orders,” Steve explained as he leveled the gun at West. He fired a single shot into the center of West’s forehead. The man crumpled to the ground, and Steve advanced, putting two more in the heart. The intractable itching in his head flickered, and then stopped altogether. For a moment, Steve just breathed, enjoying the lightness of his own mind, and regretting that it couldn’t last.

“Zola, is it?” Steve finally asked as he holstered the weapon. “We’re going to go have a nice little chat. Gabe, you alright here for a minute?”

Gabe glanced at the corpse on the floor and then looked back to Steve and nodded. “Yeah, we’re good here,” he said. Then he waved the gun back and forth at the prisoners. “We good, right?”

A chorus of “Ja’s” and frantically nodding heads answered Gabe’s question, and Steve nodded. He grabbed Zola by the shoulder and picked the case up off the floor. Zola, small and soft from an easy life, was easily frog marched into the next compartment.

The doors closed behind them and Steve smiled, gently brushing down the sleeves on the small man’s overcoat. Steve had watched Peggy interrogate men before, and while he didn’t have any womanly charms to use on them, he did get the general gist of the endeavor — relatability, gentleness, calm and polite exterior. Granted, having just executed this guy’s boss in front of him might have undermined some of that, but it was still better than trying to beat the information out of him.

“How much do you know about West’s previous experiments?” Steve asked.

“I read all of Dr. West’s previous files, including your own.”

“And the serum that’s in this case — is it the same serum used on James Barnes?”

“Yes, and no. It is of the Deep Ones, but the formulation has been altered,” Zola answered, his arms shaking while his hands stayed interlaced behind his head.

“Different how?” Steve asked.

“Sergeant Barnes was the first test subject who survived. Due to your untimely removal of him from our testing facility, we were unable to monitor any subsequent changes he underwent. Further trials with the same formulation continued to result in test subjects which could not be reanimated. We later changed the serum. We have had some success with this formulation, though it primarily results in subjects which drown if not submerged in water as soon as their gills develop. They lack the ability to breathe air,” explained Zola with the same glee and unbridled passion that had been typical of West.
“Let’s say the subject didn’t need to breathe. How would gill development affect that person?” Steve asked.

Zola’s eyes widened and he smiled with anticipatory glee. It was disconcerting to Steve — Zola’s glee might simply be because he was trying to get Steve to kill himself — but it was worth hearing him out. “You mean yourself? I would not know for sure, but I imagine that you might be able to remain on land.”

Steve narrowed his eyes and considered asking how Zola knew that he didn’t have to breathe, but decided that the information probably wasn’t worth the effort. “How do you administer the serum?” he asked instead.

“Two vials are needed. Typically we administer after reanimation, so there are already lines placed in the carotid and jugular of the subject,” Zola explained. “For consistency sake I would recommend that, though you could likely also administer it through a peripheral IV or into the left ventricle.”

The idea of another needle to any part of his chest was abhorrent to Steve, and he decided against that immediately, but he could handle the neck or arm.

“Any other useful information?” Steve asked.

Zola paused thoughtfully. “No. The infusion is typical of most drugs, though be aware that the first twenty-four hours may or may not be painful as your body begins to undergo changes. You may want to allow rest and recovery time.”

“Good to know. Now walk,” Steve ordered.

“Captain, if I may…” Zola began as he got to his feet.

Steve paused. “What?”

“I- I have given you the information you need to complete the transformation on yourself. All I ask is that you tell me the results of the experiment. I know that I will have no use for the information, but I must admit that I am curious as to the results. We tried for so long you see-”

With a rough shove to the shoulder Steve pushed him towards the engine compartment. “That’s enough,” Steve interrupted.

He held the small case in his hands, and after a moment he unzipped it and looked inside. There were sixteen small vials. Steve didn’t want to drag anyone else into this and he promised himself that as soon as he was transformed he’d throw the remaining vials in a furnace somewhere. But even the knowledge that he’d be last to have to suffer through this horrifying transformation this didn’t touch the grief that he felt.

Steve would have to explain about Bucky, and also about himself in some ways that he hadn’t before. He knew Peggy would understand his choice, and Howard would find a way to help, even if he disagreed with Steve’s methods. This wasn’t what Steve had hoped for when he’d brought up the possibility of transformation to Bucky, but with Bucky gone Steve didn’t see any other way to find the Deep Ones and end the war with any finality.
Chapter 13

Even knowing the importance of what he had to do, Steve couldn’t bring himself to start right away. Losing Bucky felt like one sacrifice too many. His life, his body, his humanity — those were not absolute requirements anymore, not for Steve, but Bucky wasn’t a part of his life that he had been prepared to lose. Bucky was everything that still felt like home to him. The fear and loneliness of the basement mortuary flooded back; the feeling of being alone in a world of nothing but pain and horror bowled him over. He managed to keep it together until he got done at headquarters. Their hotel room was too much to face just yet, but he wanted to be somewhere, anywhere where he could be alone.

He ended up in the little bar that they had frequented just a couple blocks down from their hotel. It had been bombed about a month before, but Steve picked his way through the debris, found an intact bottle of something, though he didn’t bother to read the label, and then fished a glass out from under the partially collapsed bar.

The alcohol burned on the way down, and the taste was terrible with no ice to chill it. Halfway into the bottle tears began to slide down his face. The alcohol wasn’t doing anything, but it didn’t need to. The quiet and the cold night air of London sank into his bones. Without electricity, the darkness closed in around him and he shut his eyes — picturing the Void. He couldn’t stay like that forever, he still had a mission to complete, but for a time he could grasp at the slippery memories of what it was like to be nothing and everything all at once. The Void was a promise of a future without finite suffering, an unlimited existence without thought or emotion. It wasn’t much to look forward to, but it was more than he had right then.

As Steve floated on the edge of time, he realized that what hurt so much about life was also what made it worth living. In the Void there was no individuality, no uniqueness, nothing but an endless ebb and flow of clamoring masses of beings all crowding for a glimpse of the cosmos. But here, on Earth, in this one singular existence, Steve lived as a unique being, and he had, for a time, lived alongside Bucky. To have that time end cut like a knife, but he realized that he never could have had the good without the bad. When he finally was pulled into the Void again, he would lose the anguish and heartache of Bucky’s loss, but with it he would lose Bucky and that was something he wasn’t quite ready for. Steve’s life stretched out before him in time that felt both infinite and impossibly short, and he felt the need to look away from the stars that littered the Void.

Steve opened his eyes, and the fluidity of the Void hardened into sharp edges and a fixed reality. For a moment Steve felt disoriented, but then he gathered himself up and wiped away the few tears that had not yet dripped off his chin. He left the half-full bottle and the glass on the table and stepped out onto the street in search of the nearest pharmacy. The two vials he would need, plus a spare, were still safely tucked away in his pocket.

He had contemplated talking to Howard and Peggy, to get their help and support, but the more Steve thought on it, the less he wanted to talk to someone else. Peggy might try to talk him out of his plan, and Howard would probably take her side because she was smart and sometimes a little scary. Steve didn’t have the energy for a fight. He just wanted it over with.

A small pharmacy still operated a few blocks over, though the buildings on either side of it were bombed out. Steve knew that there wouldn’t be any foot traffic down there at that time of the night, and it wasn’t any effort at all to snap the doorknob off and slip inside. He poked around quietly behind the counter and found a box of ready-to-use syringes and needles. He grabbed two, just to be on the safe side, wrapped them in a paper bag, and slipped them into his pocket. It wasn’t
fifteen minutes later that he was back in his hotel room, syringes and vials set out on the table in front of him.

