Today I Die, Tomorrow I Will

by araydre, Crematosis, SgtGraves

Summary

One of Zola's experiments leaves Bucky with the ability to start the day over again each time he dies. At times it's both a blessing and a curse.

Notes

Behold my first Cap Big Bang fic ^^ It was kind of nice to have a deadline and actually get something done for once, as hard as that is for me. And I got some awesome art from the amazing araydre and SgtGraves! Check out the beautiful art they did for me in chapter 10 and 12.
Bucky cried out as Zola plunged the needle into his arm. Pain radiated outward, like liquid fire coursing through his veins and he arched off the exam table, the restraints cutting into his skin.

"Excellent reaction time," Zola murmured. He scribbled something in his notebook and then stepped out of the room, leaving Bucky alone in the darkness with nothing but his growling stomach to keep him company.

He had lost track of how long he had been strapped to the table. Days, weeks maybe. There had been endless tests, each more painful than the last.
To keep himself sane, he repeated his name, rank, and serial number over and over again into the emptiness. It helped ground him, reminding him that he had an identity, a life outside the torture chamber. Even if he was slowly losing hope he'd ever return to that life. He was getting weaker and weaker by the day.

Bucky's eyes slipped shut. "Sergeant…32557…Buch-"

He felt a hand on his chest, shaking him and he fell silent, slowly opening his eyes. It was time for more torture and it would only be worse if they thought he was sleeping. Being jolted awake with a cattle prod was far from the worst he had suffered, but he wasn't going to give them any reason to go harder on him. He sucked in a breath and braced himself for the sharp pain of the needle.

But then he felt the restraints being ripped off. That was new. He blinked, focusing his eyes on the man in front of him.

Holy hell. He knew those big, blue eyes like the back of his hand.

"Is…is that..?" Bucky hardly dared hope.

"It's me. It's Steve."

"Steve." He barely had the energy to move, but he found himself smiling helplessly.

"Come on."

"Steve," Bucky repeated as he was hauled off the table. He still couldn't believe he was actually getting rescued by his best pal, but maybe if he said it enough, it would actually be true.

Steve clapped Bucky on the shoulder and steadied him on his feet. "I thought you were dead."

"I thought you were smaller."

Bucky's gaze wandered over Steve's body. Jesus Christ. Little Stevie looked like he had put on at least a hundred pounds, all of it pure muscle. Broad shoulders, broad chest, legs like fucking tree trunks. He was built like a fucking tank now. Maybe Bucky had been trapped in Zola's lab for longer than he thought.

"Come on," Steve said. He slipped an arm under Bucky shoulder and started half-dragging, half-carrying him out of the room.

"What happened to you?"

"I joined the army."

"Bullshit. That's one hell of a growth spurt, pal." Bucky had joined the army, too, and he hadn't sprouted muscles like Steve's.

"No time to explain," Steve said. "We've got to get you out of here."

Bucky groaned. "I'm okay, Stevie. Put me down."

As hot as it was having his formerly tiny best friend drag him down the hall like he weighed no more than a sack of potatoes, he wasn't about to let Steve do all the work.

Steve raised one eyebrow. "You sure, Buck? You're wounded."
"I can manage," Bucky said. "I ain't gonna slow you down."

Steve gave him a dubious look, but he took a moment to settle Bucky back on his feet. Bucky staggered after him as Steve made his way briskly down the hall. "So, which army'd you join, the space aliens?"

Steve sighed. "It was an experimental program. Put together by Dr. Erskine and Howard Stark. Called it the Supersoldier Serum."

"Jesus, Stevie," Bucky muttered. After watching Stark's flying car demonstration fail, Steve should have had second thoughts about putting his life in the guy's hands. But that was his Stevie. Always doing stupid shit when Bucky wasn't around to stop him.

Bucky hurried to catch up with him. "Did it hurt?"

"A little."

"Is it permanent?"

"So far." Steve glanced back and quickened his pace.

He seemed too distracted for conversation. It was understandable. Bucky wanted out of this hellhole as soon as possible, too. But it had been so long since he'd seen a friendly face or had someone to talk to.

"You know where you're going?" Bucky asked.

They were somewhere deep within the base now, running across metal catwalks instead of solid ground. Steve pulled up against a railing and took a glance around and then down.

Something exploded far down in the depths of the base and Bucky's eyes went wide as a piece of debris came flying right at him.

He woke up on the table in Zola's lab, jerking to consciousness at the feel of a cattle prod against his leg.

Damn. It had been one hell of a dream. He endured whatever the hell they injected him with, arching his back and screaming as the horrible concoction surged through his veins.

"Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes," Bucky said through gritted teeth. "32557038."

Zola scribbled something in his notes and then, blessedly, left Bucky alone to recover.

Bucky took a shuddering breath and willed his heart rate to slow. It still hurt like a bitch, but the worst of it was over for now. In another hour, the pain would start to dull into something manageable as the experiment worked its way through his body.

Fuck, he had gotten pathetic. What the hell was the matter with him, dreaming of Steve coming to his rescue? He missed Stevie like hell, that was for sure. And really, Steve would probably be the only one who cared about Bucky enough to risk a rescue deep in enemy territory. But putting his little spitfire in a strong body was the stuff of fairytales. And he couldn't afford to let his mind drift
into fantasies, couldn't afford to hope.

He let his eyes slip shut. The whole process was exhausting and he just felt so weak.

He didn't know how long he laid there, dazed and half-conscious, but a sound quickly brought him back to full attention. Someone was in the room with him, and instead of sticking a needle into his arm, they were ripping off his restraints. That had never happened before, except…except…

Bucky's eyes darted to the end of the table.

Steve. All big and muscular, just like he had dreamt.

He blinked a few times, but Steve was still there. "I'm going crazy," he muttered.


"I thought you were dead," Steve murmured, his eyes boring into Bucky's for a moment as he steadied him on his feet.

"That makes two of us," Bucky muttered.

Maybe that was it. Maybe he had died on the table after Zola's experiments and his first experience in heaven was having his rescue dream play out for real. But then that would mean Stevie was dead, too, which was a distressing thought. But if it meant he was finally out of that frail, sickly body Bucky wasn't going to be too torn up about it.

"I'm getting you out of here, Buck," Steve said determinedly. He slung an arm around Bucky's shoulder and started dragging him out of the room.

"So, you joined the army, just like you always wanted," Bucky said. "I didn't know heaven had an army."

"I don't know what you're going on about, Buck, but I joined the U.S. army."

"And the uniform looks great on you, Stevie. But your body is a miracle. Did it hurt when you fell from heaven?"

Steve sighed and stood Bucky up against a wall. "If you're strong enough for that kind of talk, you're strong enough to walk."

Bucky shrugged and stumbled after him.

It looked more like they were walking into hell than heaven, with the glow of fire around them and the hard metal under their feet.

He heard the roar of an explosion from down below and jerked back instinctively. A piece of debris clattered against the metal railing.

"Shit," he breathed.

Just a little closer and it could have been him. Had been him.

Jesus.

He didn't have much time to reflect because Steve was off running again, up stairs, around corners.
Bucky was horribly disoriented and he was pretty sure they were lost and Steve had no idea where he was going.

"Captain America!" a voice called out and Steve came to a halt.

Bucky didn't recognize the man taunting Steve, but he did recognize the man with him.

Zola.

Bucky swallowed and took a step backwards as Steve stepped forward.

It was an unusual position for him. Usually Steve was in a fight way over his head and Bucky had to step in and help. But Bucky knew he wasn't going to be of any help in this fight. How was he supposed to compete with a guy who could dent metal with his fist? He seemed scarily strong.

And he was even scarier when he started ripping off his face, revealing horrifying red bone underneath.

Bucky's stomach lurched. "You don't have one of those, do you?"

It would be the perfect demonic trick. Lull Bucky into believing that Stevie was really here to save him and then have it all stripped away.

Luckily, Steve's face stayed on and the elevator doors closed behind the horrible demon-faced man, sealing him from Bucky's sight.

Relief was short lived. The base was still being rocked with explosions. They had to get out of there now.

Steve glanced upwards and Bucky followed his gaze. There was a door, looked like an exit door. But it was way above them, and clear on the other side of the room. There was no way they could fight their way through all the explosions to get to the other side.

"Come on," Steve said, urging Bucky upwards.

Bucky blanched when he saw the thin metal support beam Steve had found.

Oh hell no. There was no way this was safe. There was no way a human was meant to put weight on this flimsy thing. It was probably the only way to the other side at this height. But there was just no way they'd make it.

"Let's go. One at a time," Steve said. He helped Bucky over the railing.

Bucky swallowed and focused on putting one foot in front of the other as the metal creaked under his feet. He was halfway there. He was going to make it.

Another explosion rocked the base and the metal pitched beneath his feet. Bucky flailed his arms wildly, but he couldn't regain his footing.

"Bucky!" Steve screamed.

Bucky jerked awake on the table.

Goddamnit.
Chapter 2

Chapter by Crematosis

Bucky might have been a lapsed Catholic, but he had found himself doing a lot of praying on that table. Praying for someone to find him, praying for the pain to pass, praying for the sweet oblivion of death.

God sure had a sick sense of humor.

If Bucky's Ma were here, she'd probably tell him some shit about being blessed. About God keeping him alive because he had special plans for him.

No, Bucky was pretty sure the big man upstairs just wanted him to suffer. Why else would he dangle the possibility of rescue in Bucky's face and then have it all go horribly wrong? And if he really wasn't meant to make it out alive, why couldn't he just die and die permanently?

Heavy footsteps sounded in the lab and Steve's voice choked out his name.

Steve. It was all worth it to see Steve. Even if Bucky had to spend the rest of his existence waking up to torture. It was better than dying alone.

Bucky cracked open one eye. "What took you so long?"

"It's me," Steve said. "It's Steve."

"I know," Bucky said. He held up his arms. "Help me up, punk. I can't believe you let me whittle away to nothing like this. What took you so fucking long?"

Steve blinked. "But, Bucky, why would you even think I was coming for you? I got rejected from the army a half dozen times, you know."

Bucky rolled his eyes. "Like that was ever going to stop you. Hydra's basically been bullying the shit out of us. I know you'd cross the fucking ocean to get a piece of this fight."

Steve grinned. "Alright. You've got a point there." He helped Bucky up from the table and slung an arm over his shoulder. "C'mon, Buck. Let's get you out of here."

"Third time's the charm," Bucky muttered under his breath.

"What?" Steve asked.

"Nothing," Bucky said quickly. He tightened his grip around Steve's waist. "Let's go."

He kept quiet and allowed Steve to lead him down the same hallway he'd gone down twice before.

There was still so much he was aching to ask Steve. The story behind his transformation had to be goddamn incredible. But he remembered that Steve hadn't seemed all that keen on talking the other times through and that was probably the smarter way to go. They needed to get out of the damn place as quickly as possible before the whole base exploded. Once they were safely out, they'd have all the time in the world to talk thing over.

Even without talking, they weren't as fast as Bucky had hoped. The confrontation with Zola and the man with the red skull still happened exactly as it had before. But this time, Bucky was anxiously
wishing they would hurry up and finish fighting before the whole base fell apart.

At last, the conflict was over and Steve shepherded him up the metal stairs.

Bucky heaved a sigh as he was once again faced with the narrow fucking support beam. He couldn't believe Steve actually expected this to work. But who was he kidding? He had seen Steve throw himself into enough countless fights, absolutely convinced that the strength of his righteous anger would be enough to kick the ass of someone twice his size. Of course Steve believed the tiny-ass beam would support them both long enough to make it to the other side.

Bucky gave the beam a determined glare and resolutely put one foot in front of the other. He was going to do it this time. He was going to make it.

When the beam started to shake from the explosions, he was ready and he put his hands out to stabilize himself. But then, with a horrifying screech, the beam started to detach from the railing.

Bucky raced forward and leapt for the railing, feeling a surge of relief as his hands closed around the metal.

Oh thank the fucking Lord. He'd made it.

He swung himself over the railing and the sense of relief faded.

Steve was still on the other side of the divide, looking across at Bucky with honest to god fear on his face.

Shit.

"There's gotta be a rope or something," Bucky said desperately.

Steve waved a hand at him. "Just go. Get out of here."

"No! Not without you."

Bucky was pissed off that Steve thought he'd be capable of leaving him. Fuck no. They were in this together. Till the end of the line. Bucky was going to find a way to get both of them out or die trying.

Again.

Steve made a small, frustrated gesture and then reached for the section of railing that remained after the support beam fell, bending it out of the way with his bare hands. He took several steps backwards.

