**A Handful of Sand**

by *littleblackfox*

**Summary**

*Shall I tell you a story? Most people think time is like a river that flows swift and sure in one direction. But they are wrong. Time is an ocean in a storm.*

**Notes**

I should, said Fox, write a Prince of Persia au. And there was no one around to knock some sense into me.

The year is 1747, and Bucky lives on the shores of the Black Sea, in a region that has been in the possession of the Persians, Byzantines, Ottomans and pretty much anyone with itchy feet and habit for collecting countries like trading cards. He is neither a Prince, nor a Persian.

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Dobruja

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Shall I tell you a story? Most people think time is like a river that flows swift and sure in one direction. But they are wrong. Time is an ocean in a storm.*

* The wind picks up, driving a little squall across the water, and the bero rolls with the waves, threatening to send Bucky over the side. He spreads his feet a little further apart, boot knocking against the oars tucked along one side. He moves with the rocking of the boat instead of against it, and starts to gather up his net.

The bero is small compared to the other fishing boats that trawl the edges of the Black Sea, the Buss and the Doggers that he catches sight of in the distance, silhouetted against the pre dawn light as they head further out to sea.

Bucky keeps to the shallows with his fishing net, a wide circle of patched and knotted mesh scarce three meters across, lead weights hanging from the fringe like the gold coins that hang from his mother’s best shawl. Fastened to the center is a long rope, the other end tied around Bucky’s wrist in a slipknot. He gathers up the rope in even loops and grasps the knotted mass at the center, taking it up in his fist. The net hangs from his hand like a veil as he shakes it out, checking there’s no debris caught in the mesh. Satisfied, he folds it up in his free arm and turns to the water.

After a few minutes of waiting, stillness falling over him like a familiar cloak, he sees a disturbance in the water ahead. He shifts his weight, his good foot forward, and casts the net, flicking his wrist with ease born of practice and unfurling the net in a perfect circle. It lands smoothly, the weights pulling the edges down, and Bucky gives the rope around his wrist a few gentle tugs, letting the weights and the mesh do their work.

He moves quickly to haul the net in, pulling hand over hand as water splashes over his feet and puddles in the boat. It’s not enough to sink him, so Bucky keeps pulling, lifting the bottom edge of the net into the boat and shaking out the contents. A few handfuls of fish tumble around him, silver and bright, and he picks through them, tossing the ones he can’t sell back into the water to swim another day. The rest he strikes behind the eyes with the handle of his knife, killing them instantly, and drops into the buckets.

He can’t bear to let them die slowly, thrashing and gasping for breath. It reminds him too much of his father.

Bucky pushes the thought away and gathers up his net again.

The sun creeps upwards as he works, the waves tipped with gold. After a long morning Bucky has little to show for it - a handful of stragglers along with a few larger fish spear caught, all quickly dispatched and stored in buckets of seawater. There had been a shoal of mackerel not long ago, too small for his net, so he could only trim his sail and keep searching as they swarmed past.

With the net weighing heavy in his hands, dripping saltwater onto the the deck, Bucky stares out to sea, becoming lost in the reflection of light on water, how it shimmers like gold.

“Hail and well-met!” a voice bellows, and Bucky snaps to attention, looking over to see a ship approaching.

Bucky can cross the length of his slender boat in a few strides, its prow sharp as a blade as it cuts through the waves. The oncoming ship towers over him, four times in length and width, with three broad sails. Fashioned after the longboats of the Captain’s homeland, it’s name is carved along the
prow in bold slashes, flanked by engravings of great black birds. The Bifrost. Where Bucky casts his little net by hand this ship unloads great weighted nets, dragging them along the sea bed in search of salmon and cod. Where Bucky takes his harvest home to his mother to sell at market they gut and salt their catch on ship, to be stored in barrels and sent inland. Bucky has no stomach for the marketplace or the fat, miserly townfolk who haggle over the price of fish. “Sastipe!” Bucky calls back. The ship is close enough for him to pick out Captain Odinson by the plaitings of his golden hair. Though it sticks in his throat to say it, Bucky likes him. The Northman is hard working and generous, and care little for whispered rumours and pointed fingers. He treats Bucky and his people the same as everyone else he encounters, and that is a rare thing. Maybe that is what has Bucky gesturing north. “Odinson, you catch mackerel, yes?” The Captain leans over the gunwhale, eyes bright. “If the gods bless me with such bounty.” “O Del’s bounty lies a league north.” Bucky shrugs, the weights of his net clattering on the deck. “At least they were an hour ago ago.” Odinson whoops with joy, and turns to yell orders at his crew. A smile tugs at Bucky’s mouth as the ship makes a slow turn, the Captain shouting his thanks as they sail away. “Baxtalo,” Bucky murmurs, and watches until they are beyond his sight.