He stripped down, put on his nightclothes, and set his belt on the table next to the other supplies. He fished their little bottle of alcohol from the desk and added that and a rag to the mix. He swabbed down the crook of his left arm, leaving it cold and wet. The belt he wrapped around his upper arm but didn’t tighten just yet. Instead, he drew serum from both vials into the syringe and carefully set it back down on the table. Then, he pulled the belt tight and put it between his teeth. He slapped the crook of his arm like had been done to him so many times before, and when he was satisfied, he picked up the syringe again.

Getting to this point — with the injection the next obvious step — was easy compared to actually giving himself the injection. He remembered West, standing over him with the needle wishing him good luck. It had felt like a point of no return, and he had been right. In the space between one breath and the next, his life, and everything he had believed, had been torn apart. Just as there had been no going back from West, and later Erskine, there would be no going back from this. Once done, Steve would have no choice — he would transform like Bucky had. If Steve didn’t die from suffocation or some plan of Zola’s designed to trick Steve into killing himself, he would wait until the ancestral knowledge came to him. He would be giving up any chance of living among humans, his life would be only for one purpose — killing the Deep Ones.

None of this was what he wanted. Bucky was gone, Steve left behind yet again. He didn’t trust Zola, but then again what other choice was there? Letting the Deep Ones go out of fear wasn’t something that he could justify, even with the risks and everything else he would be giving up.

Vaguely, he was aware that he had no plan. He had always expected to have Bucky to share his life with after they had completed their mission, but now he would be completing the mission — Bucky’s mission and now his — alone. And when it was over, he would be alone — potentially for eternity if Schmidt was right about the immortality bit. Still, Steve had a purpose, and he would fulfill it, if not for himself then for Bucky.

Steve took a fortifying breath and pushed the needle into his arm. He felt the tell-tale “pop” of a vein and drew up a small amount of blood, before depressing the plunger in one quick go. Immediately, he pulled the needle out of his arm and spit the belt out of his mouth. His mind slowed, and his blood seemed to move through his veins like syrup — everything heavy and slow and sticky. Steve gathered the vials and syringes and tossed them all in the heater in the bathroom. It wouldn’t destroy them entirely, but it would be enough to get rid of any remaining serum. The hand towel he’d used to swab his arm ended up in the hamper, the alcohol, in the drawer of the desk. With poor aim, Steve lobbed the belt towards his shoes, and it clattered against the hardwood floor and slid against a wall.

He blinked several times and looked around the room in a daze. Then he looked down at his arm. A small trickle of blood had escaped the puncture mark before it had closed up, and Steve wiped it with the tail of his undershirt.

Confused, he blinked around the room again, his arm forgotten. He tried to figure out what he was supposed to be doing, but he couldn’t remember what had happened or what should be happening.

Sudden pain gripped him — his eyes felt like someone had dropped coals into them, and he felt tears run down his face. His chest felt like it was splitting apart, the skin agonizingly raw like a burn being scrubbed clean. He gasped out of reflex and dropped to his knees. Blinking, he tried to clear the tears from his eyes, desperate to figure out what was happening. Even through cloudy eyes, Steve could see that his shirt was turning red, as blood seeped out of him and into the cotton.
White hot agony enveloped him. He doubled over and fell to the floor, clutching at his stomach. He wanted to scream, to call for help, *something* — but his lungs wouldn’t work, and his mind was flooded with images and information that overwhelmed his ability to make his body act. Without anything to hold on to, Steve fell into the endless flow of knowledge and his consciousness slipped from his body.

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“Steve! Steve!”

Steve blinked and looked up at the panicked face of Peggy, who was holding him by the shoulder and calling his name. As his eyes cleared, he could see behind her Howard, Dum Dum, and Falsworth.

“Steve, are you okay? Can you tell me what happened?” Peggy asked.

He shook his head a little to clear his senses, and pressed himself up off the floor, his shirt sticking to his body and the hardwood floor. Bewildered, Steve looked down and realized his shirt was soaked through and tacky with blood.

“Yeah, I think I’m alright,” he said slowly.

“I’m not sure I believe you. You’re covered in blood, Steve,” Peggy protested.

That did strike Steve as concerning too, but he didn’t feel poorly. “I’m not sure what happened,” he admitted finally.

“Alright, well we need to get this shirt off of you and have a look,” she said. The authority in her voice was enough that Dum Dum handed over his knife to Peggy so that she could cut it away.

“What happened to his eyes?” Falsworth whispered to Dum Dum. Dum Dum just shrugged.

While it seemed logical to take his shirt off and see, another part of Steve slammed his survival instincts into overdrive and he staggered to his feet. “No, no. I can take care of this myself,” he argued, trying to back away from Peggy.

“You cannot and you will not. Now let me help you out of your shirt,” Peggy demanded.

Steve looked at Howard, not sure what he wanted, but knowing that the situation they were in was not safe.

Howard inclined his head at Dum Dum and Falsworth. “How about you two wait out in the hall until we get this sorted?”

Dum Dum and Falsworth both looked like they were going to argue, but a stern look from Peggy was all it took to quell them and they wordlessly stepped out into the hall. Howard bolted the door behind them and sat on the edge of the bed.

“Alright, they’re gone. Now you gonna tell us what’s going or not?” Howard said.

Steve floundered, still unsure of what had happened. He tried to remember the night before but everything was hazy and came in little discombobulated snatches of memory. “I can’t remember.”

“And no one blames you for that. It was clearly traumatic whatever it was. Do you think you can sit down and let me see?” Peggy tried again.
Feeling stuck and out of options, Steve nodded dumbly and let himself be led to the bathroom where he sat on the closed toilet. While Peggy carefully cut and peeled away the shirt, Howard got a wet towel. Steve watched mutely in a mix of curiosity and mounting panic. While he wanted to understand what was going on, he couldn’t shake the feeling that something bad was about to happen.

And then something bad did happen.

After cutting away Steve’s shirt, Peggy began wiping away the blood on his chest to expose what lay beneath. When she finally caught sight of what lay under the layer of red, she bit back a scream, or rather she bit back most of it. Immediately, Dum Dum was pounding on the door to the hotel room and demanding to know what was happening.

“I got this,” Howard said, taking a last look of horror at Steve’s chest before going out to calm Dum Dum, and by the sound of it, Gabe, Falsworth, Dernier, and Morita as well.

“Easy boys, a mouse startled the lady. It’s nothing to be worried about. We think it was just a nosebleed,” Howard explained.

“Bullshit!” roared Dum Dum from the hallway, but the door clicked shut, cutting off the rest of the exchange.

In the quiet, Peggy leaned forward again and lightly ran her fingers over Steve’s chest. He looked down to see scales, a dull blue-gray like deep water, and the memories came rushing back.


“No, I did it to myself,” he confessed.

Peggy’s worry flashed to anger, but fear and concern quickly won out. “Steven Grant Rogers, what do you mean you did this to yourself?” she asked fearfully.

The door to the room closed again, and Howard re-entered the room. “They’re not happy about my explanation, but the matter seems settled, at least for now. So what’s this about doing something to yourself?”

“West had the serum on the train. I killed him, and I took enough to turn me, like they did to Bucky,” Steve admitted.

“This is what Schmidt’s work did to Sergeant Barnes? Why on Earth would you want to go through that?” Peggy implored, putting her hands on her hips.