Bucky's hands tightened on the railing.

Holy shit. Steve was going to try and jump the gap.

He wasn't going to make it. Bucky could tell from the second Steve's feet left the ground. The trajectory was just all wrong. But he leaned forward, willing Steve to make it to the other side.

Another massive explosion set off below, the flames huge enough to swallow Steve from sight. When the explosion cleared, Steve was gone.

Bucky choked out a sob.
How was he supposed to go on without his Stevie? Life wasn't worth living without him.

Bucky wiped his face on his sleeve. "Not without you," he said under his breath.

He climbed over the railing and let himself fall into the flames.

The shock of the cattle prod was actually a relief. Bucky laughed until he cried, tears streaming down his face. Zola jabbed him sharply with the needle, his face twisted with revulsion. But Bucky didn't care. If he was back on the table, Steve was back wherever the hell he was, on the way to rescue Bucky.

Steve was alive.

Zola and the other scientists were muttering something to each other about him. But Bucky tuned them out. Helpless joy bubbled up inside him. It didn't matter what they did to him now. The pain was all worth it to keep Steve alive.

He closed his eyes and let his mind drift until the sound of familiar footsteps rang out in the room.

"Steve!" Bucky said

"Buck," Steve said breathlessly. He unfastened the restraints. "Oh my god, what did they do to you?"

Bucky cupped shaking hands around Steve's face. "You're here. It's really you. God, you're a sight for sore eyes."

"It's really me," Steve said with a smile. "How do I look?"

"Like a million bucks," Bucky said. He tugged Steve into a kiss. "God, I never thought I'd see you again."

"It's really me," Steve said with a smile. "How do I look?"

"Like a million bucks," Bucky said. He tugged Steve into a kiss. "God, I never thought I'd see you again."

"We've gotta get out of here, Buck," Steve said urgently.

"Not yet." Bucky smoothed his thumbs over Steve's jawline. "I thought I'd lost you."

"Always worrying about me," Steve said with a faint smile. "But I'm big and strong now. You'll never have to worry about me again."

"I'll always have to worry about you," Bucky murmured. "Goddamn punk. Always trying to get yourself killed." He curled his hands around Steve's shoulders and pulled him closer.

"Buck," Steve said faintly. "This isn't the time or place." But he wasn't making any move to push him away.

"All those muscles suit you," Bucky murmured. He pressed a kiss to Steve's throat, pleased to feel the sensation of Steve's desperate swallow. "But underneath it all, you're still my Stevie."

Steve groaned and pulled Bucky flush against him, holding him up off the table with one hand.

Holy hell that was hot.

Bucky ran his hands over Steve's chest, mapping out his new body. What the hell was wrong with him? Why hadn't he thought to do this as soon as Steve had shown up?

Somewhere something was exploding. Bucky could vaguely register the sound and the heat of the
flames. But it was nothing compared to the heat of Steve's kiss.

He woke up to the pain of the cattle prod.

Oh, for fuck's sake.

He grit his teeth as the needle went into his arm. Enough fucking around. It was time to bust out of here.
Chapter 3
Chapter by Crematosis

Bucky woke to the sound of a buzzsaw right by his head. He flailed in blind panic for a moment until someone cursed and told him to quit stealing all the covers.

What the fuck?

Cautiously, Bucky opened one eye.

There were no restraints and no lab table. There wasn't even a roof overhead, just a patchwork mess of blankets and tarps hung over tree branches.

He wasn't in the lab anymore.

Bucky tipped his head back and laughed with relief. It had been one hell of a struggle getting Steve to stop leading them headfirst into danger, but they had finally made it out.

He propped his head up on one arm and stared at the sleeping soldiers sprawled around him.

Snoring. That's what that horrible sawing sound had been.

How the hell could he have forgotten what snoring sounded like? He had spent years listening to Steve's loud, rattling snores whenever he came down with a cold. But months of torture in the base had apparently made him forget life on the outside.

Bucky crawled out from the makeshift shelter, shivering in the early morning air. The night sky was just starting to lighten into grey, warm golden light brightening the edges of the horizon.

Fascinated, Bucky found himself wandering further and further from their camp, just staring up at the sky as he walked.

It was the first time he'd seen a sunrise in months. It didn't feel real. It felt like he was only looking at a painting.

He jerked back to reality, flinching at the weight of an arm around his shoulders, but then Steve's familiar voice was whispering in his ear. "Easy, Buck. It's just me."

Bucky exhaled noisily. "Damn punk," he muttered. "Did you come all this way just to give me a heart attack?"

"I wanted to see how you were holding up."

"I'm fine," Bucky said. His eyes tracked the pink streaks in the sky.

Steve raised an eyebrow.

Bucky sighed. "I can't believe I'm finally out of that godforsaken place. Half of me thinks I'm still stuck on that table, just dreaming I'm free."

Steve squeezed his shoulder. "It's not a dream, Buck. I know it's a little hard to believe. So many crazy things have happened since you went off to war. I'm not quite the same little guy you left in Brooklyn."
He sure wasn't. The solid weight of Steve's big hand on his shoulder was proof of that.

"We should, uh, probably talk about what this means for us," Steve said quietly.

Bucky elbowed him in the ribs. "This doesn't mean a damn thing for us, you big idiot. I promised you until the end of the line, didn't I? So that means I'm sticking with you no matter what changes. And I'm not the same person either. After everything Hydra did to me…"

It seemed so stupid in the light of day. The power to survive death over and over again? That was science fiction bullshit. There was no way that had really happened. He had to have been delirious with whatever drugs the scientists forced on him.

Steve's expression hardened. "They experimented on you."

Bucky nodded.

"You want to talk about it?"

"Not really."

Steve sighed. "I just want to know you're gonna be alright. We've got another long day's march ahead of us."

"I'm fine, Stevie." He linked his fingers with Steve's. "I'm gonna be just fine."

Steve's bright blue eyes tracked across his face. Bucky didn't know what he was searching for, but he waited patiently and let Steve look his fill.

At last, Steve nodded, seemingly satisfied with whatever he saw. "Alright then. Let's get this show on the road."

Bucky stayed where he was, watching as Steve made his way back into their little camp to rouse the men.

It was going to be a long, hard march. But Bucky felt strong enough. He was going to march back into the 107th's camp at Steve's side. Right where he belonged.

Because Steve was still Steve, he wasn't content with just rescuing Bucky and the rest of the 107th Hydra had taken captive. No, he had to put a team together to go storm the rest of Hydra's bases and take them all out.

Morita, Gabe, Falsworth, Dum Dum, and Dernier. All men from Bucky's unit. Good fighters, loyal, dependable. Maybe a little bit crazy. Anyone who escaped from Hydra's clutches and volunteered to go right back in had to be crazy. And Bucky was probably the craziest of them all.

After all the shit Hydra had done to his body and his mind, he should have been running in the opposite direction. But apparently the damn punk was rubbing off on him because he found himself agreeing to be part of the team.

Truth be told, he would follow Steve anywhere.

And now there were more people willing to do the same.

For so long it had seemed like him and Stevie against the world. But others were finally seeing what Bucky had known all along. Steve was fearless, loyal, dependable, passionate, and dedicated to doing the right thing. What better person to lead them into battle?
The Commandos were like family. A great big rowdy family. They swapped crazy stories and dirty songs around the campfire, were competitive as hell in battle, and teased each other mercilessly over any perceived weakness.

Bucky had fully expected a lot of teasing about his close friendship with Steve. It was a favorite topic for all the boys at school and Bucky had somehow kept Steve from trying to punch all of them. But it never came up. They didn't even say anything when the two of them snuck off together every night to explore Steve's new body.

Steve was still getting used to being big and buff and tended to forget how strong he was now, especially in the throes of passion. Bucky usually ended up a little sore in the mornings with finger shaped bruises on his hips where Steve had gripped him just a little bit too hard, and with his voice a little rougher than usual.

They were careful not to openly flaunt their relationship, but it had to be pretty obvious what they had been doing.

But the Commandos politely pretended not to notice anything and only teased them for sleeping in.

With all the fun they were having, it was easy to forget they were in the middle of a war. Storming the Hydra bases felt more like playing a childhood game of capture the flag than an actual battle. At this point, they had mowed through five Hydra bases without much resistance and Bucky was starting to really relax and think of it all like a game.

So maybe he wasn't taking his job as backup quite as seriously as he should have. Did they really need someone to sit on a hill with a sniper rifle to make sure the mission went well? Bucky didn't think so. The Commandos were all so good at kicking ass and he really should have been out there in the thick of battle with the rest of them, not stuck behind doing the boring shit.

But since Steve had insisted Bucky stay behind, Bucky did.

He sighed to himself as he scanned the base through his rifle. As he had expected, there wasn't much for him to do. He had taken out the few outer guards he had seen with his rifle, but once the men disappeared inside the base, there had been nothing for him to do until Steve and the rest of the men emerged again.

And just like he thought, all of them emerged without a scratch and were standing around the destroyed base, discussing tactics or some shit. After every mission, Steve liked to talk about what had gone down to try and make them even better for the next battle. Tactics weren't Bucky's thing, but he smiled as he watched the passion in his lover's body language.

A shot rang out and Steve crumpled to the ground.

"Steve!"

Bucky quickly scanned the area until he saw a Hydra soldier with a gun just stepped out from behind a section of wall. He emptied his gun into the son of a bitch and then abandoned his post, scrambling down the embankment.

Steve was lying face down in the rubble, unmoving.

Bucky shook his shoulder. "Stevie. Stevie, say something." He rolled him over.

The moment Bucky saw the blankness in Steve's expression, he knew he was gone. But he pressed a hand against the bloody hole in Steve's neck anyway.
"He's gone, Sarge," Dum Dum said quietly.

Bucky turned his pistol over in his hands.

There was a good chance that he was crazy, that everything that had gone down inside the Hydra base was all in his head. If he killed himself here, he might be killing himself for real. But was life really worth living without Steve?

Hands shaking, he raised the gun to his head.

"Sarge, no!" Gabe shouted.

Bucky pulled the trigger.

He was relieved to wake up in Steve's tent and find his lover snoring beside him, but also a little frightened because holy shit, it had all been real. He had really died several times escaping the Hydra base and come back to life to restart the day.

Steve stirred and blinked up at him sleepily. "What are you doing awake so early?"

"Nothing," Bucky said. He pressed a kiss to Steve's forehead. "Go back to sleep, doll."

Steve stretched languidly. "Nah, it's about time we got up anyway. We want to get an early start on that base."

Bucky nodded and quietly sipped his morning coffee as Steve went over tactics with the rest of the Commandos. This time, he didn't argue when Steve assigned his sniper duty. He just got himself into position and waited, looking determinedly through the rifle's scope, until the Hydra soldier stepped into view and shot him before he had a chance to raise his gun.

Steve glanced behind him at the fallen Hydra soldier and then turned to offer Bucky a salute, surprise clear on his face.

Bucky nodded grimly. Fuck that asshole. Nobody was allowed to shoot his Stevie and live.

That night around the campfire, everyone was again celebrating a successful mission.

"That was some fancy shooting out there," Dum Dum said. "Shot the guy before any of us even saw him."

Bucky swallowed. He didn't know how he could explain to the men that he just knew where the guy was going to pop up.

"Bucky's always got my back," Steve said. "He just has a way of knowing when I'm in trouble."

Bucky smiled into the fire as Steve regaled the Commandos with stories of all the times Bucky had shown up to drag him out of alley fights.

Maybe his Ma had been right. If there was a god, he had decided that Bucky's purpose in life was keeping Steve out of trouble. And there was no way a mere mortal was cut out for the job. It still wasn't going to be easy. Steve's recklessness and stubbornness could try the patience of a saint. But thank fuck for small mercies.

Bucky raised his eyes skyward and silently promised that he'd be worthy of the power bestowed on him.
Chapter 4

Chapter by Crematosis

Bucky threw himself into battle with a lot more focus once he realized Steve's life was in his hands. He quickly gained a reputation as an expert sniper, a fearless fighter, and a man who could miraculously walk out of almost any fight unscathed.

Steve had yelled at him a few times for running in without backup, which was pretty rich coming from Mr. Pick Fights with Guys Twice My Size.

But why should he worry about taking risks when he was functionally immortal? He either pulled it off or he got the chance to try again.

Maybe if he had told Steve what was happening, he wouldn't have to deal with so many lectures about putting himself in danger. But then Steve would probably point out that they didn't know the extent of his power and would probably insist Bucky only use his ability in true life and death situations.