With the passing of the ship all the fish have no doubt been scared away, so Bucky uses his paddles to turn the prow of his bero back to the shore, and sets his sail for home. He unfastens the rope from his wrist at last, rubbing absently at where his skin is red and sore. Rope fibers and salt water gnaw at his flesh like a set of blunt teeth, a wound that never seems to heal. The net he gathers up one more time, checking for damage. There are a few tears here and there, things that he will set to mending once he is home. Were the net to break it would not be the end of the world, he still has his spear, they will not starve. All the same, he checks his net each day, and repairs it as best as he can.

The wind picks up a little, blowing through the thin cotton of his shirt, but he makes good time, pulling up the sail again when he is in sight of land. The town of Constanţa a dark line between the sea and the sky, and he casts his net once more. A few more fish are added to the buckets, silver and bright. The ones with burnished red scales and wide mouths he tosses back into the sea. The townsfolk say they are good for eating, but Bucky isn’t hungry enough to try. With their broad, pink-tinged fins they look like the Ottoman warships that used to patrol these waters, and so long as he has enough to feed his kin and bring coin from the market, he will let them swim. If he harbours some fanciful idea that the Ottoman Navy had been turned into fish, and eating them might encourage them to turn back again, he doesn’t share it with anyone.

He considers his catch, more buckets full than empty, and returns to shore. The flat base of the boat makes it well suited to beach landings, and Bucky goes with the wind to the stretch of white sands, jumping into the shallows to pull it through the foam dressed waves and onto land. His mother is usually waiting for him, ready to take the catch to market, but today it is his sister, Rebecca. She is not of age yet, so her dark hair flows freely, whipping around her face in the wind, the hem of her skirt dancing like a dervish. She comes paddling out to meet him, bare toes digging into the sand and skirts soaking up seawater, and Bucky knows better than to brush her aside. There is a length of rope knotted to the prow, and he passes the end to her, letting her pull the bero the last few feet until it’s above the tideline.

Mother would complain about her getting her hands dirty and her skirts wet, say that a woman’s work is the catch not the catching, but Bucky sees no harm in it. Soon enough she’ll come of age, and her long hair will be hidden under a scarf. Soon enough she will move into another kumpania, a good one if Bucky has a say in the matter.
There will be a darro paid, of course, a compensation. But there is not gold enough on this forsaken
earth to equal her worth.
At least whatever coin they scrape together will never go to a bride for him. No daughter would take
his hand, nor would he offer it, his heart long since burned to cinder.
“Good catch?” Rebecca asks, peering into the bero.
Bucky nods, lifting out the first of the buckets, the lightest one, and handing it over. “What are you
doing out here? Did mother send you?”
Rebecca nods, gesturing for another bucket. “You have a visitor.”
He nudges her aside, taking the remaining two buckets and striding up the beach. “Trouble?”
“Isn’t it always?”

Trouble comes riding a dappled grey mare. Bucky finds the horse before he does it’s master, setting
down his buckets to stroke its nose.
The camp is a rough circle of tents and vardos on the edge of the woods, down past the dunes but
still in sight of the sea. Despite the early hour everyone is awake, a handful gathered around the fire
chasing off the morning chill. The twins are busy packing up their goods to take to market, Wanda
with her embroidery and lace, Pietro with his carved wooden bowls and pegs. While most families
keep to a single caravan or large tent, Bucky’s mother and sister share a vardo while he has a small
ten tent near the entrance to the camp, and it is there that company awaits him.
There is no sense in dragging things out, so Bucky gives the horse a last scratch under the chin
before walking over to his tent. He pulls back the heavy canvas flap and ducks inside.
A man sat on a rug before the fire rises to his feet, knocking over the bag at his side in his haste. He
wears a felt cap, and snatches it off his head before giving Bucky a short bow. All the while Bucky’s
mother watches from the darkest recess of the tent, hands pressed to her stomach though her features
betray nothing.
His trouble looks scared. Why do they have to look so scared?
“Besh telé.” Bucky gestures to the ground, and the man sits again.
His clothes are travel stained but hard wearing, his mouse-brown hair cropped short. Bucky’s darker
hair is too long to be considered decent but decency be damned, curls around his ears and tickles his
collar. The man stares at it as if it holds secrets.
Bucky looks over at his mother, and nods to the entrance. She follows him, making sure not to pass
between him and the visitor as they slip outside.
“What do you know?” Bucky murmurs.
“Only that it is a matter of honour.” She puts her hand to his chest, pressing harder than is
comfortable. “Enough to convene a kris. Your name was mentioned.”
Bucky draws his lower lip between his teeth, and resists the urge to bite down until it bleeds. He can
see the twins waiting by the fire with their baskets of goods. Beside them Becca watches curiously.
“Go to market,” he says at last. “Sell what you can, salt the rest.”
“Bucky-”
He kisses her forehead. “I’ll take care of it.”
She gives him a stern look, but finally gives the center of his chest a pat in silent acceptance, her
rough fingers warm against the sea-damp fabric of his shirt. She doesn’t tell him to be careful, instead
calling to his sister to help with the catch.
Bucky waits for them to leave before going back inside, slipping between the folds of canvas.