“Because Bucky knew how to end the war. The transformation it- do you remember Meier and his weird cult stuff? What Bucky had to do to convince him to give up the intel?”

“I do,” Peggy answered.

“I don’t,” Howard interjected.

“West experimented on Sergeant Barnes as well. I did not see, nor did I ask, but apparently the Sergeant was possessed of certain traits that convinced Meier that he was in fact one of the deities
he was on about. Now Steve has apparently acquired those traits as well, though voluntarily, and I, for one, would like to know why,” Peggy said imperiously.

“Wait, so Barnes had scales and whatever those lines are?” Howard asked, waving at Steve’s as-of-yet unopened gills. “Not to mention the eyes.”

“They’re gills, but yeah, he had this and more. The important part was that he had the ancestral knowledge of the Deep Ones — where they live, their weaknesses, everything we need to know to kill them, but with him gone… I saw the vials on the train and I knew what I had to do. I’m not going to just let them win,” Steve said.

The hand holding the bloodied towel slipped off Peggy’s hip and she sagged. “If it has to be done, then I understand why you chose to. Nevertheless, I’m still not pleased with you.”

Steve smiled. “Don’t worry, neither am I.”

Peggy and Howard retreated to the hotel room, leaving Steve alone to bathe. The cold spray of water felt amazing against his skin, just as Bucky had told him, and Steve scrubbed away the blood and mucus that had accompanied the transformation. When the water ran clear, Steve stoppered the drain and lay down, his absurdly long legs hanging over the edge of the tub to provide room for his torso.

As soon as the water touched his sides, the feeling of panic and drowning began to creep in at the edges of Steve’s awareness. He remembered Bucky saying that he felt the same thing the first time, so he forced himself to stay in the tub as the water rose. When the water was finally deep enough to submerge, Steve toed the faucet off and slid beneath the surface.

Unlike Bucky, who had to wait until he was darn near blue in the face for his gills to open, Steve’s gills peeled open in just a few seconds. The sensation was like waking up and having to open his eyes after a long night’s sleep, or getting sweaty and having to separate one bit of skin that had stuck another. It didn’t hurt, and felt more natural than surprising. A few seconds later, Steve felt the water rush in through the slits to his lungs.

The first breath underwater felt almost electric, though Steve reflected momentarily that actual electricity in the water would probably feel significantly different and wished the tub was big enough that he could actually stretch out in it, maybe even swim around. Water felt like the only place in the world that he wanted to be. Savoring the sensation of water against skin and scales, he lay there until he heard a knock at the door. He lifted his head above the water to listen.

“Steve? Are you alright in there? It’s been nearly an hour,” Peggy called.

He tried to reply but found that he couldn’t draw breath to speak. He sat up, unstoppered the tub, and got on his knees to get his gills above the water. He then copied Bucky’s technique for clearing the gills, which seemed only natural: he plugged his nose and blew until he could draw a deep breath. Unfortunately the entire procedure took nearly a minute and in the meantime Peggy’s concern seemed to grow exponentially. By the time Steve answered, Howard was already jimmying the lock to the bathroom door.

“It’s okay, I’m okay,” he stuttered out, and the knocking and fiddling with the knob stopped.

It was shocking at first, not the sound of his voice, but the act of speaking itself. It felt alien, like something he could do but was not intended for.
“What was all that splashing about?” she asked.

“I, uh, I had to clear the water out of my gills before I could talk. It took a minute,” Steve answered a little bashfully, suddenly uncomfortably aware of his new anatomy.

“Well,” Peggy said, seeming to run out of words.

“I’ll just be out in a minute,” Steve said, already toweling off.

He stepped out of the tub, acutely aware that he had nothing clean to change into, and wrapped a towel around his waist. The humiliation of going looking for clothes in this state was two-fold: firstly, he was naked — save for a towel — in front of a lady, and secondly, Peggy and Howard seemingly had no compunction about staring openly at Steve’s transformed chest. He hurriedly gathered his clothes and returned to the bathroom to dress in privacy.

While he dressed, there was a knock at the door to the hotel room. Apparently, an urgent telegram had been delivered to Peggy from what Steve could gather.

“Oh, thank god,” she muttered.

Steve couldn’t imagine what would inspire relief in the middle of this hell, but hope for the unexpected sprang eternal. When he opened the door, interested, if not eager, to find out what what lay ahead, Peggy and Howard were already standing, both smiling.

“Steve, a bell boy just brought me this,” she said, holding out the slip of paper. Eagerly, Steve took the telegram, hoping for some small miracle. He knew it wouldn’t be much, the telegram being delivered by someone without clearance, but something was always better than nothing.

    To: SSR HQ London
    Attn: Agent Carter
    Sgt James Barnes alive. Injured but stable. En route from Venice to London. ETA Feb 3, 0730 hours.
    Col. Marshall Johnson

Steve read it once, twice, and then a third time before lowering the paper. Apparently, small miracles were out of season because this was more than he could have ever hoped — Bucky was alive and he was on his way back.
Chapter 14

Steve, with Peggy and Howard, met the incoming medical transport at the rear loading bay of the SSR headquarters. A doctor joined them, though not without clearance and an abundance of caution as a result of a preemptive dressing down by Peggy. Steve watched anxiously from behind the sunglasses that he had donned as two medics hauled the stretcher out of the back of the ambulance and up onto the dock.

Bucky's head was bandaged so that only one eye was visible, and his left arm was splinted and wrapped to his chest. A half-empty IV bag lay beside him, connected to his right arm, and a catheter bag lay over his legs. Bucky seemed unconscious, and when the transfer from the ambulance to the gurney jostled him, he didn’t even stir.

One of the medics handed paperwork to Peggy saying, “I’m guessing you know, seeing as how you had him shipped all secret like, but he ain’t exactly human.”

“That will be all,” Peggy snapped, thrusting the signed paperwork back at the young man. “Get him inside,” she directed to the doctor, and Steve came along the other side of the bed to help push.

The SSR headquarters were not set up for medical care, and what little they did have had been requisitioned from hospitals and military bases for miles around. Everything was in short supply and even with orders signed from Col. Phillips, finding the right supplies on such short notice had been a challenge.

A small meeting room, one that was hardly ever used, had become their new medical bay. Howard left shortly after their arrival, still having work to accomplish, but Peggy stayed until the doctor was able to complete an exam and declare Bucky stable.

Steve stayed on all through the day. Around lunch, the Howlies came by, all of them teary-eyed but laughing, joyous at the return of their teammate whom they had accepted for dead like so many others before him. Their happiness buoyed Steve’s own, and he found himself able to stay with Bucky more easily.

Shortly after dinner, Steve appropriated a sleeping bag and cot from a supply closet and went about making himself as comfortable as he could be on the concrete floor. Bucky still hadn't come to, and according to the doctor, was not in a coma but a “deep state of healing rest.” Steve sensed some uncertainty behind those words. When pressed, the doctor admitted that he’d never seen anything like it before. The prolonged sleep aside, the doctor insisted that Bucky was showing signs of recovery.

Sometime not long after Steve had turned out the overhead light, leaving only a small lamp lit, a quiet groan came from the bed. In an instant, Steve was there, his hand gently resting on an uninjured portion of Bucky’s shoulder.

“How you feeling?” Steve asked.

One green eye blinked open. It was a dull green at first, but brightened with recognition, and then a small smile grew on Bucky’s face.