There was absolutely no one else Bucky would rather have as the captain of the Commandos, but sometimes Steve took his role way too seriously.

At least Steve wasn't going to be their captain for too much longer. They had already wiped out the majority of Hydra's bases and they were finally going to be able to take out Hydra's second in command.

The team had gotten intel that Zola would be traveling by train through a mountain pass and the Commandos had gotten set up on a high vantage point where they could watch the train approach and prepare to zipline down.

Bucky looked down into the ravine and grimaced. Falling to his death had been one of the worst ways to go. Fucking Steve and that tiny-ass support beam were going to give him a fear of heights.

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

"Yeah, and I threw up."

Bucky nervously eyed the tiny zipline. "This isn't payback, is it?"

Steve grinned. "Now why would I do that?"

Bucky rolled his eyes. "Because you're an asshole."

Steve's smile faded a little. "You know, Buck, if you're really uncomfortable with-"

"Fuck no. I'm going with you, jerk. You just want me to stay behind so you can do risky shit without me."

Steve's smile returned full force. "The thought did cross my mind."

As much as Bucky would like to stand around sassing Steve forever, they had a serious mission ahead of them. And Gabe had just intercepted a Hydra transmission authorizing the train to put on speed.
Steve grabbed onto the hand grip. "We've only got about a ten second window. We miss that window, we're bugs on a windshield."

Bucky grimaced. It sounded like a spectacularly painful way to die. And he'd probably have to go through it several times, knowing his luck.

"Better get moving, bugs," Dum Dum said cheerfully.

Steve took off down the zipline, Bucky following close behind.

Surprisingly, they all made it onto the train on the first attempt. But now they just had to stay on the train. And moving across the roof of a speeding train was no walk in the park.

Slowly, they made their way down a ladder into one of the storage cars.

It was all too easy. Nobody had fallen off the zipline, nobody had smacked into the side of the train, and now there was no one ready to shoot at them.

"Something ain't right about this," Bucky hissed. "Where are all the guards?"

Steve leveled him with an unimpressed look, but Bucky could tell he was also unsettled by how quiet it was. Surely a man as important as Zola would be surrounded by as many soldiers as possible.

Bucky kept a tight grip on his rifle as he scanned the area, watching Steve's back as he took a cautious step into the next car.

Suddenly, the door slid shut behind Steve, sealing them off from each other.

A Hydra soldier appeared from behind one of the shelves and started firing at Bucky. In the car ahead, Bucky could hear more gunshots so another soldier had been lying in wait for Steve too, it seemed. He gritted his teeth and hunkered down behind the little bit of cover he could find. An enemy he could fight was at least better than a vague sense of dread. And if he got killed, well, he knew to stick closer to Steve the next time.

Steve dispatched his soldier relatively quickly and then doubled back to help Bucky, which was a little embarrassing.

"I had him on the ropes," Bucky muttered.

"I know you did."

Steve looked about to offer him a comforting pat on the shoulder, but instead he shoved Bucky behind him and put up his shield as another soldier stepped out with one of the crazy powerful Hydra weapons strapped onto him.

The blast bounced off Steve's shield and blew a hole in the side of the train instead of Steve's body, but the force also knocked him to the ground.

Bucky rushed to pick up Steve's shield and defend Steve while he was down. Again, the blast ricocheted off the shield, but Bucky was thrown out of the hole in the train.

By some miracle, Bucky managed to grab onto one of the thin metal railings on the side of the train, but he could tell it wasn't going to hold him for long. Already, the metal was starting to creak
under his weight.

"Bucky!" Steve shouted. He inched his way outside the train and reached out as far as he could. "Grab my hand."

Bucky made a half-hearted grab for Steve's hand, but with a final groan, the railing snapped off.

Fuck. He was falling to his death after all.

He hit the snowbank hard. Sharp, agonizing pain radiated down his body.

How the fuck had the fall not killed him on impact?

It was going to kill him eventually, that was for sure. He could barely draw a breath, which probably meant a ruptured lung or cracked ribs. And if his injuries didn't kill him, the hypothermia certainly would. It would be a slow, painful death and Bucky wasn't about to just lay there and wait for it to happen.

His pistol was lying just a few inches from his face. If he could reach out and grab it, he could end his suffering right then and there.

But his arm wasn't cooperating. He couldn't even feel his fingers. With a supreme effort, Bucky tilted his head to check on the problem, fighting down the wave of nausea.

He had no left hand now. His arm was severed at the elbow and he could see bone protruding from the bloody stump. The cold was probably the only thing keeping him from bleeding to death immediately.

He laid there for some time, slipping in and out of consciousness until his attention was caught by the glow of flashlights in the distance and voices carrying on the wind.

Oh no. Steve was coming to rescue him. And that was really the last thing he wanted at this point. The only thing worse than a slow death would be months and months languishing in a military hospital.

As the men got closer, Bucky was horrified to hear unfamiliar speech.

It wasn't Stevie coming to his rescue. It was the enemy.

He couldn't let them take him. He had to get to the gun and reset the day.

Three men in fur-lined uniforms stood over him. One of them grabbed the back of his uniform and started dragging him off through the snow, leaving a trail of blood behind.

Bucky squirmed ineffectually and pawed at them with his good arm, but then the darkness rose up around him.

When he came to, he was strapped to a gurney in a lab suspiciously like the one he had escaped from with Steve's help. But instead of weird, experimental torture devices, it seemed to be stocked with standard medical equipment.

For a brief moment, he allowed himself to hope that he was just stuck in a shitty field hospital, but then Zola's face swam into view.

"You again," Bucky said hoarsely. "Why can't you assholes just leave me alone?"
Zola smiled thinly. "The Captain will not find you this time. The procedure has already started."

Bucky snorted. "I don't need Steve to save me this time. I can do it myself."

The straps across his chest kept him from getting up and escaping, but the medical tray was next to the gurney, just in reach. Bucky snatched a scalpel off the tray and jammed the blade into his neck.

He woke up in the lab.

No, no, no. This couldn't be happening.

Bucky frantically scrambled for a scalpel and slit his throat again. Again, he woke up strapped to the gurney.

Zola smiled down at him smugly. "You are to be the new fist of Hydra."

There was no way out. Steve wasn't coming for him this time.

The scientists started sawing away at the tattered remains of his arm and all he could do was scream.
Chapter 5

Chapter by Crematosis

The Asset flexed metal fingers around his sniper rifle and watched for signs of movement in the apartment.

He had tracked Nick Fury to this location, an apartment owned by a man named Steve Rogers. If necessary, Rogers would be eliminated to take down Fury, but his orders were to attempt to kill him with as little collateral damage as possible.

His finger slid over the trigger. Fury might have escaped him in the street, but that was only a temporary setback. His mission was to eliminate the man and the Asset never failed a mission.

The Asset fired from his rooftop perch and cleaned up any trace of his presence. Get in, get out. Be like a ghost, his handlers had always told him.

Before he could make a clean getaway, Steve Rogers burst out of the apartment in pursuit. The Asset fled along the rooftop, but somehow, Rogers still managed to catch up to him and attempted to take him out with the shield he was carrying.

The Asset caught the shield easily enough. And now that the man was unarmed, he could incapacitate him, make sure he didn't follow him. Hydra considered Rogers a potential threat and he would likely become the Asset's next target if he got too close. Injuring him now might prevent him from becoming a mission later.

There was no reason he should try to prevent Rogers' death. But something seemed very familiar about the man. The Asset pushed the feeling aside. He had no time for feelings. His mission was complete. Now it was time for the extraction.

He threw the shield as hard as he could, forcing Rogers to stumble backwards as it hit him in the gut. And while he was distracted, the Asset leapt from the rooftop and disappeared into the shadows of the alley.

He took a long, circuitous route back to Alexander Pierce's home to ensure he wasn't being followed.

Pierce was in the kitchen, making himself a sandwich when the Asset slipped in through the window. "I was wondering when you'd show up," he said. He placed the sandwich and a glass of milk on the kitchen table and settled into his seat. "Mission report."

The Asset gave a detailed account of where he had stationed himself on the rooftop, the weapon he had used, how many shots he had fired, how he had eluded Rogers.

Pierce took a sip of his milk. "For your sake, Nick better be dead. We can't afford another failure."

The Asset repressed a shudder. His handlers had been very angry with Fury's temporary escape. Strike team had been authorized to beat him with their stun batons until he fell to his knees and it had been made very clear to him that a much worse punishment would be in store if Fury eluded him a second time.

Pierce's phone rang and he glanced at it briefly before answering. "This had better be important." There was a long pause. "I see," Pierce said. "Yes, of course. I will." He hung up the phone and
turned to rummage through the fridge. "Nick's dead. Everything is back on schedule."

The Asset nodded. Pierce didn't offer any details about his plans and he knew better than to ask.

"Mission complete," Pierce said. "Back to base."

The Asset returned to his quarters deep in SHIELD's basement, a small room that had once been a storage closet. There was hardly space for the Asset to lie down and sleep. But the room was rarely used. Once the results of his mission were recorded, he expected to be put back into cryofreeze.

But the next evening, he was ordered to return to Pierce's home for further instructions.

"The timetable has moved," Pierce said. "Two targets, level six. I want confirmed death in ten hours."

Ten hours wasn't much time to set up a mission. Usually, the Asset was allowed to spend a day or two observing a target, getting a feel for their routines and mannerisms. Going in blindly against not just one, but two unfamiliar targets was a little daunting.

But the Asset didn't question his orders.

"Steve Rogers and Natasha Romanov," Pierce said. He placed two files in front of the Asset. "They've already cost me Zola. We can't let them further jeopardize our plans."

The Asset accepted the files and leafed through them. Roger's face was familiar to him after the encounter from the night before. The woman too seemed vaguely familiar. That was somewhat reassuring. He at least had some knowledge of his targets.

When he returned to base, he found Strike team preparing themselves for battle. It was good to have Strike team's assistance on his mission, especially for such high level targets.

The Asset was allowed four hours of sleep before the mission and then he was dragged out of his quarters and outfitted with his weapons. Rumlow, his handler for the mission, had put together a plan for the takedown. According to intel, Rogers and Romanov were on their way to the Triskelion to sabotage Project Insight. The Asset would stop them before they reached their destination, with Strike team backing him up.

"They've got Sitwell," Rumlow growled. "And the motherfucker's been talking. Which means he's gotta go too."

The Asset nodded. He had no personal attachment to Sitwell. If his handlers deemed it necessary to eliminate him for the sake of the mission, he would do so.

He proceeded ahead, intercepting them along their known route. He made contact with their vehicle and removed Sitwell through the window.

With the help of Strike team, the vehicle was disabled, but his targets were more difficult than Sitwell. The woman especially was giving him plenty of trouble. If he hadn't been wearing his protective goggles, she certainly would have shot him right in the face. But she couldn't escape him forever. Finally, he had her cornered behind a car. She was wounded and in no condition to escape or fight back.

But then Rogers tackled him, throwing him to the ground with his shield.

The Asset struggled, but between Rogers' body weight and the shield, he was effectively pinned.
"Stay down," Rogers growled. He punched him across the face.

The Asset's face mask shattered.

Rogers' eyes went wide. "Bucky?"

The Asset spat out a mouthful of blood. "Who the hell is Bucky?" he muttered.

"Bucky," Rogers repeated. "I can't-I don't...I can't believe you're alive. I don't know what they've done to you, but we're going to make it right. I promise you. We're going to help you."

The Asset didn't like the sound of that. "I can't let myself be taken alive," he said. With his tongue, he opened the hidden compartment in his tooth and crunched down on the cyanide capsule.

"No!" Rogers screamed.

The Asset woke up back at base.

He had taken the cyanide. By all rights, he should be dead. But maybe this had all been some sort of test to prove he would do as he had been told and was willing to take his own life when necessary.

His handlers tested him frequently to see how well he followed orders. There was no praise when he passed one of their tests, only punishment if he failed.

Rumlow entered his quarters with all of the Asset's gear.

"Here's the plan," Rumlow said.

The Asset listened intently, expecting to find a small detail changed or omitted, something his handlers could punish him for forgetting, but the mission briefing sounded exactly the same.

Eliminate Rogers and Romanov, eliminate Sitwell, ambush them enroute to the Triskelion.

The Asset didn't understand why he was meant to carry out the same mission a second time, but he didn't dare question it.

Again, he proceeded Strike team, eliminating Sitwell easily and braced himself for the fight with Rogers and Romanov as Strike team moved in to immobilize their vehicle.