The man starts to rise again, and Bucky motions for him to stay put, walking past the drapes that
cover his bed to a small wooden cabinet in the corner. He fetches two glasses and a bottle, bringing
them over to the fire.
It is a sign of hospitality to offer a glass of wine or brandy to your guest. Bucky has neither, and
hopes the sour, resinous brew the locals favour will suffice.
“Pi?” Bucky holds up the bottle, and the man nods. “I should offer bread and salt, but I have
neither.” Bucky shrugs, filling the glasses to the brim. “Here.”
“Thanks.” The man takes the glass, downing half the contents. The other half he sprays into the fire with a gagging, anguished yelp.
“It’s not poison, it just tastes like it is.” Bucky’s mouth crooks up as he takes a sip. “More?”
The man glares at the bottom of his glass, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “Please.”
Bucky snorts, pouring him another full measure before setting the bottle down before the fire and then himself, though he feels like he would have to roll in the coals themselves to feel warm.
The man sips carefully this time, though his eyes still water at the taste. “If their women are like their wine,” he says, smacking his lips. “I won’t be staying long.”
Bucky snorts, taking another sip. It is foul on the tongue, with a lingering aftertaste of plums, but it chases away the chill. “What’s your name, brother?”
“Barton,” comes the quick response. A horse trader, which explains the fine mare outside.
Bucky pours himself another drink. “What brings the Lovari out here?” he asks before handing over the bottle.
“A matter of honour.” Barton pours himself a measure. “Brought before the council of elders by our brothers from the east. Your name was mentioned.”
“Of course it was,” Bucky mutters, more to himself than anything.

“You have a… a reputation.” Barton hesitates, and Bucky says nothing, his fingers tightening around the glass. “Is it true what they say about you, that you’re descended from the Rajput? That you killed three—”

“Why are you here?” Bucky snaps.
To his credit Barton only flinches a little, spilling liquor between them. “Trouble in Persia. Three brothers have been taken by the Shah. He had them snatched off the street and taken to his palace in Khorasan.”
The news is troubling. Rom suffer wherever they roam, but he had heard those in Persia suffered the least.
Bucky sets down his glass, picking his words with care. “I am sorry for our brothers, but our people are taken off the street every day. The Sultan tolerates us so long as we pay taxes, but beyond the Empire is Amblayamásko-kasht. So what business is it of mine?”
“And don’t I know it,” Barton mutters under his breath before trying to appeal to Bucky’s better nature. “They are our brothers. Don’t you care?”
“I would weep for them,” Bucky says, a little more gently. “But what use are tears in a desert?”
“The brothers,” Barton adds, casting his gaze around as his voice drops low. “Are Zagari.”
No amount of good brandy and sweet wine could chase away the chill that spreads through Bucky’s chest at those words. Cold like the bones of winter, like the very depths of the sea, spreads through his lungs and blossoms out onto his skin, the hairs on his arms rising up.
“Goldsmiths?” Bucky asks warily.
Barton nods. “So I am told. The krisnitorya said they were Morghuli.”

Bucky is on his feet before the word has left Barton’s mouth. There is no sense in asking if he’s sure, if there has been some mistake. Barton wouldn’t be here if the kris were not sure of it.
He curses, low and vehement, dragging his fingers through his hair. “What happened?”
“They overwintered in Qazvin,” Barton reaches into the bag at his side to retrieve a map, ink-spattered and worn through in places. He spreads it out on the rug, where Bucky can make out the blue inkblot of the Black Sea, and the broad swipe of the Caspian Sea to the right. Barton jabs his finger towards the southern reach.
“When they didn’t take to the road again in spring a contingent was sent in search of them. The whole kumpania was dead, slaughtered. When they asked around, people said the Shah had come in the dead of night. Sent soldiers to their doors, told them to say nothing of what they saw.”
“Soldiers,” Bucky murmurs, pulling the map closer. If the people were warned to keep silent, then why did they speak up?
The liquor in Bucky’s stomach turns to acid.
“And the contingent?” he asks slowly. “Where are they now?”