“Steve,” he rasped.

“How you feeling?” Steve asked.
Bucky shifted minutely on the bed and grimaced, “Like I fell off a cliff.”

The guilt that Steve had been holding back since he first read the telegram slammed into him like a ton of bricks. He’d had no way to go after Bucky when he fell, and he’d had no reason to think that Bucky could have survived, but he had, and Steve had left him, in that ravine — cold, injured, and alone.

Steve blinked a few times, the nictitating membranes of his eyes sweeping away the barely formed tears. “I’m sorry I didn’t come back for you.”

“’S okay. I understand. I would have left you, too,” Bucky whispered.

Right. Of course, Bucky was only logical, but somehow Bucky’s understanding felt more like reproach than comfort or absolution. “I should get the doctor,” Steve said, trying to steer the conversation elsewhere.

“Yeah,” Bucky said, his one eye already sliding closed again.

The doctor, who had been reading on a cot of his own in an office a few doors down, scuttled with haste into the makeshift infirmary. He talked with Bucky a moment before deciding to change bandages. The wound on Bucky’s head was healed, all except for where the skin had grown over some of the gauze. In that place, rough, scaly skin grew instead. It was gray-green like Bucky’s other scales, but the scales were so small it almost just looked like bruised skin. Thankfully, only the first couple of layers of skin had grown into the gauze and it all came apart minimal damage. But minimal or no, Steve knew the feeling, and the hairs on the back of his neck stood up when Bucky hissed in pain.

Bucky’s arm was next, and even touching it had him grimacing in pain. The doctor paused his work and went to retrieve an ampule of morphine which he injected it into the IV tubing. Bucky’s breathing slowed, and the tension in his face and neck slackened. Gently the doctor tried again. Strip by strip, the gauze was lifted away and tossed into a garbage pail revealing an appendage and that looked less like an arm and more like something seen by the side of a highway after an unfortunate member of the local fauna ventured too close.

When Steve had seen something looking so damaged and broken, it usually meant a soldier was on his way to an amputation or the grave. Seeing Bucky in that state seemed almost worse than just losing the arm altogether.

“This is healing very well,” the doctor remarked as he stripped away the last of the bandages.

“What?” Steve exclaimed before he could stop himself.

“Oh quite. According to the records that came with him, the Sergeant here had reattached the limb himself before he reached camp. The doctors there were unsure of what to do with him given his unique physiology, so they let him keep it and simply cleaned it up and reinforced his work. But that was nearly two days ago. You can see here how circulation is returning to the fingers and when I squeeze his hand he’s able to mirror the motion. Limb reattachment is something we haven’t even yet begun to achieve and yet he did it with a sewing needle and some fishing line,” explained the doctor.

That stupid little emergency pack that Bucky’s mom had made for him — fishing line and hooks, thread and a needle, waterproof matches, and a pair of tweezers — had saved his life, or at least his arm. Steve thought Bucky only carried it out of sentimentality, and maybe he had, but damned if he would look so lightly on something like that again.
“-remarkable when you think about it. He should be able to use it normally again in a week, I’d say. Even the bone seems to be showing signs of rapid repair.”

After cleaning the wounds and reapplying creams and wraps, the doctor left the room. While Bucky still dozed in his drug-induced haze, Steve stood bedside holding his hand and watching. He had Bucky back, but they’d both paid one hell of a price for it. He hoped that Bucky could find it in himself to forgive him.

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The webbing had grown back between Bucky’s fingers by the end of the second day at headquarters. It was nearly all the way to the first knuckle this time, but they hadn’t bothered to remove it yet. The doctor said that taxing Bucky’s body any further would delay the reattachment of the arm, and neither of them, no matter their concern about Bucky’s appearance, was willing to risk that.

Instead, Bucky worked on his hand strength with Steve when he was around. Once Bucky had regained consciousness and could feed himself, Steve had gone back to work. But on his breaks and at night, Steve stayed with Bucky. They had a small ball of rubber bands that Steve had purloined from the office supply cabinet for Bucky’s recovery. It had a myriad of purposes, the ball itself being good for squeezing, throwing, catching, and rolling in his palm, while the rubber bands could be placed around his fingers to stretch against as he opened his fingers wide and worked the nerve and muscle fibers back into cooperation. It hurt, Steve could tell, but Bucky covered it the best he could because it was some dignity in a situation where there was little of that to be had.

The arm was another matter, and they were careful not to do any exercises with it until the building emptied out for the night. The doctor helped with some of those therapies, directing Bucky as he regained the strength and range of motion that he had lost. Every session ended with Bucky gasping on the bed, tears rolling down his face faster than the second eyelid could clear them away.

Through all of it, neither of them talked about Steve’s eyes or the tiny sliver of webbing that had appeared between Steve’s fingers, though Bucky had made no effort to conceal his staring.

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“If it were up to me, I would not see you return to active duty so quickly,” the doctor said with a disapproving stare. “You’ve not even seen a week of convalescence, and while your arm might be very well healed indeed, it is not entirely healed. You are weak and in my opinion, unfit for duty.”

“Duly noted,” Peggy interjected. “Now, are you ready, Sergeant?”

Bucky nodded, “Yes, ma’am.”

“Good. The team is waiting in the strategy room. Get dressed and join us. Oh, and don’t forget to cover your hands and eyes,” she said before turning and leaving.

Bucky looked at Steve who smiled. “You heard the lady, better get dressed.”

A great chorus of cheers went up when Bucky walked in the room behind Steve. A few cautious hugs greeted Bucky, but he was subjected to none of the shoulder slapping and jostling that regularly accompanied such events, his thickly bandaged hands an obvious reminder of his healing state.

“Welcome back to duty, Sergeant. We are relieved to see you alive and well,” Peggy began with a
kind smile. “Now, we have urgent business to attend to. Arnim Zola, the man apprehended on the train, has given Col. Phillips some very important intelligence that we feel requires urgent attention.

“All information covered in this briefing is in your folders, though those folders may not leave this room. Feel free to take as long as you need to go over the material and ask any questions that you may have. We’re leaving at 0400 tomorrow, so eat, rest, and be prepared. Lunch is on its way, so read up and we’ll brief after that.”

Bucky fumbled the folder open, and Steve reached over and arranged the papers so that Bucky could see better.

“We really need to do something about these hands,” he said quietly.

“Wanna go do that before lunch gets here?” Steve asked.

Bucky nodded solemnly. “Yeah, no reason to lose a perfectly good lunch over that.”

Steve got up, whispering to Peggy that they were going to go take care of Bucky’s hands which got a horrified look but no response, and then they made their way back to the infirmary. The doctor was still packing his things, his services no longer needed since Bucky was mobilizing in the morning.

“Change your mind?” the doctor asked dryly.

“Nope, gonna flay those useless skin flaps off my hands first,” Bucky answered with obviously false cheer.

The doctor paused and looked dubiously between Steve and Bucky. “Have you done this before?”

“Yeah, and not just the once, either,” Steve replied as he gathered supplies.

The doctor shook his head. “I hope you boys know what you’re doing,” he said as he carried an armload of things out into the hall.

*****

“So what do you think?” Steve asked as he finished going over the plan he’d cooked up for their offensive.

“I think that’s a fucking stupid plan,” Bucky said loudly.