The fight was a little easier the second time around since he knew the initial actions Rogers and Romanov would take. But that knowledge was only good for so long. Romanov was a wily fighter and as he changed his tactics, she adapted. And Rogers was still there to give him trouble right before he could eliminate her. But this time, the Asset anticipated Rogers jumping in to save the day and met him head-on, slamming him back into a parked car.

"Why did you call me Bucky?" the Asset demanded.

Rogers watched him warily. "When did I do that?"

"Yesterday. Today." The Asset made a frustrated gesture with his flesh hand. "Earlier." He removed his face mask.

Rogers gasped. "Bucky."

The Asset shoved Rogers to the side. "Don't call me that."
"But that's your name. Buck, don't you know me?" Rogers asked hesitantly.

"I know you're a threat," the Asset said. He raised his gun.

Rogers raised up his shield to block the bullet and then his eyes widened as something over the Asset's shoulder caught his attention.

"Natasha, no!" he screamed. He tackled the Asset to the ground.

The world erupted in bright light and sharp pain. And then there was nothing.

The Asset sat up cautiously. He was...he was back in his quarters.

He held his hands out in front of his face and turned them over, inspecting them for scars or shrapnel. But there was nothing there. His body was completely functional and free from pain. It was like the explosion had never happened.

Cold dread settled into his stomach as Rumlow walked into his quarters with his gear.

Why was he being asked to carry out the same mission over and over again? This had never happened to him on any of his previous missions. He had never died during a mission either. And yet, there was a nagging sense of familiarity to his situation. Just like something was oddly familiar about Steve Rogers.

The Asset readied himself for the battle a third time. He had been trained to be cold, calculating, ruthlessly efficient. But he found himself almost enjoying the fight and seeing what new tactics his targets would come up with. Planting a phone to lure him into a trap had been a clever ploy by Romanov, allowing her just enough time to fling an EMP onto his metal arm, temporarily disabling it so she could make her escape. It really was a shame that he would have to eventually kill them to accomplish his mission. He could have done this all day.

The Asset paused. That phrase was familiar. Why was it so familiar?

While he was momentarily distracted, Rogers lunged at him and they grappled for a moment until the Asset regained the upper hand.

With his metal arm, he grabbed Rogers by the throat. He could see him squirm, fighting for air. If he tightened his grip, he could choke him to death, crush his windpipe. But instead of increasing the pressure, he found himself flinging the man away. It was an unusual lapse in behavior. But if his handlers happened to question him about it, he would just say his arm was still malfunctioning.

Rogers launched himself at the Asset again. They traded blow for blow, metal fist to metal shield until finally Rogers managed to grab him and fling him towards another car.

When the Asset rolled back to his feet, he could see that his mask had fallen off in the scuffle. He glanced over his shoulder, waiting until Rogers saw his face and his eyes widened with recognition.

Bucky. Why did he keep calling him Bucky?

At the last second, the Asset remembered the grenade launcher Romanov had acquired and jumped out of the way.

When the smoke cleared, Strike team had the targets surrounded. The Asset was no longer needed. He disappeared into the wreckage and made his way back to base. His metal arm was still not quite
at optimum strength. It would need to be looked at by technicians.

He sat in the chair and watched as the technicians opened up his arm and started their work. It was a routine operation. His arm had been repaired countless times after a mission. But he felt restless and unsettled and the feeling was only growing stronger as they worked. There was a nagging feeling that he had left something very important behind. Maybe it was because he hadn't actually eliminated the targets and hadn't even stayed to watch their elimination. But maybe it was something deeper than that.

Steve Rogers. He was a stranger, he was his target. But he had risked his life trying to save the Asset from death. He called him a name like he knew him. And the more the Asset thought about Rogers, the more his mind dredged up vague images that might have been dreams or memories.

The Asset lost himself in his own mind, heedless of his surroundings until he was brought back with a slap across the face.


The Asset licked his lips and averted his eyes. "The man on the bridge. Who was he?"

"You met him earlier this week on another assignment."

"I knew him."

There was no other explanation for what he felt. There had to be some personal connection between them.

Pierce knelt down besides his chair and started talking to him about how valuable his work was, how Hydra was accomplishing all its goals with his assistance, how Steve Rogers was only standing in the way of world peace.

The Asset had never been told anything positive. He should have felt honored to be such a valuable part of Hydra's ultimate plan. But...

"But I knew him," the Asset insisted.

Pierce's expression hardened. "Wipe him and start over."

The Asset swallowed around his fear as the techs pushed him back into the chair.

He had his orders. He would comply.
The Asset had one mission: Eliminate Steve Rogers before he sabotaged the helicarriers. Use whatever force necessary.

He had never had a mission where he was given so much free range, but he wasn't about to question orders. His handler, Rumlow, had stressed the importance of taking down Rogers. The mission would be completed, no matter the cost.

His first stop was the SHIELD air strip. There, the Asset encountered SHIELD pilots who were disobeying orders to take down Rogers and were instead attempting to give him air support as he accessed the helicarriers.

The Asset destroyed most of the aircrafts and killed all the pilots. The last remaining craft he used to fly up to one of the helicarriers and wait in ambush for Rogers' arrival.

In no time at all, Rogers arrived on the helicarrier, toted by an accomplice wearing some sort of jetpack with wings. The Asset waited until they had just landed on the surface of the carrier and then jumped out of hiding, shoving Rogers through a railing. The accomplice attempted to fight back, but the Asset yanked off one of his wings and kicked him from the helicarrier.

The accomplice quickly started falling back to earth, but Rogers was still stubbornly clinging to the ship's underside.

There was no way the Asset could engage him where he was. He would proceed to the ship's core and from there prevent Rogers' attempt to sabotage it.

He waited on the narrow catwalk and watched impassively as Rogers made his approach.

"Please don't make me do this," Rogers pleaded.

He was emotional, the Asset noted. His targets usually made mistakes when they were frightened or anxious. The Asset felt no such emotions, which gave him an advantage.

Rogers made a desperate lunge forward that the Asset quickly blocked. Already, his fighting was a lot sloppier than it should have been, his emotions getting in the way of his battle skills.

Not that the Asset should know Rogers' normal fighting prowess. Rogers was unfamiliar to him. He was just a target.

And yet, the fight wasn't as one-sided as the Asset expected. Rogers was still able to break away from the fight momentarily to press buttons and make a grab for some green microchip that seemed to be important to the operation of the helicarrier. And the Asset wasn't going to stand for that.

He tackled Rogers, and together they went sliding off the catwalk onto the glass underbelly of the ship, the Asset managing to snatch up the chip as they fell.

Rogers' fighting style was really deteriorating at this point. He headbutted the Asset, and then grappled with him for the chip. The Asset found himself pinned to the ground, both of his arms immobilized and Rogers' arms wrapped around his neck. He had time for a brief moment of panic...
before Rogers' grip tightened and he blacked out.

When he came to, Rogers was scrambling back up to the ship's core. The Asset shot him three times, but Rogers persisted. With what had to be the last of his strength, he hauled himself up and slid the chip into place.

With a dull sense of dread, the Asset realized that he had failed his mission.

And then the world exploded around him. The other helicarriers were opening fire and the ship was being ripped to pieces. There was nowhere to go. He couldn't move without being showered with debris. And then a huge chunk of metal fell down, pinning him to the ground.

He was sure he was going to die there, trapped and in pain. But then Rogers jumped down and started straining to lift up the metal.

The Asset didn't know why his enemy was helping him. If their roles were switched, he wouldn't hesitate to leave Rogers trapped. But the Asset would use Rogers' stupidly kind impulses against him. He might have failed his mission to protect the helicarrier, but he could still kill Rogers.

Rogers was still standing there after the Asset squirmed out from the metal.

"You know me," Rogers said firmly.

"No, I don't," the Asset snarled.

"Your name is James Buchanan Barnes."

"Shut up!" He swung wildly, knocking Rogers back with the sheer force of his anger.

There was something wrong with his programming. He wasn't supposed to react emotionally. Killing was cold, impersonal. But Rogers was getting under his skin in a way no one else had.

"I'm not going to fight you." Rogers let his shield drop. "You're my friend."

The Asset snarled and tackled him to the ground. "You're my mission." He punched Rogers in the face. Without his shield, there was nothing standing in the way of the Asset killing him and completing his mission.

Rogers coughed up blood. "Then finish it. Cause I'm with you to the end of the line."

Bucky looked down at Steve's bloody face in horror. Steve had always been his mission. But it had been to protect him, not kill him.

What had he done?

A heavy beam broke off and slammed through the glass. Bucky managed to grab onto a metal girder, but Steve was barely conscious and unable to react. For one horrified moment, Bucky watched his best friend falling towards certain death and then he was jumping after him.

Steve was unmoving in the water so Bucky hauled him onto the shore and made sure he was breathing.

He was still alive at least, but he was hurt pretty bad. Bucky's first instinct was just to kill himself and reset the day so Steve wouldn't be hurt. But there was the chance that when the day reset, Bucky's memories would be reset too. And maybe the next time, Bucky would actually kill him. He couldn't take that risk.
Walking away was one of the hardest things Bucky had ever done, but he knew it was the right decision. He needed to protect Steve from himself.

Maybe one day he could be Bucky again, the protector that Steve deserved. But Steve had other people looking out for him now. He would be fine without Bucky.
Chapter 7
Chapter by Crematosis

Bucky threw himself into research, holing up in public libraries and stealing wi-fi when he could. There were so many places he vaguely remembered from his youth. His family home, a dance hall he had taken Steve, the corner grocery store. He was sure that if he could see those places again, it would spark new memories. But searching up addresses online revealed that most of the old places had been torn down or changed beyond recognition. He wandered his old neighborhood and didn't recognize a single thing.

Eventually, he found himself in the Captain America exhibit at the Smithsonian.

The second he set foot in the exhibit, he felt like he had gone back in time to the 1940s. There was an image of his Stevie before the serum that Bucky almost reached out to touch, the uniforms of all the Commandos, a startlingly realistic replica of Steve's shield, and Steve's beloved motorcycle.

He came to a stop in front of a large display dedicated to the life of and supposed death of James Buchanan Barnes. It was his face and his body, but he might as well have been looking at a stranger's image. He just wasn't the same man anymore.

From there, Bucky traveled abroad with a notebook full of scraps of memories. He moved from country to country, visiting towns he had fought through in the war. He never stayed in one place for long. Hydra was still out there somewhere. He couldn't let them find him and make him back into the monster he had been.

It took almost a year for him to work his way to Bucharest. He couldn't stay there forever, he knew that. But he had set himself up in a tiny apartment that reminded him of Steve's cramped little place back in the 40s and after a few weeks there he found himself reluctant to leave.

He kept to himself for the most part, venturing out of the apartment only when he had to get food. It wasn't safe for him to be out on the streets for too long. The market he frequented was only a block away from his apartment which meant he was usually out of the building for no more than an hour.

His favorite things to buy at the market were plums. They were a rare indulgence, bought only when he had some spare change and enough supplies in stock. Because he was living by scrounging for discarded items and carefully using false documents, having a full stock of supplies was a rarity. Today was only the second time he felt he could afford the plums.

Bucky carefully picked through the plums on offer and finally selected one that looked ripe and juicy. He savored his treat slowly, lingering outdoors a little longer than usual before he finally started heading back to his apartment.

As he was about to cross the first street back from the market, carefully keeping an eye out for the police or Hydra, he noticed a newspaper vendor giving him an odd look. The man stared right at him with wide eyes and then raced off, abandoning his stall.

Bucky crossed the street and snatched up the paper the man had left sitting on his stall. There on the front cover was an image of him supposedly planting a bomb at the embassy in Vienna.

Fuck. He knew he shouldn't have stayed put for so long. Now he was going to have to leave quickly and didn't have time to plan his next location.
He hurried back to his apartment, quietly letting himself in through an open window.

Unfortunately, he wasn't alone. There was a man poking around in his kitchen with his back to him. But Bucky recognized the broad shoulders beneath the uniform. Steve. Steve had found him.

As if he could sense him, Steve's back suddenly went rigid and he turned around slowly. He regarded Bucky carefully. "You know me?"

Of course he knew him. Steve was the one thing he knew with any certainty. But he was too dangerous to be around now. Steve would be safer if he gave up on him as a lost cause.

"You're Steve," Bucky said carefully. He averted his eyes. "I read about you in a museum."

"I know you're nervous. You have plenty of reason to be," Steve said soothingly.

"I wasn't in Vienna. I don't do that anymore."