Barton’s expression turns furtive. “They were found on the road to Jordan.”

Bucky doesn’t need to ask. He knows they are dead. They were dead the moment they entered Qazvin, they just hadn’t known it yet.

“Were you followed?” he asks instead.

Barton grabs the bottle and pours himself another drink. “They say the Shah has spies everywhere. I was followed for a while by some merchants on the road, but I gave them the slip, left them running circles in Aleppo.”

There is a choori, sharp and wicked, stowed in Bucky’s boot. If the fool has tracked spies into his home Bucky will cut his throat and drop his body in the sea, kinfolk or not.

“Were you followed here?” Bucky hisses.

“No.” Barton gulps down his liquor and gives a sharp little shake of his head. “I am certain of it. And I’ll not be going back there. I’ll go west. Home.” He gives Bucky a wary look. “But they know someone is coming.”

Bucky breathes a little easier in spite of the warning. His people are safe. His sister is safe. And if the Shah has spies then he will have to be cunning. He will have to travel by night, avoiding the roads and townships. Bucky stares down at the map for far too long before sitting down and scrubbing his hands over his face. Khorasan lies far beyond the Black Sea and the Ottomans, out in the further reaches of the Persian Empire, but it might as well be the other side of the world. If he walked out the door now he would not arrive there before summer’s end, nor would he be in any condition for fighting. And where would he sleep? What would he eat? He would die on his feet and the world would die with him. With a little persuasion Barton would part with his horse, but what is one horse when faced with such a distance?

O Del, grant me wings, so that I might fly to their aid.

“I’ve heard tales of the Morghuli,” Barton says slowly. “The goldsmiths of the east. They dug too deep into the earth and—”

“Hold your tongue,” Bucky snaps. “Lest someone cut it out.”

Barton clamps his mouth shut, and Bucky rakes his fingers through his hair, still damp with salt-spray.

“Wait here,” he orders, rising to his feet and heading outside. It is only when he is certain no one is there to watch him that he breaks into a run.

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He cannot walk, and no horse of flesh and bone could carry him such a distance. But what about a ship?

His bero, trustworthy as it is, is built for fishing. Small and steep-sided, it is meant for rivers and shallows, not the open sea, and the first storm he met would tear it in two. But he knows a Captain with a fine ship and a good heart.

Where his bero can fetch up on any stretch of beach, the Bifrost needs a dock, so Bucky makes his way across town, skating around the marketplace and the traders setting up their wares and down to the dockyard. With luck the Bifrost will still be moored up, the day’s catch unloaded under the Captain’s watchful eye.

Down in the harbour sturdy wooden jetties spear out from land into the clear blue waters, with ships of every size gathered along each side. Twin masted ketch jostle alongside single masted dories, fishing boats much like Bucky’s own. Further out are where larger ships might dock, the brigs and barques. Deck hands yell back and forth as they unload their cargo; barrels of fish and lamprey, woven baskets with a few sullen, snapping crabs trapped inside. There are as many people loading as there are unloading, barrels and crates being hauled up onto boats by rope and pulley, and Bucky darting between them all, his boots clattering on the broad wooden planks.

At last he spies the Bifrost, out on the last jetty, and hurries over, raising his hand to the bored
looking crewman leaning against the gunwhale.

“Hail and well met!” Bucky shouts up.

The crewman, his hair black with grease, his features pinched, gives Bucky a slow once over. “Well, that seems unlikely.”

Before Bucky can say something unwise, the Captain comes over to see what’s going on. The amiable grin he bears in the face of all things only grows wider when he sees Bucky.

“If it isn’t our seagull.” He gestures further down the side of the ship, where barrels of mackerel are being carried down a set of planks. “Come aboard.”

Bucky waits for the last deckhand to come down the ramp with his cargo before heading up. The planks under his boots are deeply ridged and thick enough to not bow under the weight, and the steep drop into the water either side gives Bucky no pause. Odinson waits for him at the top, and reaches out to grasp Bucky’s forearm as he steps onto the deck.

“Seagull?” Bucky raises his eyebrows, and the Captain throws an arm around his shoulders with a laugh.

“A seagull never strays far from land,” he says with too much warmth for Bucky to take offence. “And shows the keen-eyed fishermen where to cast his net.”

He walks Bucky along the deck to the cabin at the rear, and the crewman who had looked at Bucky so disdainfully draws alongside them.

“Better a gull than an albatross.” He gives the Captain a dour look.

“This is Loki. My brother, my council, and my dearest friend.”

Loki makes a show of being offended, but Bucky has a sister and knows better. “Thor. My idiot.”