Every head in the room turned to him and he shrugged. “Okay, you clearly want me to explain. Look, going in up front and alone will draw everyone in the base to the front gate — right where the assault team is going to be trying to go in. You’re going to have all available boots on the ground right there which is going to maximize casualties. I mean yeah, theoretically it’s handy to blow down the front doors with your futuristic motorcycle, but as we could also mount that tech on anything, there’s no good reason to do it this way. Instead—”

“And the Howlies?” Steve asked.

Bucky looked like it was physically painful not to roll his eyes. “We send them in the back once the assault team hits. After a couple of minutes, the majority of the troops will be out front and we can breech without a whole lot of enemy combatants left inside. Easier to get in and finish this with everyone else distracted.”
“Okay, so what’s your plan?” Steve asked, trying not to sound too pissed off that Bucky had called him and his plan stupid in front of everyone.

“Morita can lay some ordnance on the side, over here,” Bucky said, pointing at the sketch of the base. “Draw the guards’ attention over there and then breech at the front gate with those neat devices Stark wants to put on your motorcycle, and then blow down the front gate. Give it few a minutes and then we breech from the back like I said.”

“I think that idea is a helluva lot better than yours, Rogers,” Col. Phillips interjected.

“I’m going to have to agree,” Peggy added.

Steve swallowed really hard, his pride stuck in his throat like an angry knot, and agreed. “I think that’s smart, Buck. Thanks.”

Bucky smiled and nodded, the warmth of it dampening some of the embarrassment from having his plan picked apart in front of everyone. But whether or not Bucky thought he was stupid did nothing for the opinions of the others in the room, and accordingly he sat back in attentive silence and let Peggy and Phillips flesh out the plan.

*****

It was after midnight when they filed out of the meeting room, making for the room that had served as the makeshift infirmary earlier that day. Most of the medical supplies had already been redistributed to local clinics and hospitals, but the room had not yet been reclaimed so Steve grabbed another cot and bedroll for Bucky.

They brushed their teeth and cleaned up in the bathroom, before walking back down to the storage room and disrobing. Bucky stripped down to his skivvies, and Steve down to his skivvies and undershirt.

“You not gonna show me yours?” Bucky asked, his voice deadpan.

Steve turned around and stared at Bucky, taking in the gill slits and the patches of scales that had matured across his chest and down his sides and over his left arm, as well as a patch on his head though it was covered with hair.

At any other time with anyone else, Steve would have joked about the innuendo in Bucky’s question. But the look on Bucky’s face was one of concern and fear, and Steve knew better than to make light.

“Yeah,” he answered quietly and lifted this shirt over his head. The gills and scales weren’t something that he had really examined. The time in the tub when Peggy and Howard first found him had been only one of two chances he’d had to use the gills at all. Since he’d spent the last week at SSR headquarters he hadn’t gotten a bath or any time to examine his new anatomy, and he was acutely aware that he was letting Bucky look at him in a way that he hadn’t really even done, not with that tiny medicine cabinet mirror in the hotel bathroom.

After a moment, Bucky got up and stepped towards Steve. Then slowly he reached out and ran his fingers over the intercostal scales. Steve flinched at the touch, the sensation in the new skin still startlingly intense, but after a second he leaned into it, still as desperate for contact as he always was.

“How bad did it hurt?” Bucky asked.
“I couldn’t even scream. I think I blacked out,” Steve answered.

Bucky’s hand fell away from Steve’s side, and Steve immediately missed the contact but forced himself to straighten up anyway.

“How- how did it happen?”

Steve closed his eyes, committing the look on Bucky’s face from that moment to memory — concerned, caring, understanding — knowing that as soon as he opened his mouth it would all be gone.

“I did it to myself.”

Bucky’s eyes flared so bright they were almost white and he staggered back, dropping to sit on the cot. “What the hell, Steve? Why?”

“You were dead. I couldn’t go after the Deep Ones before, and without you, no one knew where they were. If I wanted to stop them, I had to,” Steve explained.

Bucky nodded mechanically. “Where did you get it?”

“West had it on him when I found him on the train. I took it and killed him. His assistant told me how to use it, and when I got back I got the supplies and then injected myself in our hotel room.”

Abruptly, Bucky stood up and scrubbed his palms over his face. “I’m so fucking mad at you. You do the stupidest shit — all your plans, just shit,” Bucky said. The anger in his voice didn’t have the momentum to make it to the end of the sentence though, and by the end he just sounded fond.

“I know,” Steve replied, smiling apologetically. When he’d injected himself, Steve had made the most informed decision he could, even if it was reckless and stupid. His only regret was seeing the way that his choices upset Bucky.

Steve looked up, and Bucky had stopped pacing. Tears ran down his face. In two long strides Steve closed the space between them, wrapping Bucky up in his arms.

“I’m so fucking mad at you,” Bucky reiterated through tears.

Steve chuckled softly. “When are you not?”

But, for all the jokes they could make about Steve’s good sense or the lack thereof, Bucky didn’t. He just held on tighter and shook his head.

Confused, Steve pulled back a little and looked at Bucky. “What? What’s wrong?”

“I shouldn’t be glad, but I am. I just- I never wanted to do this alone,” Bucky said, his head still down.

“But… you tried to stop me. You told me, I couldn’t and I shouldn’t and you wouldn’t even let me talk about it.”

Bucky just shook his head and Steve suddenly thought that he understood. Steve had been offering him more than a helping hand, he’d been offering companionship on what amounted to a suicide mission. More than that, it would have meant someone who understood Bucky and what his life had become. He had told Steve to shut up because it was probably all he could say without telling Steve how scared he was, without asking for what he really wanted, without asking Steve to give
up the last of his humanity. He had stayed quiet to save Steve even at the cost of himself.

“You’re allowed to be glad, Buck. I only ever asked because I didn’t want you to go alone. I don’t regret it one bit.”
Chapter 15

Steve was anxious while he waited for evidence of Dernier’s handiwork. He thumbed at the crook between his middle and index fingers where Bucky, in between dry heaving and cursing, had snipped away the webbing that had finally grown in enough to hamper Steve’s gloves. It had healed readily, but quick healing didn’t do shit for the pain. His brain was still convinced that there was an injury, flares of phantom pain making him grit his teeth or clench his fists every so often. He thought he would be less fixated on the pain if he had something to do other than wait. But the waiting was more stressful than the memory of Bucky hastily taking some sewing scissors to his hands, so that was what his brain chose to focus on.

The concussion of the explosion rocked the ground under their feet, and Steve heard the grenades in Bucky’s pocket clink softly.

“You think that'll get their attention?” Bucky asked deadpan.

“Depends, maybe they never liked that door anyway,” Steve said.

“Counting down,” Peggy called over the radio. “Sixty seconds.”

The explosion, like the serums and the phenol, felt like a point of no return, another moment where backing out was suddenly replaced with inevitability. It was less terrifying than those moments certainly, but nevertheless the explosion ratcheted up the group’s anxiety. Minutes stretched, not into eternity but into something fluid and malleable while Steve waited. The radio crackled to life as the assault team advanced, and time crystallized again.

“Everyone clear on where they’re aiming?” Steve asked as he readied his grappling gun.

A chorus of “clear” and “yes, sir” and “oui” let Steve know that they were good, and he lifted his gun to aim.


Five grappling guns fired in unison, their hooks driving deep into the granite above the observation windows of the east face of the mountain. They secured their guns in the clips that they had drilled into the rock behind them earlier that morning, and after a five second delay, took running starts, jumping into the chasm below.

The bottom of the vale was invisible beneath them as they slid. Heavy clouds hung in the depths more than a hundred feet below them, making the cold mountain air more moist than it usually was this time of year.