"I know," Steve said. "But there are people who think you did. They're on their way here right now. And they're not planning on taking you alive."

"That's smart. Good strategy."

Bucky's eyes flicked upwards. He could hear movement overhead. Somebody was on the roof.

"This doesn't have to end in a fight, Buck."

"It always ends in a fight." Bucky clenched his fist and prepared for the inevitable.

The first projectile through the window was a stun grenade, easily blocked with Steve's shield. Bucky kicked the second one aside and shielded his face from the blast. But the flash bang came through another window and caught Bucky off guard. Before he could get rid of it, it went off, temporarily blinding him.

There was a loud crash as someone came through the windows, the sound of the door splintering, and the pop of gunfire. Bucky's right side erupted in pain.

And then he woke up on the mattress on the floor of his apartment.

Bucky scrubbed his flesh hand over his face and sighed. When he had woken up for the first time that morning, all he had wanted was one goddamn plum. But he should have known better. His life just wasn't that easy.

He should have headed straight out of town. If he didn't stop at the market, he'd probably make it to the train station before anyone was on to him. But, well, he was tired of running. And as stupid as it was, he did want to see Steve again, even if it got him killed a few times.

So Bucky started every version of the day the same way. If he was going to die, he was at least going to savor his plum first. He lingered out in the open, letting himself be seen and resolutely ignored the news seller dashing off to inform the police of his whereabouts.

After six different deaths, Bucky had gotten the timing down pat and arrived back in his apartment shortly after Steve's arrival.

He watched Steve reach for his memory notebook and grimaced. "Stop touching my stuff, Steve."

Steve turned around and beamed at him. "You know me."
"Course I know you, punk. Can't forget a trouble magnet like you. You're going to get me killed." His eyes narrowed. "Again."

Steve's smile dimmed. "God, Buck. I never meant for anything to happen to you."

"It doesn't matter." He shoved Steve aside and snatched the notebook out of his hands.

"Of course it matters! Buck, I-"

"And tell your fucking cat guy to stay the fuck out of my way."

Steve's forehead creased. "Who?"

"Not with you then. Good."

Steve grasped Bucky's arm. "I'm not letting you kill anyone."

Bucky shrugged him off. "I don't do that kind of thing anymore."

"But there are people-"

"Who think I do. Yeah, I know."

Steve sagged and he made a helpless gesture with one hand. "So I suppose you already know German special forces are on their way here."

"Yeah, no thanks to you," Bucky muttered.

"I'm not with them," Steve said. "I'm trying to protect you from them."

"Well, maybe you'll do a better job of that this time." He punched a hole into the floorboards and pulled out the backpack that held all of his meager supplies.

"Buck," Steve said with a sigh. "There doesn't have to be a fight."

"Bullshit. You don't even believe that." Bucky shifted, eyes flicking from the window to the door. They had maybe seconds before the battle started.

"We can still fix this," Steve pleaded.

"No, we can't. You can fix a busted window. But you can't just plaster over an international incident."

Right on cue, the glass shattered.

Steve swung the shield backwards and the stun grenade exploded in the kitchen. Bucky kicked the second grenade towards Steve and watched with satisfaction as Steve trapped it under his shield.

Bucky moved towards the other window and shoved his mattress up towards the window, blocking the flash bang.

It was always going to be Steve's first time in the fight, but he moved with practiced ease, matching Bucky's movements as if they had choreographed the battle together. God, was Bucky glad to have his best friend backing him up.

While Steve worked to keep the police force occupied, Bucky tossed his backpack out the ruined
window onto the rooftop of the building next door and made his way out of his apartment towards the stairs.

There were swarms of police outside the door and even with the benefit of having gone through the experience several times, it was hard to fight so many people at once. He was really trying not to kill anyone, just get them off his back and keep them down for awhile. But he hit one man hard enough that he went toppling over the railing.

A few steps below, Steve leaned over and grabbed the man before he could plummet to his death. He leveled Bucky with an exasperated look. "C'mon, man."

Bucky gave him a savage grin and elbowed the man he knew was coming up behind him. It had been so long since his days fighting at Steve's side, but this was really bringing back old memories. Maybe once they got out of this place, they could team up again, just like old times.

But now was not the time to be thinking of the future. He had to focus on the present.

Bucky took a deep breath and paused to calculate the trajectory of a jump across the stairwell. It had hurt like a bitch when he had impaled himself on the goddamn railing. And Steve had refused to just shoot him and put him out of his misery. Goddamn stubborn punk. At least the special forces had been all too eager to oblige.

This time, Bucky cleared the jump without issue and proceeded down the stairs to the best level to jump across to the neighboring roof and grab his bag. He'd have to be wary of the guy in the black clawed catsuit once he hit the rooftop, but he wasn't going to let him catch him this time.

Bucky hit the roof on the other side, rolled to his feet and started running. He knew where the cat guy was going to tackle him and he was just going to run a different way and head down the other side of the building, jumping from balcony to balcony until he made it to street level.

The cat guy was still on his tail, but Bucky just kept running. At the edge of his consciousness, he noted that Steve was a little distance behind them, desperately trying to catch up. But Bucky couldn't slow down. He spotted the opening to an underground tunnel and jumped down, dodging traffic.

So far, this was the furthest he had made it without getting killed, but he tried not to get too excited about his chances. He could hear sirens approaching, which didn't bode well for him. A man on foot didn't have much chance outrunning a car. He needed to get faster.

Spotting an oncoming motorcycle, Bucky made his move. He yanked the man off the bike and gunned it.

He was almost out of the tunnel. He could see daylight in front of him. But as soon as he cleared the tunnel, the cat man took a flying leap at his motorcycle and punctured the tires with his sharp claws.

Steve tackled the cat guy to the ground, but it was too late. They were surrounded by police cars. The escape attempt was over.

At least the task force was no longer intent on killing him on sight now. He was arrested, waiting for extradition. And before they took him off to trial, they wanted to interrogate him.

Bucky was led inside a secured room with a big glass pod sitting in the middle. Inside the pod, he was strapped into a complex series of restraints. It was a ridiculous amount of overkill in Bucky's opinion. But whatever it took to make the task force feel better.
A small man in spectacles entered the room with a laptop bag and a clipboard. "Hello, Mr. Barnes. I've been sent by the United Nations to evaluate you. I'm not here to judge you. I only want to ask you a few questions."

Bucky rolled his eyes. "I don't want to talk about it."

The psychiatrist nodded and made a note on his clipboard. "You feel that if you open your mouth, the horrors might never stop. But don't worry. I'm only going to ask you about one."

The psychiatrist pulled a red book out of his bag and held it up so Bucky could see the star on its cover.

Bucky shuddered and swallowed convulsively. He knew that book all too well.

He struggled against his restraints as the man started to read the trigger words. "No! Stop!"

But the psychiatrist read on, seeming to take pleasure in Bucky's pain.

It was the worst fate imaginable. He had worked so hard to free himself from Hydra's programming and now he could feel himself slipping under again.
Bucky woke up slowly, feeling stiff and groggy. But when he tried to stretch out his cramped muscles, he realized his arm was stuck. He looked around in alarm. He was in an unfamiliar warehouse and his metal arm was trapped in some kind of vice. Who the fuck had him captured?

"Cap!" a voice called out. "He's awake."

Bucky relaxed with relief. If he was with Steve, everything was fine.

Steve stepped into the room, followed by his sidekick Sam. "Which Bucky am I talking to?" Steve demanded. "The Soldier or my friend?"

Thank god Bucky had spent the past several months working on getting his memory back. He was eager to tell Steve all the tiny childhood moments he remembered just to show how much he had regained. But he settled with just a few. Just enough that Steve would know.

Sam didn't look convinced, but Steve nodded. "Good to have you back, Buck."

Bucky licked his lips. "What happened when I went under? How many dead?"

Steve looked down at the ground. "Too many."

Bucky squeezed his eyes shut. "Goddamnit. I knew this would happen. All the shit Hydra put inside my head is still there. He just had to say the words." He yanked at his restraints. "I've gotta fix this, Stevie."

"We will," Steve said resolutely. "Tell me who did this. We'll make sure we catch him and bring him to justice."

Bucky shook his head. "That's not good enough. I need to go back and do it over again, make sure no more innocent people die because of me."

"There's no going back, Buck, just going forward. If you tell me-"

"Yes, there is," Bucky said firmly. "There is for me. Just give me a gun and I'll go back and kill the son of a bitch before he gets into my head. It's the only way, Stevie."

"You're not making any sense, Buck."

"Just give me a gun," Bucky said patiently. "Or have your pal over there shoot me. Either way works. I just have to die so I can start this goddamn day over again."

"I know things look pretty bad right now, but I'm not letting you kill yourself," Steve said firmly. "We're going to figure this out."

Bucky rolled his eyes. "I'm not actually going to die. Zola injected me with something the first time he had me. I'm practically immortal now. Every time I die, I just start the day over again."

Steve and Sam exchanged a look.

"I might be fucked in the head, but I'm not crazy. You remember how good I was during the war,
right? All those times you yelled at me for running into an unknown situation? It's because I'd done it all before and knew exactly what was going to happen. Trust me, Stevie. If I can turn time back to this morning, none of those people have to die."

"Buck," Steve said hesitantly. "This morning…"

Bucky groaned. "How long was I out?"

"Almost an entire day."

"Damn it," Bucky growled. "If it's a new day, I can't go back. I can kill myself over and over again, but the furthest I can go back is this morning. Fucking asshole." He tightened his hand into a fist. "We need to stop him before he kills anyone else."

"What is he planning?"

"I don't know. But it's nothing good. He wanted to know about Siberia, where I was kept. I'm not the only Winter Soldier, Steve. There are dozens more, even worse than me."

Steve looked thoughtful. "He said he wanted to destroy an empire."

"And this would be the perfect army to do it. You'd never see them coming."

Steve motioned to Sam and they stepped out of the room for a quick whispered conversation. Steve returned to the room alone and eased Bucky's arm out of the vice. "We're going to get this guy, Buck."

Bucky frowned and rolled his shoulder. "We're going it alone?"

"Sam's going to get us some back-up. Says he knows a guy. But we don't have time to wait on him. We need to get there now and see if we can stop him before he wakes up the others."

Bucky nodded. The man had a significant head start on them, but they had to at least try to bring him down.

Sam had located an aircraft they could borrow and had flown off to provide a diversion while they took off for Siberia.

It was a long flight and Bucky found himself restlessly moving around the cockpit the closer they got to Siberia. He had only unhappy memories of the place and being back brought them all to the surface. Steve spent most of his time telling Bucky about how he had adapted to waking up in the future, all the friends he'd made, and the battles he had fought. Listening to Steve's stories helped ground him a little, but he was still antsy and he knew he wouldn't really feel at ease until he saw what they were dealing with.

They landed a few feet away and proceeded cautiously to the base's secret entrance, carved into the side of a large rock outcropping. The door was ajar, which meant the madman was already inside, but they had expected that.

"He can't have been here more than a few hours," Steve said.

"Long enough to wake them up."

Bucky raised his gun as they walked into the base. There was no telling what they'd find. If the other soldiers were already awake, they could be walking right into an ambush. He moved
carefully down the main corridor, sweeping over every empty room they passed by. So far there had been nothing but dust and cobwebs.

All of sudden there was the creak of metal behind them. Bucky whirled around, gun at the ready. Steve crouched in front of him, his shield up defensively.

But when the doors slid open, it wasn't a Winter Soldier on the other side, but a man in a suit of red and gold armor. Iron Man, Bucky realized. One of Steve's teammates. Former teammates. Bucky eyed him suspiciously.

"Tony?" Steve said in disbelief.

The armor's faceplate slid open and Tony held out his hands placatingly. "At ease, Soldier. I'm not here for you."

"Then why are you here?"

Tony looked away. "It was brought to my attention that maybe, just maybe your pal here's not the man we're after."

"He's not," Steve said firmly.

Tony nodded. "Ross has no idea I'm here. And I'd like to keep it that way. Otherwise I'd have to arrest myself."

Steve lowered his shield. "It's good to see you, Tony."

"You too, Cap." Tony gaze moved up to Bucky and he threw his hands in the air with a scoffing sound. "Hey, Manchurian Candidate, you're killing me. There's a truce here. You can drop the weapon."

Steve motioned for Bucky to lower his gun and he did so reluctantly. He still wasn't convinced Tony was on their side, but he supposed he would have to trust him for now. They'd need all the help they could get against an army of Winter Soldiers.