They are as different as day and night, but Bucky doesn’t question that they are kin. His own kumpania is bound together by more than just blood.

“Time and time again,” the Captain, Thor, pats Bucky’s back hard enough to make him stumble. “I have entreated you to drink with us. What brings you now?”

Bucky steps out of his reach, turning to face him. “I seek passage.”

Thor crosses his arms, regarding Bucky with the same shrewdness as his brother had. “You have the bearing of one looking for trouble.”

Bucky gnaws on his lip, his silence answer enough.

“I see.” Thor and Loki exchange a glance, something unspoken passing between them. “And will that trouble find its way back to me and mine?”

Bucky nods, much to his surprise. But Thor has his respect, and with it must come his honesty.

“Hmn.” Thor rubs his beard. “And where is this trouble you seek?”

“Khorasan.”

“You’ll find it deserted,” Loki remarks before Thor can ask why. “The Shah has abandoned his palace, and taken his retinue to Babylon.”

“He’s moved to Baghdad?” Bucky asks. It’s less of a journey than to Khorasan, but he still can’t afford to be idle.

“You misunderstand me,” Loki wrinkles his nose. “He has not gone to New Babylon. He has ambitions to rebuild the ancient city, more glorious than it was before.”

These are ill tidings, but Bucky will not be daunted. “Well, then I need passage to Babylon.”

Loki snorts, dismissing their talk as madness, and Thor leads Bucky into the cabin. There is little space to move around, the crew lodging below decks when at sea, but there is a desk and two chairs, and Bucky takes the seat offered to him.

“To Babylon,” Thor murmurs, searching around the cabin until he finds a map. It is far grander than the scrap of cloth Barton had to offer, a thick sheet of vellum, the landmasses and borders carefully inscribed in black and red ink. He clears space on the desk, turning the map around so Bucky can read it. He traces the threads of ink eastwards to his destination. There is so much land and so little
sea, and Bucky silently berates himself for charging forth on an impossible task. Thor, however, is not so daunted, and drums his fingers on the map, humming to himself. “Miklagard,” he says at last. “We go south, and cross the straits to the Mediterranean. We can make port and you should have no trouble finding your way to Aleppo. From there you can—” “No.” Bucky shakes his head, his hair whipping back and forth. “I cannot pass through Aleppo, or any cities.”

Thor takes the news in his stride, his fingers dancing over the map. “Ordu,” Thor says at length. Bucky shakes his head again. Ordu is a port town, and a busy one at that. “Hear me out.” Thor holds up his hand, placating, and then draws his finger along the coast a little way to the east. “There is an estuary here, a good distance away from the port. We bring that little dory of yours with us, it won’t take up much room on deck.”

Bucky rubs his thumb against his chin, trying to memorise every last detail of the map before him as Thor traces a route. “If we weigh anchor and drop you both here.” He taps at the mouth of the estuary. “You take the river south to Keban. You’ll need to pull your boat across land a few miles.” He gives Bucky a playful smile. “You think you can manage that?” “Yes,” Bucky huffs. The bero is flat bottomed, and he can easily pull it across even ground. “How many is a few?”

Thor shrugs, pointing to a blue thread that twists back and forth across the vellum. “You’ll meet the Euphrates here, which should take you to the steps of Babylon.”

Bucky sits back, thumb still working against the dimple of his chin. By river and sea will be faster, no doubt, but he’ll not be able to travel by night, not on the winding river as it passes through the mountains. It’s far from the beaten tracks, so he’ll likely not see another soul until he’s on the Euphrates, and what is another fishing boat there? With good weather and clear skies he’ll make the journey in twenty days, maybe less. “Yes,” he says quietly. “Good man!” Thor sits back, looking pleased. “We can supply you with some provisions. You’ll not lack for fresh water, but you might want a change from fish now and then.” “That won’t be necessary,” Bucky says firmly. “We will supply you with provisions,” Thor says equally firmly. “Be courteous or you will have nothing but salt cod.”

Bucky snorts, mouth twitching up. “As you wish. And what is your fee, for passage and the threat of salt cod?”

Thor waves his hand, dismissive, and Bucky bristles. “I am not a beggar at your door,” he hisses. “I am here to book passage. I have no need of your charity.” “Calm yourself.” Thor rolls up the map, Bucky’s ire rolling off him like rainwater. “I am not offering charity. You’ll work my ship like the rest of the crew, and earn your keep, don’t you worry.” He looks far too pleased with himself. “I’ll give you the really nasty jobs if you like.” When Bucky’s demeanor doesn’t improve, Thor slaps him on the back. “There are ports other than Constanţa, my friend. My brother and I will take a walk into town, get a good price on our wares and offer our services. Someone will have wine or cloth that needs to find its way to Batumi or Poti, and from there we will find something that needs bringing west.”