“Break!” Dum Dum shouted, and Steve bared down on the handbreak of his trolley.

“Feet out!” warned Dum Dum and Steve refocused, his legs extended forward ninety degrees in preparation for impact with the cliff face above the windows. Every single one of them made some variation of the “oof” noise when they impacted the wall.

“Goddamn handbreak didn’t engage fully,” puffed Falsworth as he clung to the little ledge that provided them with a place to wait.

“Break anything?” Gabe asked.
Falsworth shook his head. “Nothing I need.”

The pitter patter of gunfire and the muffled crackle of Hydra’s assault rifles echoed down the valley.

“We breech on my mark,” Steve said, drawing their attention.

He shifted, grabbing the barrel of zipline trolley in his left hand. With his right, he drew his gun, and then he kicked back from the mountain. Momentum took him about thirty feet out, far enough that he could fire and shatter the windows below the team’s feet.

“Now!” he shouted.

Bucky, Falsworth, Morita, and Dum Dum jumped and swung back out over the couloir. The ropes they clipped onto the anchors swung them back towards the mountain like pendulums and through the broken window. Steve just let the return momentum of the zipline throw him through the now open window casing as he let go at the last moment, temporarily untethered above the valley below.

The window was mostly broken, but a shard remained sticking out of the frame and caught him across several of the gills on his right side as he sailed through. He dropped to the floor alongside everyone else and slung his shield out front, deflecting a hail of gunfire. His side sent bolts of angry burning pain across his chest and into his lungs, but as soon as he could get his hand on his pistol he was firing.

“This way!” Bucky shouted.

Steve sprung up from a crouched position to follow, Dum Dum shouting, “We’ll cover you,” as they went.

“He’s this way,” Bucky said as they sprinted down a corridor.

“Who?”

“Schmidt.”

They sped down the hall and turned in time to see Schmidt slip past a squad of commandos. Abruptly Steve and Bucky backpedalled into the previous hall, only just missing the barrage of blue energy pulses meant for them.

Like someone throwing the discus, Steve curled his arm around the edge of his shield, bent his knees, and spun, his momentum coming from his hips and out through his hand into the shield. The shield ricocheted off the far wall and bounced down the corridor, several loud thuds echoing in its wake. At the last second, Steve leapt out from behind the wall and caught the shield on its return flight.

An energy pulse clanged into the shield a second later, and Steve landed flat on his ass several feet back down the corridor. Bucky leapt out immediately after, his Thompson submachine gun cutting down the remaining squad members at the end of the hall.

“You alright?” Bucky asked as he backed toward Steve.

“Yeah, thanks,” he said, scrambling to his feet.

“I’m sure you had them on the ropes, punk,” Bucky commented as they advanced again.
Steve chuckled, holding his own Thompson at the ready. “‘Course I did.”

The next corridor was clear, but they had lost track of Schmidt in the firefight so after the first turn they were forced to guess their way through the base.

“The hangar bay is on the south face. Chances are he’s heading there now,” Steve said after another left turn.

“Yeah, I think that much was obvious,” Bucky shouted back as he grabbed Steve by the arm and yanked him out of the line of fire. “Can you think and also not get shot? I feel like that would be convenient.”

“Sorry. Look-” Steve cut himself off mid-sentence and hurled his shield down the hall, the disc glancing off of one enemy combatant and into another before returning. “Look if we can get down there,” Steve said pointing at the opening to the next corridor, “then one more right ought to get us close.”

Bucky half bowed and gestured with his hand. “Lead on, Captain.”

Steve glared playfully at Bucky as he took off at a run. Towards the end of the hall they heard a plane roar to life in a nearby hangar and ran towards it. Catching it or not could decide life or death for tens, or even hundreds, of thousands. Their run turned into a flat-out sprint, but as they entered the hangar, the plane was already moving, and it was clear that they couldn’t catch it on foot.

A platoon of Hydra soldiers advanced on them, but the ranks split with screams and the horrible thud and crunch of flesh and bone against metal. An enormous topless black car burst through the last lines of the soldiers — Colonel Phillips at the wheel and Peggy alongside him.

“Need a ride?” shouted Peggy.

No sooner had they climbed in than Phillips floored it and they sped off down the mountain runway, mowing down the few remaining soldiers in their path. The car accelerated with surprising speed, and Steve and Bucky stood up in the backseats, ready to jump. The landing strut was nearly in reach when Peggy grabbed Steve by the front of his uniform and pulled him down, planting a firm kiss on his lips.

“Go get him,” she yelled, her voice barely audible over the roar of the plane’s engines.

Steve stared at her blankly for a moment and then glanced over to Bucky who looked fit to burst with amusement. “Come on, I’ll explain kissing to you later,” he shouted with a laugh.

Steve shook his head and steadied himself before his leap. He had barely clamored into the wheel well when Bucky landed on the strut below him. A second later the sound of the tires on stone stopped and the cold air of the Alps snaked into his clothes, leaching away his body heat. The icy wind burned his eyes, but after only a moment his nictitating membranes slid out, shielding his eyes from the glare of the brilliant snow below and drawing slivers of gold across his field of vision.

Not willing to wait for the wheel to retract and crush him, Steve pried open a maintenance panel inside the well and crawled through. The inside of the plane seemed empty, but Steve drew his weapon anyway, waiting by the open panel as Bucky climbed through. As soon as Bucky was on level footing, he drew his weapon as well. They moved by hand signal through the fuselage, their footsteps making dull metal thuds that died amidst the roar of the plane.

On either side of the narrow catwalk were rows of small single-person aircraft. They were rather
arrogantly, and unoriginally, labeled with the names of cities all over the eastern United States — New York, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, Newark. Steve turned to Bucky who looked disturbed, his eyes glowing a bright white and green even through his protective haw.

Steve pressed on, trying to ignore the rest of the cities that were inscribed on the small bombers — Detroit, Atlanta, Washington DC, Baltimore. They were nearing the cockpit when the sound of footsteps drew their attention. The apparent pilots of the small aircraft were running along the upper gangway towards their designated planes.

Bucky acted first, raising his Thompson and shooting two of them before having to duck behind a support beam for cover. Steve only managed to knock off a few rounds with his rifle before he was out of ammo, left only with his sidearm. He raised his shield for cover and crouched, fitting most of himself behind it. Peering out from around edge, he used his pistol to take down two more, and Bucky shot another as well, making good use of the cover fire that Steve provided. But the pilots didn’t stop to engage either of them, instead hurrying to their aircraft.

As the first pilot neared his destination, Steve saw the launch controls on the opposite side of the catwalk. Still covered by the shield, he darted over, opened the hatch, and released the docking clamp. The plane dropped in a free fall from the open door, and Steve launched himself forward, snagging the pilot, and throwing him out, too.

By Steve’s count that left at least four more, though probably five if someone had to stay on the plane to work the docking clamps, not counting the personnel in the cockpit. He turned back to check on Bucky when a pilot jumped down on Steve from the gangway above. He slipped and tumbled down, sliding out of the open bay doors. He grabbed the edge of the bay at the last moment, the soldier’s gloved fingers digging into Steve’s thigh as he held on.

“Steve!”

Bucky’s anguished voice cut through the tumult, and with renewed urgency, Steve kicked the soldier with his other foot. Free from his soon-to-be dead weight, Steve hauled himself back into the plane, quickly climbing back to safety on the catwalk.