Tony took the lead as they continued, using his suit's tech to scan for heat signatures. But as they got closer to the containment chamber, where all the soldiers should have been in their cryogenic tubes, the suit only picked up a single heat signature.

At first, Bucky was certain that meant they were too late, that the other Soldiers had been awakened and were long gone to wreak destruction. But as he entered the chamber, he realized all the soldiers were still in their tubes. And there was a small bullet hole in the glass of each tube. They were all dead.

"If it's any consolation, they died in their sleep," a voice rang out through the room. "Do you really think I'd want more of you? But I am grateful to them, because they brought you here."

The lights flicked on, illuminating a man standing behind layers of enforced glass and solid steel, a Russian-made bunker that would withstand all their best efforts to get to him.

Steve stepped forward and tried to talk some sense into him. It was a lost cause, Bucky knew. He was a madman with a mission. All he wanted was revenge and there was nothing he could say to dissuade him.

A tiny computer screen outside of the reinforced bunker flicked on and all three of them crowded
around it to watch the tape.

"I know this road," Tony said.

Bucky recognized the road too. He had taken it on one of his missions, when he had been ordered to kill Howard Stark and make it look like a car accident.

And to his horror, the tape showed the murder in full detail. He could only watch helplessly as his past self beat to death a man he had known in the war and his wife, an innocent woman who had just been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

As the tape ended, Tony lunged for him, but Steve held him back. "Did you know?" Tony demanded.

"I didn't know it was him," Steve said.

Bucky squeezed his eyes shut. Steve had always been a terrible liar. He had known. He had known and just didn't want to tell Tony.

Tony backhanded Steve out of the way and advanced on Bucky again.

Steve threw his shield and it bounced off Tony's head, only a temporary distraction.

"Stay back, Steve!" Bucky shouted. "We need to work through this on our own." He held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. "I'm not that man anymore. I don't want to fight you."

"You killed my mom," Tony gritted out. He aimed his repulsor right for Bucky's face.
Chapter 9

Chapter by Crematosis

Bucky came to back on the aircraft, en route to Siberia.

Now that he knew Siberia was just a trap orchestrated by Zemo, the logical thing would be to just not go and avoid playing into his hands. But every time he tried to reroute the plane back to Germany, T'Challa was waiting to murder him for supposedly killing his father in the embassy explosion. And he'd rather be killed for something he had actually done, rather than one of Zemo's plots.

But he wouldn't have had to put himself in a position to choose between deaths if Steve hadn't been such a fucking idiot.

"Why didn't you tell Tony about his parents?" Bucky demanded.

Steve blanched and his hands jerked over the aircraft's controls. "How on earth do you know about that?"

"Because he just kicked my ass for killing his parents. You're a goddamn idiot, Steven."

"I didn't know for sure it was you," Steve said. "Zola was the one who told us and he could have been lying to get a rise out of me."

"Bullshit. You were afraid Tony'd want revenge and come after me."

"And he did," Steve said defensively. "The cause of death was officially ruled as a car accident. I didn't see any good in telling him differently."

Bucky was still irritated with Steve's rationale, but what was done, was done. He couldn't go back in time and tell Steve it was all going to blow up in his face.

All they could do was move forward and try to convince Tony that Zemo was the real enemy.

It was easier said than done. Tony was an emotional wreck every time he watched the video. There was no reasoning with him. He wouldn't listen to Steve, he wouldn't listen to Bucky. And the more Bucky resisted getting killed, the more brutal the fight got.

Eventually, Bucky realized that they needed to talk things over with him before he saw the video. After the video played, Tony couldn't be reasoned with, but if they could break the news to him gently beforehand, maybe he wouldn't lash out as hard.

Bucky entered the base, walking forward purposefully until he heard the telltale sound of Tony's arrival. Watching Steve and Tony's interactions was a little heartbreaking. To hear Steve tell it, they had once been the best of friends. But now they barely trusted each other.

Tony huffed. "Hey."

"Manchurian Candidate, yeah," Bucky muttered as he lowered his gun. "It wasn't funny the first time."

Steve's eyes widened. "Jesus Christ, Buck. This isn't the first time?"
Bucky rolled his eyes. "No, Stevie. It's not. I told you about the resets."

"I'm sorry, what resets?" Tony said.

Bucky sighed. "Every time I die, the day starts over again. Something Hydra infected me with back in the 40s."

Tony blinked. "So, what you're telling me is that somehow Hydra got ahold of those aliens from Edge of Tomorrow."

Steve frowned. "What aliens?"

"The ones from the movie. Come on, it was a good movie. Tom Cruise and Emily Blunt fighting aliens in these ridiculously improbable battle suits. I mean, those things really were a laugh. Fucking Justin Hammer could have come up with something more."

"Tony," Steve said warningly.

Tony rolled his eyes. "Okay, fine. You're not into mindless entertainment. Just think of it like Groundhog's Day, but with death."

Steve's forehead creased. "What does Groundhog's Day have to do with anything?"

Tony gasped. "You haven't seen that movie either? Jesus Christ, Steve. Have you been living under a rock?"

"No, just under the ice," Steve said irritably.

"I can't believe you two are arguing already," Bucky muttered. "You're friends, aren't you? Or at least, you used to be. Can you at least hold off on the fighting until the asshole tries turning us against each other?"

"The fuck you talking about, Barnes?"

Bucky took a deep breath. "I did some terrible things while I was under Hydra's control. You know this, don't you, Tony?"

Tony nodded. "With your history, everyone just assumed that you were behind the attack in Vienna. But I uncovered evidence showing that wasn't the case. You were being framed. Ross didn't want to hear it, of course. He's intent on bringing you in."

"It's understandable," Bucky said. "I may not have bombed the embassy, but I've done enough killing myself. I deserve to be locked up for life."

"Bucky, no," Steve said. "That wasn't you. You were under Hydra's control."

"Innocent people died because of me. Good people." His eyes flicked to Tony. "People like your parents."

"That's not possible. My parents died in a car crash."

Bucky shook his head. "It was set up to look that way. Hydra wanted them dead and they didn't want any investigation into their deaths."

Tony sucked in a shuddering breath. "You killed my parents?"
"Tony, I-" Steve began.

Tony whirled on him. "Did you know about this?"

Bucky gave him a meaningful look.

Steve swallowed. "Yes."

"And you never thought to tell me? What the hell, Steve? You were always the one going on about how we shouldn't keep secrets from each other. What about all the shit you gave me for Ultron?"

"I know. And I'm sorry, Tony. You're right, I should have told you right away. But I wanted to convince myself that it wasn't true. I've know Bucky my whole life and he's always been a good, decent man. Even knowing what Hydra did to him, I couldn't imagine him killing Howard."

Tony slumped against the wall, his face twisted with misery.

Bucky put a hesitant hand on his shoulder. "Zemo is going to show us a video of your parents' deaths to get us to fight each other. I need you to promise me that you're not going to fall for his bait. He's the real enemy here. Because he's lost his family, he wants to make sure everyone else loses theirs. You and the rest of the Avengers team are Steve's family now. Please don't let Zemo succeed in driving you apart."

Tony blinked furiously. "I..I promise. But dammit, Rogers. We are going to have words after this."

"Whatever you need," Steve said. "If punching me in the face will make you feel better, I'll let you do it."

"Nah," Tony said. "I'd just end up breaking my hand on your stupidly strong skull."

"I've heard that suit of yours packs a pretty powerful punch."

Tony grinned and flexed the fingers of his armor. "Don't tempt me, Rogers."

Bucky led the way on into the containment chamber and waited for Zemo to make his appearance. There was still no way he could see to get into the bunker and take the man out, but maybe if his plot to tear them apart failed, he would simply surrender.

The video began to play and Bucky watched Tony's reaction more than he watched the actual video. Unfortunately, it looked like it was still having a big emotional impact on him.

"You bastard," Tony hissed. He lunged at Bucky.

"Tony, no," Steve said. He stepped in between him and Bucky. "You promised you wouldn't do this."

"You saw what he did to my mom," Tony snarled. "She didn't deserve that."

"No, she didn't," Steve agreed. "But the people you should really be mad at are Hydra. They're the ones who ordered the hit."

Tony shoved him back. "How the fuck can you stand there and tell me you wanted me to believe the best of Barnes? He didn't just kill her, he beat the shit out of her."

"Because I never saw the video!" Steve shouted back.
Tony paused.

"I'm sorry, Tony. I had no idea it was this bad. You should have never had to see this."

"Damn right," Tony growled. "Fuck Zemo. And fuck you too." He pointed an accusing finger at Bucky. "I am never going to forgive you for what you did."

Bucky took a hesitant step closer. "There's no way for me to begin to say how sorry I am-"

"You stay the fuck away from me," Tony snapped. The center panel of his armor glowed for a moment and then a tremendous burst of energy shot out.

Bucky stared at where his metal arm once was. Now all that was left was a smoking stump.

"Tony!" Steve shouted. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"And that goes for you too, Rogers," Tony said. "My father made you that shield and you're best friends with the man who killed him. You don't deserve to carry it."

Wordlessly, Steve let his shield clatter to the ground.

Tony nodded. "Now get the hell out of my sight. You're dead to me."

"Come on, Buck," Steve said quietly. He slung an arm over Bucky's shoulder and steered him towards the exit.
Chapter 10

Chapter by Crematosis

Things were looking grim in the aftermath of Siberia. They were considered wanted fugitives by the United Nations. No matter where they went, they could be arrested as terrorists and locked up for the rest of their lives.

But surprisingly, T'Challa was willing to offer them refuge in his homeland of Wakanda. If anyone found out he was harboring them there, the task force could swoop in and tear the country apart looking for them. But Wakanda was safely isolated from the outside world.

It was just the kind of paradise Bucky was dreaming of.

But before he could settle into his new home, Bucky had to make sure he wasn't going to be a threat to the people of Wakanda. Hydra's programming was still in his head and although the chances of him running into someone else with the red book were rare, the Soldier might get triggered accidentally by some innocent person. And Bucky refused to have any more deaths on his hands.

Shuri, T'Challa's brilliant younger sister was sure she would be able to get all the triggers out of his head. Until then, Bucky felt it was safest to stay in cryo. He spent one last night with Steve and then he went under.

Although he knew Shuri was a brilliant woman and Wakanda's tech was the best in the world, Bucky hadn't really expected for her to find a way to counter his programming. So he was a little surprised to find himself waking up in Shuri's lab.

"My sister has made you well again," T'Challa said proudly.

Shuri nodded. "All of your memories and personality traits are intact and Hydra's programming is gone."

Bucky grinned. She really was a miracle-worker. He remembered everything now, all the bits and pieces he had thought were lost after Hydra. And all the hard-won memories that he had regained were even clearer in his mind. He remembered everything he had done under Hydra's control as well, but those memories were muted, pushed to the back of his mind. It was really better than he could ever have hoped for.

"This is crazy," Bucky said. "It had to have taken you years to accomplish all of this." He looked at Shuri critically. She still looked unbelievably young.

"Oh, please. It took a month tops," Shuri said with a dismissive snort.

Only a month? Holy shit.

He took his first unsteady steps outside of the cryo pod and looked around. "Where's Steve?" He had thought that Steve would have been eagerly at his side the second he heard they were waking him up.

"Captain Rogers is on a mission with Agent Romanoff and Mr. Wilson," T'Challa said. "But we will inform him that you are awake now. I'm sure he will be eager to come see you when he gets back."
Bucky rolled his eyes fondly. Even as a wanted fugitive, Steve just couldn't resist getting involved when people needed help. But god, he loved him for it.

"I can make you a new arm too, Sergeant Barnes," Shuri said eagerly.

Bucky shook his head. "I'm just Bucky now. I'm done fighting."

"As you wish," T'Challa said. "We will find a nice, quiet place for you to finish recovering your strength. My people are good, but we do not get outsiders very frequently. They will no doubt be very curious about your arrival."

To keep Bucky away from the prying eyes of his people, T'Challa brought Bucky out to a hut on the outskirts of the city, far away from anyone else.

"It is a humble dwelling, but from the little I know about you, you are used to making do with very little and the simple life will be no hardship."

"I appreciate it," Bucky said. He shook T'Challa's hand. "Thank you for everything you've done for me."

He settled pretty easily into his new life. As a city boy, he didn't have much experience with farming or growing his own food, but Shuri came out every other day to check up on him for the first week and with her help, he was able to cultivate a small patch of land.

A week later, she eagerly pulled him out of the hut and brought him back to the capitol city to see a package that arrived for him.