He could argue his point, but Bucky has enough self-preservation to back down from this fight, at least. “As you wish,” he says with as little grace as he can muster. “Go home, gather what you need.” Thor squeezes his shoulder. “We set sail at dawn.”

Chapter End Notes
Bero - boat
Sastipe - Hello
Kumpania - tribe
Darrow - dowry
Besh telé - sit down
Amblayamásko-kasht - the hanging tree
Baxtalo - good luck
The Cost of Living

Chapter Summary

“I will take you to the treasury,” the man nods. “And you will set me free.”

Chapter Notes

While Mainland Europe persecuted, enslaved and executed any Roma found in their countries, the Ottoman Empire was far more tolerant, so long as they paid their taxes. There were Roma soldiers, merchants, smiths and musicians, and regarded as citizens of the Empire.

For anyone interested in further reading (I'm looking at you Lasgalendil) [Gypsies in the Ottoman Empire Quora thread](https://www.quora.com/)... See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the hours before dawn when the camp is silent and still, only Bucky remains awake. His head has yet to touch a pillow, nor is it likely to as he sits cross-legged before the fire in his tent, bowed over his work. He has gathered what supplies he can for the journey; a lantern and bottle of oil, some strips of dried fruit and a handful of sweet, spiced biscuits sit alongside a water flask. There is a thick fold of waxed canvas to keep out the rain, a tinderbox, compass, and a whetstone for his blades. Lastly there is his travelling cloak.

There are few provisions, but he’ll eat what he can catch on the way, and if there is no catch he’ll sleep hungry. It will not be the first time, nor will it be the last. For now his thoughts lie not with food, but the armour laid out in his lap.

The sword he had tended to first. It is a fine weapon, a talwar not dissimilar in shape from the shamsir so prized by the Persians, but with an elegantly curved blade that is narrow at the hilt and broadens before the tip, ending in a tapered point. It is a fine weapon, but one that feels heavy in his hand, and when he does not need it, it lies under his bed wrapped in every scrap of cloth he can spare. He still feels the shape of it in the night, the ghost of it pressed against his back, the curve of it lying against his spine.

Next he had sharpened the curved blade by the light of the fire, taking care where the blade flares out and arrows in. Now it lies on the rug beside him while he works on the rest, reflecting the firelight onto the canvas around him and twisting the shadows into grotesques.

The cuirass he made himself, many summers past. Cowhide, boiled in water and stretched to fit his form. It is hard and flexible as oak, covering him from shoulder to hip and fastened in place with a series of belts and buckles. At the center of the chest is a copper disk, embossed with a many spoked cartwheel. A single band of copper is fixed at the hem, resting just above the hip when worn.

Bucky pours a little more warmed oil onto a cloth, rubbing it into the leather until it shines. There is no vanity in his efforts, though there is pride, pride enough to choke on. The oil keeps the armour supple, so when he is struck with a blade it will not shatter. Hard as oak, but yielding as a sapling. For a moment he is a boy again, throwing punches into his father’s open hands.

The stone god will shatter under a hammer, chaves. The iron god is beaten into shape. But wood stands firm, wood turns with the blow, sends the strike down to its roots. Bend with the blows and
you will not break.

He straightens up, brushing the hair out of his eyes, and sets the cuirass aside.
The vambraces, two pieces of leather that cover the arm from the wrist to the elbow, bear their own copper plates and bands. There are score marks in the leather, not deep enough to cut right through. Bucky drags his oiled rag over them in turn, working the worn leather until it is supple and dark, the copper shining.

His armour clean and well-cared for, he turns his attention to his knives.
The choori he tends to first, a recurved steel knife the length of his arm from elbow to fingertip. The blade tapers to a sharp point, well-suited to driving through chain mail, and Bucky drags his whetstone across it until the edge is even and sharp. He tests the blade with his thumb, shaving a fragment from his thumbnail, and puts it aside.
Another knife, this one much smaller, a choora. The blade is no longer than a finger and just as slim. It is honed to a razor’s edge, and he slips it into his boot.
There is still an hour before sunrise, beyond the camp the edge of the horizon paling to blue, and Bucky packs his belongings with care. Once his supplies are stowed he puts on his cuirasse, buckling it into place with speed and skill borne of long practice. Three belts of dark, broad leather he wraps around his waist, fastening each one in place with a gold buckle in the shape of a cartwheel.

Guardsmen like to aim for the gut, a shallow diagonal strike from the bottom rib to the hip that spills entrails down your legs to puddle around your feet. If the blade is sharp a man will take a few paces before he notices what has happened, stumbling over his own guts.
Better to lose a few leather belts to a sword than your own wretched soul.