Three more pilots lay dead, and Bucky’s eyes shown white, the green subsumed by the intensity of his fear.

“Don’t fucking scare me like that,” Bucky admonished.

“Yeah, I’ll try not to fall out of the plane again,” Steve agreed, a little shaken by the experience himself.

No need to talk, Steve held his breath to quiet their approach, though little stealth was possible after the firefight. Behind him, Steve could hear Bucky’s heavy breathing, which had been getting steadily more strained, and then suddenly Bucky gasped and his gills hissed open. The air was thin in the plane since the fuselage wasn’t pressurized. Steve hoped that Bucky’s gills would do a better job than his lungs, though gills were ill-suited for air if fish were any indication. They would have to depend on speed to finish the job before Bucky passed out and then suffocated in the oxygen-deficient atmosphere.

They hurried forward to the cockpit, still wary of any other pilots that might be lurking in the wings as it were. Holding his pistol at the ready, Steve eased open the door to the cockpit, Bucky on his heels. Bucky watched Steve’s back as he quickly made his way to the control panel and began to decipher the myriad dials and switches.
“Steve, look out!” shouted Bucky.

Without waiting to see what was coming, Steve ducked just in time to avoid being shot by Schmidt, who had taken aim with his energy pistol from his hiding place behind the console. Bucky returned fire over Steve’s head, most of it going directly into the control panel. As soon as Bucky stopped firing, Steve leapt over the command station and onto Schmidt. With his shield, Steve knocked the pistol from Schmidt’s hand, but when the shield swung wide, Schmidt punched Steve in the gut, knocking him to his knees, and took his gun.

Steve faltered, reflexively gasping for breath, his lungs having been painfully compressed by the impact. In that instant, Schmidt raised Steve’s gun and fired at Bucky. Bucky screamed in pain, and Steve heard Bucky’s boots, and then his knees, thud as he staggered back and then fell.

Steve shook off the last effects of the impact and straightened up, bringing the edge of the shield down on Schmidt’s wrist this time. The impact shattered the bone, and the gun fell from Schmidt’s maimed appendage and skidded across the cockpit, coming to rest against the far wall. Steve couldn’t risk looking down at Bucky, who was groaning in agony on the floor, though he desperately wanted to. Schmidt was still on the offensive, shattered wrist or not, and Steve was forced to focus on the fight.

In the melee, Steve and Schmidt ended up trading places. Rather than engage, Schmidt turned and ran for the Stone of Azathoth that was encased in the glowing, blue housing in the center of the cockpit. Evenly matched for physical prowess, Steve couldn’t reach Schmidt in time to stop him from grabbing the Stone and tearing it free. It flared to life, the cerulean blue glow encompassing Schmidt, growing more luminous until the Stone blazed white. Schmidt screamed as space and time unravelled around him, and the forces of the Stone began to unspool Schmidt.

For a moment, the yawning maw of the Void opened behind Schmidt. The allure and promise of its eternal rest in incomprehensible all-knowingness called to Steve like a siren song, luring him back to the realm of Yog-Sothoth where the dead were gathered. But the rift snapped closed as soon as Schmidt’s remnants were gone, and Steve shook himself back to consciousness in time to watch the Stone burn through the hull of the aircraft and freefall into the ocean below.

Turning, Steve saw that Bucky was still curled in on himself and moaning, and he rushed to him.

“Buck, hey, lemme see,” Steve ordered. With effort, Bucky let go of his stomach, and Steve felt the wound carefully.

“It’s a through and through,” Steve reported.

“Noticed,” Bucky bit out, his eyes still clenched tightly closed.

“It should heal. Remember mine were pretty quick. It’s better when the bullet goes through. It’s a bitch when your body pushes it out after the fact,” Steve consoled.

“F-fantastic,” Bucky agreed. “N-n-now f-fly th-the plane.”

“Hang in there,” Steve told him with a reassuring squeeze to the shoulder.

The control panel was shot all to hell, but Steve wasn’t going to complain, given Bucky’s reason for shooting it. Most of the functions weren’t responding, but the manual tiller still worked and, after some poking, so did the radio and navigation system.

SSR frequencies were something Steve had memorized before his first unauthorized trip across the Front and he tuned in with little effort.
“Come in. This is Captain Rogers, does anyone read?” Steve called into the mic.

“Cap, what are your-” Morita replied.

“Steve, is that you? Are you alright?” Peggy cut in.

“We’re alive, but Bucky’s wounded. I think he’ll pull through,” Steve responded.

“What about the plane?” Peggy asked.

“Steve,” Bucky called from where he lay curled up on the floor.

“Hold on, Peggy,” Steve answered, clicking off the mic. “What is it, Bucky?”

“Don’t give her the coordinates,” he gasped.

Steve shook his head, certain that he misheard. “Come again?”

Bucky explained his plan bit by bit, taking pauses to gasp and manage his pain. By the end of it all, Peggy was shouting into the radio for Steve to check in.

“Sorry, Peggy. I was trying to fix navigation,” Steve said.

“The plane — do you have control?” she asked again for what was probably the fourth time.

“It’s complicated. It’s on autopilot, and the control panel got shot up in the fight. I can’t turn it off. The tiller is stuck. I can change altitude, but not direction. I gotta put it in the water, Peggy,” Steve answered.

“Give me your coordinates, I’ll find you a safe landing site,” she ordered.

“Peggy, I don’t think there’s gonna be a safe landing. I don’t have so much as a working compass, and we’re already halfway across the Atlantic. If I don’t stop this, lots of people are going to die,” Steve argued.

“Please, Steve. There’s time, we can work this out. I’ll radio to London, get Stark on the line-”

“This is my choice, Peggy,” he interjected.

The radio crackled and went silent. Steve looked back at Bucky. He was soaked in sweat and shaking in pain, but there was a lopsided grin on his face. “I see you l- lie better than you u- used to,” he commented.

Steve laughed and turned back to the console. “I guess I learned a thing or two in the USO.”

Another minute passed and Steve watched Greenland loom closer on the navigation system. “I guess it’s time. You sure about this?” Steve asked.

“Yeah,” Bucky answered.

Steve swallowed and nodded, and leaned forward onto the tiller. The autopilot, which was still engaged, whined and complained from the counter-force. The plane lurched and pitched forward suddenly, sending Bucky sliding forward on the floor leaving a bloody streak in his wake.

“It’s gonna be a bumpy one, but I think I can bring her down relatively level,” Steve called to Bucky. “You might oughta brace yourself.”
“Y’think?” gasped Bucky sarcastically as he climbed into the copilot’s chair and buckled himself in.

They sat side by side watching the clouds part as they descended, the ocean looming close. The terror of it, of the possibility of dying on impact, was mitigated by the smell of the ocean. Even thousands of feet above it, the smell of salt and fish carried up into the cockpit, and Steve’s gills tingled in response. The feeling of home burned in Steve’s mind.

A few things in Steve’s life had felt undeniably like home — his ma, the Barnes’ row house, the Brooklyn Central Library, Burbanks’ automat where he got dinner with Bucky from time to time. Steve thought of those things as he stared at the water, the ocean — its ancestral promise of home joining those memories.

“Steve?” Peggy called over the radio. Steve could hear the tears in her voice.

“I’m still here, but we’re close,” he answered.

“Steve, the kiss…”

Steve smiled. “Yeah, I gotta make sure to pay you back for that.”