"You have a gift here from Captain Rogers," T'Challa said. "He was pleased to hear you are out of cryofreeze and doing well here."

Inside the box, Bucky found several movies and a note from Steve apologizing for not being there to watch them with him. But they were all movies Steve's team had suggested to him as important pop culture moments and Steve liked the idea of passing on the movies that helped him settle into the future with Bucky.

Bucky picked through the DVDs. There were several discs of Star Wars, Star Trek, Rocky, and then Groundhog's Day.

Bucky grinned. "I know which one I wanna watch first. Where's your DVD player?"

"We don't have any of those here. Our tech is far beyond that now." Shuri eyed the discs. "But I believe I can make something work."

An hour later, she had put together a small pod the size of the disc that would enable Bucky to project the movie onto the wall and listen in with headphones.

It really was a fantastic movie. Bucky laughed until he cried. Phil's predicament wasn't quite the same as his, but it was close enough. Just a more comedic take on the situation. Bucky could see why Tony's mind had jumped to the movie. But thinking of Tony's suggestion was a sobering reminder of how everything had gone wrong in his case. Real life didn't always end as happily as it did in the movies.

Bucky watched through three other movies before Shuri and T'Challa insisted that he return to his hut for the night.
Bucky reached for the pistol secured at his hip. "Today has really been fantastic." He spun the gun around in his hand. "I want to do this over again. So, I think I'm going to kill myself now so I can do everything again."

T'Challa's eyes went wide. "Mr. Barnes, please. You have so much to live for."

"I know," Bucky said. "I'm finally free from all the shit Hydra did to me. I feel fucking amazing. For the first time in years, I'm my own person and I could do anything I want. I could definitely live this day for fucking years."

"There are days that I too wish would last for an eternity," T'Challa said carefully. "But humankind is given a finite lifespan. Do not be so eager to rush into the afterlife. There is more than enough meaning to life here in the mortal realm, as short as it may be."

"No, no, no. You've seen Groundhog's Day, right?"

Shuri and T'Challa exchanged a glance.

Bucky sighed. "It's one of the movies Steve sent me. The guy repeats the same day over and over and over again. Same with me, but with more death." He put the gun to his temple. "So, if I pull the trigger-"

T'Challa lunged for the gun. "Mr. Barnes, please!"

"No, it's fine. I'll just wake up back in my hut like the day never happened." He hesitated. "Unless you fixed that when you fixed my brain. Shuri?"

"I…I don't know what you are talking about. There was nothing I saw in my scans that would explain such a phenomenon."

"Huh. Well, better safe than sorry." Bucky holstered his pistol.

Shuri let out a shaky breath.

T'Challa put a hand on his shoulder. "You have been through a great deal of torment, my friend. Now that Shuri has healed your mind, we must work on healing your spirit. I can have someone speak to you about what you are feeling."

"I'm not suicidal," Bucky protested. He pursed his lips. "What am I saying? I've thrown myself into almost certain death for my dumb-ass punk boyfriend probably a thousand times. Maybe I am suicidal."

T'Challa nodded knowingly. "We will work on getting you some help. In the meantime, perhaps it is best if someone else holds onto your weapons."

"Sure," Bucky said agreeably. "I'll put them in the vault."

As soon as T'Challa's back was turned, Bucky pressed the gun to his head. "This conversation never happened."

Bucky sat up in bed and rolled his shoulder. Ugh, maybe T'Challa was right. Maybe humans really weren't meant to live as long as he had.

It had been an amazing day, the best day Bucky had had in a long time. But now he was free from Hydra and free from all the shit they had put in his head. Why couldn't he just let the next day play
Bucky should have known that the peace wouldn't last forever.

The day had started like any other, but everything changed with the arrival of T'Challa and two of his guards, bearing a box with a new metal arm inside. It was darker and sleeker than his previous arm, but Bucky had no doubt that it was twice as deadly.

Bucky's shoulders slumped. "Where's the fight?"

"On its way."

He sighed and reached for the metal arm. T'Challa had promised to respect his wishes and not force him to fight. For him to be insisting on breaking that promise, the situation had to be incredibly serious. And as much as Bucky wanted to stay out of conflict, the Wakandans had been good to him. If the country was in dire trouble, he had to fight.

Bucky was taken up to Shuri's lab to have the arm fitted to his nervous system. And by the time that was finished, T'Challa had sent word that visitors had arrived.

Steve and his team were following T'Challa off the landing pad, discussing the upcoming battle.

"We have my king's guard," T'Challa said. "The border tribe, the Dora Milaje and-" He gestured in Bucky's direction.


"Buck," Steve said warmly. He pulled him into a crushing hug. "How've you been?"

Bucky grinned helplessly. He felt so much better now that Steve was here. He wished the circumstances were better, that they could just spend time just talking and relearning each other's bodies. But there would be time for that once the battle was over.

With a last lingering glance in Bucky's direction, Steve and most of the people he had brought with him headed up to Shuri's lab. Bucky stayed behind on the landing pad with Sam and a man he introduced as Rhodey. The three of them would keep a watch out for the approaching assault while the rest of the team consulted with Shuri on removing retrieving the stone powering their android friend without killing him.

It sounded like a complicated process, but if anybody could do it, Shuri could. They just had to buy her some time to do it.

Before too long, they picked up signs of a large mass entering the atmosphere.

Bucky watched the ship explode against Wakanda's protective dome. "God, I love this place."

"Don't start celebrating yet," Rhodey warned. "There's more incoming."

The other ships landed in the tree-line outside the dome.

T'Challa gathered his troops and Steve summoned his team on to meet the invaders at the edge of the dome. Wanda elected to stay behind with Vision while Shuri worked on him.
The bulk of the army settled several yards back from the dome's edge and Natasha, Steve, and T'Challa walked up to meet the two alien leaders that emerged from the crafts.

Bucky had never had much hope for peaceful negotiations, but only a few words passed between the groups before the alien woman raised her sword in the air and the ships behind her began to unfold.

"They surrender?" Bucky asked sarcastically as Steve stepped back in line with the rest of the army.

"Not exactly."

The trees shook with the force of the horde of lizard monsters that suddenly rushed out of the ships. Most of them were vaporized immediately by the protective dome, but the aliens had sheer numbers on their side. When enough aliens pushed against a certain spot on the barrier, a few of them were able to make it through.

They couldn't depend solely on the dome's protection anymore. It was time to fight.

The lizards were vicious, ugly creatures, but they went down as easily as rabid dogs. They were weak animals, powerful only through sheer numbers. It would be a long, grueling fight against the creatures, but Bucky was sure that with the dome helping to cut down the lizards, it was a battle they would ultimately win.

But then came the report that some of the lizard creatures had started running along toward the backside of the dome. If they circled around the back, there was nothing standing in their way of getting to Shuri, Vision, and Wanda. They needed to keep the enemy in front of them, where they had superior firepower.

To draw the enemy in right where they wanted them, T'Challa opened a small section of the barrier directly in front of the Wakandan army.

Having only a small portion of the barrier open meant they could limit how many of the creatures got in at once and keep them bottlenecked. But there was just too many of them. They were quickly overrun.

And then a massive burst of light cut through the sky. Bolts of lightning flickered from lizard to lizard and huge swathes of them crumpled to the ground. When the light finally faded, the axe-wielding man at the center had to be Thor, the man Steve had called the god of thunder.

They were lucky to have him.

For a moment, the battle had turned in their favor. But then massive spiked wheels erupted from the ground, tunneling beneath the barrier.

"Fall back!" T'Challa shouted.

Bucky scrambled out of the way of one massive wheel and dove down into a grassy hollow, letting another pass harmlessly overhead. Fighting the swarms had been hard enough when they were just dodging lizard creatures, it was going to be damn near impossible to fight around the wheels. And there was no way Bucky could see to take them out. There was no visible pilot, no weak point. But they couldn't keep running from the things forever.

Wanda appeared suddenly in the midst of the battle as a group of wheels converged on Natasha and Okoye. Her hands glowed with red light. And with a single burst of energy, the wheels slammed
back into a cluster of lizards.

Holy shit.

Maybe they shouldn't have been so concerned about the lizard creatures making their way over to Vision. Bucky was pretty sure she could hold them all off single-handedly.

But now that she was on the field, Vision was in trouble.

"Someone get to Vision!" Steve ordered.

It was paramount that they keep Vision's stone out of Thanos' hands. That was their only goal in this battle. If most of them died, at least they died keeping Thanos from wiping out the rest of the universe. Everyone who was able to immediately abandoned their current positions and assured Steve that they were on their way to Vision's location.

After he dispatched the lizard he was fighting, Bucky started to work his way over as well.

Vision was in a lot more trouble than Bucky had originally expected. Thanos had finally made his appearance and was pushing aside anyone that approached him with a wave of his hand.

"Wanda, it's time," Vision said quietly.

Through tears, Wanda activated her powers and aimed one hand directly at the stone in Vision's head. With the other, she held back Thanos' approach.

Bucky couldn't let her do it all on her own. He charged towards Thanos as well and was thrown back in a swirl of purple mist.

When he made it back into the battle, Wanda was weeping over Vision's body and Thanos was fitting the final stone into his gauntlet.

It was over. They had lost the battle and now Thanos was too powerful for any of them to stop.

But then a bolt of lighting split the air and threw Thanos back. Thor had once again shown up to save the day.

Thanos aimed the gauntlet at him, but the axe cut through the blast of energy and embedded itself deep into Thanos' chest.

Bucky held his breath. It was a powerful hit, stronger than any of the rest of them had managed. Thanos looked pretty wounded.

But with a grim smile, Thanos snapped his fingers.

Bucky stared in alarm as his hand disintegrated right before his eyes. "Steve."

Before he could take more than a step in Steve's direction, his legs had disintegrated too and he pitched forward.

Bucky woke up back in his hut.

"Fuck, that was weird." He held his hand up in front of his face, cautiously wiggling his fingers.

But at least it hadn't hurt. Bucky had been stabbed or shot for a majority of his deaths. It was actually kind of nice to go painlessly for once.
And at least he knew exactly what to do differently. All he had to do was convince Wanda and Vision to stay with Shuri until the stone was removed and destroyed. Easy enough. Thanos would still be incredibly fucking powerful and they were still going to have a tough time defeating him, but as long as he didn't have the last stone they at least had a chance.
Now that Bucky knew how the battle had gone wrong, he was eager to get back into the fighting. When T'Challa and his guards started making their way to his hut, he met them on the way. "Alright, give me the arm."

T'Challa looked slightly taken aback. "Sergeant Barnes, I-"

"Hurry it up," Bucky said impatiently. "The fight's coming and I want to be in good shape when Stevie gets here."

T'Challa and his guard exchanged a glance, but they led him to Shuri and from there, Bucky quickly rushed to the landing strip to meet up with Steve and the rest of the team.

Steve beamed when he saw him. "Buck. How've you been?"

"Good," Bucky said. His expression shifted to Wanda. "I need to talk to her for a moment."

"Why? Did something happen?"

"You could say that." He walked closer to her. "You can read minds, right? I don't like people messing around in my head, but..."

Steve nodded. "Go ahead, Wanda."

Wanda moved her hands over his face, her fingertips lighting up with red light.

"Oh," she gasped. "I did not know."

"Yeah, well, now you do. So it's really important that you stay with Vision the whole time. Don't leave Shuri's lab, no matter what. The second you leave that spot, it's all over."

She nodded. "I will stay with him then, until the stone is destroyed."

Bucky felt reasonably confident. Wanda had deep feelings for Vision. She didn't want him to die. So he was pretty sure knowing what he did, that she would stay put. And he could count on her to keep Vision protected while the rest of them fought off the lizard army.

As long as they kept the barrier closed, the lizards would be thinned out and they would just all keep fighting until Shuri let them know that the stone was removed and destroyed.

"Brother!" Shuri shouted over the comms. "They've broken in. We are being overrun."

"Hang on," T'Challa said. "We are on our way to you right now."

There was an excruciating scream and then the comm line went dead.

Bucky squeezed his eyes shut. Her death was on him. He turned his gun on himself.

The next day, he resolved that as long as Wanda remained in Shuri's lab with Vision, he would let the rest of the battle play out as it had. Fighting the swarms of lizards hadn't been a pleasant
experience, but if they kept the creatures occupied, they would keep them away from Shuri.

Without Wanda's assistance with the wheels, the battle was going to be a lot rougher. Sam and Rhodey did what they could, focusing all their firepower on the wheels and the rest of them simply ran and dodged out of the way.

But then Thanos appeared in the middle of the battle. With waves of his hand, he scattered the team right and left and kept walking all the way into the capitol without opposition.