The vambraces he ties on one after the other, soft leather cords biting into the paler skin of his inner arms. The sword he straps to his back, the choori he slips into one of the belts with care.
He uses an ember from the fire to light the lantern before dousing the rest, kicking dirt over the remains to make sure it’s snuffed out. Lastly he reaches under his bed for the pouch he keeps hidden there. He rubs his fingers over the old leather, feeling the hard edges of coin moving around underneath, and hopes that it is enough.
The cloak covers the armour, though he keeps the hood down while he’s still in camp. The woven wool is coarse and stained a dark shade the colour of rich earth, and keeps out the worst of wind and weather.
He leaves his bag and lantern by the door of his tent, and slips through the camp, his way lit by stars. His feet are silent of the compacted earth around the campfire, his steps light as he cracks open the door to his mother’s vardo.
His sister doesn’t wake when he kisses her on the brow, but his mother does.
“Chaves,” she says softly, and Bucky wonders when he got to be so old.
“Daj,” he murmurs back.
She doesn’t tell him to stay, that his hands are red enough, and for that he is thankful.
“Devlesa,” she whispers, stroking rough fingers down his cheek.
He grasps her hand and kisses her palm. “I’ll be back before winter, or not at all.” He presses the pouch into her hand, closing her fingers around it. “There should be enough to see you to spring.”
He leaves before she can persuade him to keep the money, and tells her to rest, knowing that sleep will not find her again. They need coin more than he will, the Sultan tolerates all manner of people on his lands, Roma and even Christians, so long as they pay their taxes. The cost of living blisters his hands and stains his boots with salt, but it is a price he is willing to pay. He takes a last walk around the camp before collecting his pack.
They will be fine, he tells himself. They have money saved, and ways to make more. They will manage without him.

He strikes out for the sea, the chill winds catching at strands of his hair and his boots slipping in the
sand, heading down to where his bero is waiting on the beach. His bag he lays inside, checking that his spear and oars are where he left them. The lantern he hangs from the mast. It casts a weak circle of light, barely enough to see his hands by, but it will warn other ships of his passing. He will not need the lantern when he goes inland from Ordu, he will pass through the valleys like a ghost, but for now he must be seen.

With a firm push the boat slides down to the shore, it’s flat base moving easily along the wet sand. The edges of Bucky’s cloak soak up seawater as he wades through the shallows, pushing the boat further out until he is knee deep in foam. The hem spreads out on the tide around him, swirling back and forth with the waves like the tail of some strange fish.

Bucky climbs into the boat, water sloshing in with him as he takes up his oars, sitting down to slice a paddle into the water and push him further out to sea. The bero lists and rocks as he paddles sideways into the tide, but before too long the lights of the docks come into view. Out on the furthest jetty, strung up with lanterns like a midwinter festival, stands the Bifrost.

Bucky is once again struck by how strange the ship looks. Where his own bero is sleek and sharp-edged, the Bifrost has a rounded keel and deeply curved hull. The shrouds - thick rope netting that holds the masts in place - stretch down just past the railings and are tied to iron hoops along the sides. Up on deck figures move back and forth, readying the ship for the coming voyage.

Bucky rows a little harder, fighting the waves, until he is in the lee of the ship, it’s great bulk providing respite from the frenetic sea. He draws alongside the hull, and looks up to see that he already has an audience.

“Hail and well met!” Thor shouts down to him.

Bucky pushes back his hood and waves a hand in return, his splayed fingers backlit in lantern light, and tosses the end of the rope tied to the prow up to him. Thor snatches it out of the air, taking the slack in his right hand, and turns to shout for his men.

A pair of thick loops of rope are thrown down to him, and Bucky passes one over the prow of the bero, tugging it until he is sure it is in place before doing the same at the stern. Only a fool would stay on board a ship being hauled up onto the deck, he’d be pitched into the sea on the first haul up.

“Hold fast!” Thor shouts when the ropes are in place. “I’ll throw down a line.”

Bucky frowns, taking another look at the hull swelling out before him.

“No need!” he shouts back, and reaches up to a promising looking plank.

The bero rocks a little as he jumps up, fingers finding proud edges and narrow recesses between the planks, his feet braced against the broad slats. He moves swiftly, as if he could outmatch gravity, using the curve of the keel to his advantage, and a moment later Thor is reaching down to grasp his hand, pulling him the last few feet onto the deck.

“You climb like a spider,” Thor marvels, leading him out of the way so the crew can winch the bero onto the deck. “I have never seen such a skill.”