“A week, next Saturday at the Stork Club. Take me dancing,” Peggy answered, her voice breaking on the last word.

“I’ve got two left feet, I’d hate to hurt you,” warned Steve, the water close enough that the waves made small white lines on the surface of the sea.

“I’ll teach you. Just be there, eight o’clock on the dot. Don’t be late.”

He took a deep breath, his entire field of vision filled by the ocean. “Wouldn’t dream of-”
Epilogue

The inward rush of imploding glass and icy water had been more shocking than Steve could have ever anticipated. He hadn’t planned to put the plane into the water at quite such a steep angle but the plane took far longer to level out than he had expected. Steve’s rudimentary aviation lessons had been less than sufficient for emergency piloting a highly advanced enemy aircraft, especially one that was ten times bigger than Howard’s Beechcraft.

The icy water soaked into their clothes, and Steve felt his body temperature plummet as his gills fluttered open. Water bathed his lungs but the pain in his extremities never came like it had with Brandt’s torturous test. Instead, he felt awake, rejuvenated, and energetic. The relief of not just water, but salt water, against his skin was enough to scrub away the fear and pain of the crash landing.

Bucky, on the other hand, was still grasping at his stomach. Blood still seeped from his wound into the darkening ocean waters. Working quickly, Steve undid their harnesses and wrapped an arm around Bucky. They swam out the front of the cockpit where the windshield had been blown away and then they went up, up towards the light.

Their uniforms added to the effort of swimming, but it wasn’t too taxing. With their gills, there was no imperative to stay above the water. When Steve tired, he simply let them sink below the surface until buoyancy brought them to a steady depth.

An ice floe could be seen up ahead and that became their destination. They would rest and heal there before setting out to follow the beacons that echoed in their minds.

More than once on their sojourn to the floe, which Steve came to realize was much farther away than he had originally estimated, Bucky lapsed into unconsciousness. Each time Steve checked Bucky’s pulse and the healing of the bullet holes. They were closing, though not as fast as Steve would have liked. But worry or not, they made it. Bucky was awake and doing his best to climb as Steve pushed him onto the ice. Steve clambered up behind him as soon as he saw Bucky was safely landed.

But out of the water Bucky immediately collapsed and began to spasm and jerk, his chest heaving silently. He tugged ineffectually at his coat, and Steve realized that Bucky couldn’t get the water out of his gills fast enough with the heavy winter coat that he was still wearing. With sickening clarity Steve also realized it was also the reason that Bucky had kept losing consciousness in the water — he was suffocating.

Buttons be damned, Steve ripped the jacket at the seams and peeled it off. The shirt and undershirt went next, exposing Bucky’s mossy-green scales wet and glinting in the sun. Water came from his gills, spurting out of the lower gills and dribbling out of the upper ones with each breath. When Bucky was done clearing his chest Steve let him go, and he flopped back onto the snowy ice floe, panting.

Concerned, Steve attempted to ask a question, only to realize that he too, had a chest full of water. He quickly shucked his own top and cleared his gills, marvelling at the brilliance of his blue-gray scales in the sunlight.

“You alright, Bucky?” he finally asked, voice still raspy and wet.

“Yeah, think so. ‘M sore, tired, feel like I just survived a plane crash.”
“Huh, funny. I feel the same way,” Steve said with a smile. “Here, let me look at the wound.”

Bucky lifted his hand away, then let it flop down onto the ice. It was still a little angry looking — swollen with scabs covering the top of it — but it was healing well. Steve gently lifted Bucky, rolling him onto his side for a better look at the exit wound which had been substantially larger as exit wounds were wont to be. It was taking longer to heal, but still seemed to be progressing well, so Steve gently laid Bucky on his back and left him alone.

Steve resituated himself on the ice and stared out across the gently waving ocean. It was like the Void in a way — so expansive that it felt endless and eternal, so uniform and empty that it strained time and distorted the mind, the self becoming lost in the endless churn of the whitecaps that dotted the surface all the way to the horizon. The sun climbed to its apex and then began to ride down towards what must be the west, and still they sat.

Finally, as the edge of the sun touched the horizon, sending up an orange-gold plume of light, Bucky spoke.

“You ever wonder how things have changed since we left?”

Steve blinked and turned to Bucky. “How do you mean?”

“I don’t know, I mean Ma and Pa and the girls. I guess I wonder about them sometimes,” he explained.

Steve looked away from Bucky and the sun, staring instead at the ice and flexing his hands. The webbing, which had been cut away only that morning, was making a rapid comeback after their earlier swim.

“I don’t think about them all that much. I never expected to go home after I left, so there never seemed much point in dwelling,” Steve finally answered.

“No, I know. I’ve known for a while now, but looking at the sun it’s hard to imagine that there’s a war on, that they might end up a part of it. It doesn’t feel like anything’s even real anymore,” Bucky said.

“We did what we could to stop the war,” Steve said softly, as though that remedied their losses.

“And once we pick our asses up off this chunk of ice we’ll finish a helluva lot more than that,” Bucky agreed.

“You think they’ll send a search party?” Steve asked.

“’Course they will, but without the coordinates we’ve probably got several days lead time. More than enough to heal up and get the hell out of Dodge. You played that up real well, by the way. Broke Carter’s heart, you ass,” Bucky said with a laugh.

Steve gave Bucky a flustered, open-mouthed shrug, his shoulders bunching so tight they threatened to touch his ears. “You told me to sell it. I sold it.”

Bucky laughed, the sound no longer strained by pain. “Yeah, yeah. We still gotta talk about that kiss anyway.”

“No we don’t,” Steve retorted.

“The hell we don’t. We can’t talk on this long-ass trip underwater, and I wanna hear all the juicy
details now," Bucky countered.

“I didn’t ask her for it, and we never kissed before,” Steve protested.

Bucky snorted. “Well that much was obvious. Have you ever kissed anyone besides her?”

“No,” Steve answered tersely. He could feel his ears warming up.

Bucky smiled. “It doesn’t much matter. I don’t think kissing is gonna be an important skill where we’re going. I was just giving you a hard time.”

“Hadn’t noticed,” Steve grumbled, still annoyed but warmed by the friendly ribbing and the blush.

Their conversation lulled as the last rays of light faded. Stars began to fill the night sky. The Milky Way glowed bright and clear across the cosmos, and Steve laid back on the ice next to Bucky. This was nothing like the Void. In the Void, the light of the celestial bodies succumbed to the vast space between them and the inky blackness of death and time. Stars in the Void became mere specks in a deep unfillable well of night.

But from Earth, the sweep of the stars across the sky was brilliant. Billions of stars and galaxies illuminated the heavens, their lights melding and flowing together. The stars were a multitude of colors too — white, yellow, red, orange, blue. A falling star raced across the starscape, and Steve turned to Bucky to see if he had seen it too. Bucky looked at him and smiled, the universe reflected in the pupils of his eyes which were blown wide like a cat’s in the low light. In that moment, everything that had ever been home to Steve was condensed into Bucky.

Steve turned away and sighed, trying not to think of tomorrow. They had agreed that tomorrow they would shed the rest of their human clothes and slip away into the abyss beneath the waves. Back to fighting and death and war. But for one night they could lie floating on the top of the world and watch as the vastness of the universe wheeled above them in silence broken only by Bucky’s breathing and the gentle slosh of the sea.

Steve knew home was gone after everything that had happened. But if he could have this again — peace, quiet, a clear view of the heavens, and Bucky — well, he might be alright with what life had become after all.

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