Bucky sighed as his hand began to turn into dust.

Maybe he was going about it all wrong. Wanda was extremely powerful. Maybe the most powerful member of their team. They could use her on the battlefield. If she used her considerable power to wipe out most of the lizards, maybe that would buy them enough time until Thanos' appearance.

So Bucky stayed with Vision while Wanda entered the battlefield. From the window, he could see Wanda creating swathes of destruction through the enemy ranks. It had been a good tactical decision.

And Shuri seemed to be making good progress removing the stone.

"He's here!" Bruce shouted suddenly. "It's Thanos."

"We're out of time," Bucky groaned.

Vision bowed his head. "Do what needs to be done."

Bucky called Wanda back to the lab to give her a chance to say a last teary goodbye to Vision and he gently removed the stone from Vision's head so she wouldn't have to do it. And once it was done, he held out the stone for her to destroy.

"That's it," he said. "Thanos can't get his hands on it now."

"We have incoming," Shuri said urgently.

The walls of the lab split aside like they were made of tissue paper and Thanos stepped inside.

"It's gone," Bucky said fiercely. "The stone is destroyed."

"I think you'll find that it isn't," Thanos said. He tilted his wrist, the gauntlet lit up with green light and the fragments of the stone knit back together.

Son of a bitch. This was going to be a lot harder than Bucky had anticipated.

If they couldn't destroy it, there was no way they could prevent Thanos from taking the stone. Whether or not Shuri could remove it was a moot point now.

Their only chance was killing Thanos before he got his hands on the stone. And Bucky had already seen firsthand just how well those attempts had gone.

But he wasn't giving up.

Bucky wasn't the tactician Steve was, but he had a few plans. He knew where Thanos would make his appearance and if the team coordinated their efforts, maybe they would be able to defeat him.

But it seemed like no matter what they did, they just weren't strong enough. Bucky had even
grabbed Thor when he landed and steered him straight over to where Thanos would be. And after
Thor had made the initial strike against him, the rest of the team swarmed him. But it was no use.
The battle always ended with his body slowly dissolving into dust.

And Bucky was getting tired of fighting the same guy over and over again. He needed a break.

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Bucky didn't even wait for Steve to get off the jet before he rushed forward.

Steve's eyes lit up. "Buck."

Bucky allowed himself to be pulled into a crushing embrace and then schooled his face into a
serious expression. "I've got to show you something.

Steve's smile faded. "Of course, Buck. Let me just-"

"Shuri can get the stone out of Vision's head," Bucky said quickly. He tugged at Steve's hand.
"Come on. It's important."

"Captain Rogers, this is not the time," T'Challa said. "War is almost upon us."

"We'll be right back," Steve assured him. "Get Vision to Shuri and start working on that stone.
We'll join you when we can."

Bucky raced towards his hut, dragging Steve along behind him. It was sweet that his Stevie had so
much trust in him, but eventually he was going to get suspicious and demand to know what was
going on.

Before Steve could even open his mouth to question what they were doing in Bucky's hut, Bucky
tackled him, pushing him down into the soft furs that made up his bedding and straddling his
waist.

"What's gotten into you?" Steve demanded. "I thought you were going to show me something
important."

"I am," Bucky said with a cheeky grin. He reached down to unzip his pants. "My dick."

"James Buchanan Barnes," Steve said sternly. "We are not sneaking off in the middle of battle to
have sex."

"Yes, we are," Bucky hissed. "Do you remember the last time we had sex?"

"The day before you went back in cryo."

"Yeah, and that was a year ago."

"Six months," Steve said with a fond eye roll. "Don't be so dramatic, Buck."

"A year," Bucky repeated.

Steve's face fell. "Has it been that many for you?"

Bucky nodded.

"Jesus, Buck. I'm so sorry."
Bucky patted Steve's cheek. "We'll figure something out. But in the meantime, I think I deserve a little break." He started stripping Steve out of his uniform. "I'm pretty sure you could use a break, too."

Steve said nothing as Bucky finished undressing the two of them, his body tense and his eyes unfocused.

Bucky licked up Steve's abs. "Relax, baby. I'm going to take good care of you."

There was the sound of gunshots in the distance, Wanda's agonized scream.

Steve flinched. "Buck, I really think we should-"

"Later," Bucky murmured. He pressed a kiss to Steve's jaw. "You know I'm just going to die in a couple minutes anyway and it'll reset. None of our friends will actually die."

"You don't know that, Buck. What if we've gone too far from the battle and you get spared?"

"It's not going to matter where I am. Thanos is going after the whole universe, remember? We tried to fuck off to France a couple cycles ago. I crumbled into dust halfway into the flight. So did our pilot." He cupped Steve's face in his hands. "It doesn't matter where we go. I'm always going to die, along with half the people in the universe."

"Then we really need to get back out there and fight."

"We will," Bucky said. "On the next round. Just let me have a break, baby. Just one day to recover from all the shit I've been through already." He gave Steve his best puppy dog eyes.

Steve was silent for a long minute. "Alright," he said finally.

Bucky groaned as Steve rolled his hips upwards. "That's it, Stevie. You feel so good. Can't wait to get you inside me. Want you to fuck my brains out. Want you to fuck this stupid battle out of my head."

Steve rushed through the prep work, fumbling with the container of lube.

Bucky grinned. Dirty talk had always been Steve's undoing.

Steve pushed into him in one smooth stroke and Bucky keened.

God, he had missed this. The wonderful feeling of fullness, the burning stretch, the pain and pleasure mingling into one.

Steve started out slowly, but he quickly picked up the pace.

Bucky groaned and tipped his head back. He felt so good. The rest of the world was fading away and it was just him and Steve slotting their bodies together. He felt like he was floating.
Abruptly, Steve's thrusts halted.

Bucky rolled his hips impatiently. "C'mon, Stevie. Why'd you stop? We were just getting to the good part."

Steve's eyes were wide with terror. "Bucky, your arm."

Bucky glanced down at the dust cascading from his shoulder blade. Fuck, he thought he'd have more time.

He woke up fully clothed, erection gone as if it had never been. But the sexual frustration still crackled under his skin like electricity. In no time at all, he was hardening again.

"Goddamnit," Bucky growled as he took himself in hand.

Next time, he was jumping Steve's ass the second he walked off that jet.
Bucky was tired. So goddamn tired.

He didn't want to get out of bed. When T'Challa and his guards arrived bearing his new arm, he just wanted to roll over and ignore them. What was the point of fighting? He was just going to die anyway, over and over and over again.

Even the thought of seeing Steve again did little to cheer him up.

Bucky tried to plaster on a smile for Steve, but the love of his life knew him all too well and sent the rest of the men on ahead to talk to Shuri while he pulled him aside.

"What's the matter, Buck?"

"I'll be fine, Stevie."

"Well, you're not fine right now," Steve said firmly. He put a hand on Bucky's shoulder. "You know you can talk to me about anything. No matter what it is, I'm here for you."

Bucky clung to him. "Tell me something about the war."

Steve's brow furrowed. "I thought Shuri said you got all your memories back."

"I did. But they're so distant now. If you don't want to talk about the war, then tell me something else. Tell me about when we were kids. Tell me about the, the thing in Sokovia. Something, anything. I just want to remember something besides this same fucking day."

Steve cupped his hands around Bucky's face. "Buck. Look at me. How many times has it been?"

"I don't remember."

Steve squeezed his eyes shut. "Oh, Bucky."

"It's like I've been living this same goddamn day for my entire life. Everything else is so distant now, like a dream. One day it's all going to be so faded that I can't remember anymore."

"That's not going to happen," Steve assured him. "We'll figure it out eventually."

"I doubt it. I could live through this whole battle 14 million times and we'd still lose every goddamn time. What's the point? Nothing I do is going to change a goddamn thing."

"There's always 14 million and one," Steve said with a forced smile.

Bucky planted himself in Thanos' path. "Just give up now, asshole. There's no version of this fight where you'll win. Sure, you'll manage to destroy half the world, just like you've always wanted. But you're never going to be able to savor your victory. A man named Zola infected me with something, way back in 1945. Something that resets the day every time I die."

"Bucky, no!" Steve shouted. He scrambled to his feet. "There's gotta be another way."
"There is no other way. We've tried hundreds of options. None of them work. This is our last play, Steve. It's the end of the line."

He turned back to Thanos.

"All those people will die over and over and over again for the rest of eternity and their deaths will all be meaningless. You'll never get your perfect world. The second I die, all your plans die as well."

"Then I will take you back to when you were made and unmake you," Thanos growled. The time gem glowed.

Bucky closed his eyes and steeled himself. This was it. Thanos would take him all the way back to the war and then he would see. He would see how the Nazis wiped out millions of people. How all that senseless death didn't solve a damn thing. And if that didn't convince Thanos not to kill half the universe, Bucky didn't know what would.

If Thanos ended up killing him for real, so be it. Bucky was tired of fighting a battle he couldn't win.

"I'm not letting you do this," Steve shouted.

Bucky gasped at the sudden, sharp pain through his abdomen. He looked down and saw a knife protruding from his stomach. Steve's hand was wrapped around the hilt.

Steve. Steve had stabbed him.

Bucky sucked in a pained breath and pressed a hand over the wound. The blood was welling up between his fingers, bright red.

"Steve, how could you?"

Steve's eyes were wet with tears. "I'm sorry, Buck. But I'm not going to lose you here. This isn't the end of the line."

He twisted the knife and Bucky cried out in agony.

Thanos growled out something about the time stone, but it was too late. Bucky could feel himself slipping away.

He woke up back in his hut. Wearily, he scrubbed a hand over his face. Damn Steve. He should have known the punk would pull a stupid stunt like that.

He could have just tried the same thing again. Since he knew Steve would try and stop him, he would just have to be faster, just have to fight him back when he tried to get in his way.

But the anguish on Steve's face was something he just couldn't handle.

Bucky moved through the battle on autopilot. If the lizards killed him, so be it. If the wheels killed him, so be it. Thanos had killed him enough times already. Maybe some of the other hazards of the battle deserved a chance.

Bucky watched as Thor brought his axe down right into Thanos' chest. Seeing the blade sunk into the titan's chest made his own chest twinge. He ran his hand over the spot where Steve had stabbed him. There was no scar there, nothing to show it had ever happened.
Thor twisted the axe deeper into Thanos' chest and he cried out in pain. But through the pain he whispered a few words Bucky could only make out when he got closer.

"You should have gone for the head."

Was it really that easy? Could the battle really be solved with a single blow?

And it all depended on Thor being able to strike the decisive blow. From what Bucky had seen, he had thrown the axe to block Thanos’ energy blast. The axe had only hit him where it had hit him because of the trajectory of both attacks.

But if he could get Thor to ambush him the second he stepped from the portal and slice off his head before he could get to Vision and the final stone, there really might be a chance they could do this.

He touched Thor's arm. "Listen to me carefully. I know where Thanos is going to be and I know how we need to destroy him."

Maybe it would work, maybe it wouldn't. But the thing that mattered was there was hope again.
Tony couldn't believe Strange had just given up.

For all his big talk about doing whatever it took to keep the stone safe, he had handed it over the moment Thanos had been about to kill him. And now Thanos was one step closer to wiping out the galaxy.

"Why did you do that?"

"We're in the end game now."

"End game?" Tony demanded. "What's that supposed to mean? Game over, Thanos wins, we all lose?"

"We'll see in just a minute," Strange said.

"Er, what are we looking for?" Peter asked hesitantly.

"Nothing. If nothing happens, we'll have survived the apocalypse. If it all goes wrong, most of us will perish."

For a long, tense few minutes, everyone waited, eying each other for signs that something was going to happen.

At last, Strange sighed with relief and leaned back against his rock. "It's all over. I knew Mr. Barnes would come through eventually," he said with a smile.

"Barnes? How do you know him?"

"I don't," Strange said. "But considering how he just saved the entire universe, I'd like to make his acquaintance."

"There is no way Bucky Barnes saved the entire universe," Tony said indignantly.

"It took him a couple deaths, but he got there in the end. I think he's suffered enough to atone for Siberia, don't you?" Strange said with an enigmatic smile. "Now, I don't know what plans the rest of you might have, but I need to retrieve my stone. Thanos might be dead, but there's no shortage of threats in the universe. Someone will always want to take his place."

Tony watched him leave. Barnes, really? He didn't seem like the savior of the universe type. But if Strange was right, Tony really owed him an apology for Siberia.

Ugh, he hated apologizing.