“Well then, you’ve never really needed to be on the other side of a wall,” Bucky huffs. Thor stares at him, mouth agape. After a moment of silence, where Bucky starts to wonder if he should throw himself overboard and swim for it, he throws back his head and laughs.

“You are quite the scoundrel,” Thor chuckles. “You’ll fit in well here.”

Bucky bristles a little. He has a kumpania, he doesn’t need another. “If you say so.”

If Bucky’s reticence troubles the good captain, he doesn’t show it. “Come, meet the crew.”

Thor puts a hand on Bucky’s shoulder, and though he would rather stay and make sure his boat is docked safely, he goes where he is led.

Less than a dozen men work the Bifrost, and seem fine enough folk, for gazho. Bucky nods, his mouth a thin line, as Thor introduces them in turn. All Northmen, they blur into one long procession of beards and roars and backslaps, until Bucky can’t tell a Volstagg from a Fandral. Thor leads him on through the ship, willfully oblivious to Bucky’s prickly demeanor, showing him
the hold below decks where casks of salted fish perfume the stale air.

“The crew billet down here,” Thor points out a space set aside for him that Bucky has no intention of using. “Meals are at 8 bells. Have you worked a ship before?”

Bucky shrugs. He knows his berth, and has watched the crew of masted ships crawling over their shrouds and ratlines. “I know enough.”

Thor gives his back a firm pat, frowning when the flat of his hand meets the blade under Bucky’s cloak. “Seeing how you came aboard, you can work the sails,” he says brightly. “Heimdall will show you the ropes.”

Thor whistles, flicking his fingers at one of the crewmen further along the deck. As he approaches Bucky shifts back on his heels, eyes flicking up and away. He is tall and dark-skinned and fine featured, with eyes like molten gold.

“Heimdall, this is…” Thor’s brow wrinkles. “What’s your name?”

“Bucky.”

“The ‘Gyptian,” Heimdall says slowly. His gaze seems to peel away layers of Bucky’s skin, and he fights the urge to tug up his hood.

“Heimdall is our raven,” Thor says with pride. The man is well-titled, though his beard is starting to silver. “He watches the horizons, finds a clear path in the storm.”

“Heimdall holds out his hand, and Bucky reaches out to grasp his forearm in the manner Thor’s people favour.

“Sastipe.”

Heimdall grips his arm, thumb tracing the edge of his vambrace before letting go. “So you’re our storm-crow?”

Bucky nods, and with that Thor claps him on the shoulder and strides off, no doubt in search of others be relentlessly cheerful at.

“Come,” Heimdall gestures for Bucky to follow him. “There’s much to be done.”

Up in the ropes there is little use for talk, and Bucky is grateful for the reprieve. His sword and armor are wrapped up in his travelling cloak and stowed away in his boat, and he climbs the ratlines with arms bared and sea spray dewing on the shirt donned in place of boiled leather.

There is no mast too high for him to climb, no spar that stretches too far for him to reach, and Bucky takes a quiet pride in his achievements. The wooden god welcomes him, the mast firm under his fingers, the spars unbending as he walks across them.

There are walkropes and ratlines strung along underneath the yards, great jutting wooden poles striking out from the mast, the sails cinched in tight bundles to their lengths. Heimdall inches along the lower mainyard, feet sliding along the taut ropes and hands grasping the wooden yards as he unfastens the ropes holding the sails in place. Above him, Bucky walks the topsail yard like a tightrope, hands thrown out to counterbalance against the gentle listing of the ship.

He would not dare try this at sea, not with the peaks and troughs of the waves, but in dock? Yes. Yes, let the gazho below see what a baro Rom is capable of.

Below him the watchful crew shout and bang their chests, at first in alarm, and then delight. They roar each time he stoops down to tug a rope away, and the sail unfurls a little more.

When the task is complete, he gives his audience a bow before climbing down to the mainyard and helping Heimdall finish his task.

With the sails unfurled and straining against the wind, Thor gives the order to raise the anchor, and the Bifrost sets out to sea.

* *

At 8 bells Bucky finally climbs down from the rigging, his body numbed from the cold winds, his hands aching and his heart eased. Thor waits for him on the deck, ready to thump him on the back and hustle him down below where the others are sat around long, low tables at dinner. They are fed well on beef stew and beer, though Bucky does not indulge to the extent of those
around him. He is grateful to eat something other than fish, grateful enough that he lets them jostle him about in their merry making.

Before the night has worn on he makes his excuses, leaving the close, cramped quarters stinking of sweat and ale for the cold winds and sea spray.

He walks along the deck, taking the measure of the length and breadth of the ship before checking on his bero. Nothing has been stolen, nor does he expect it to have been. Only a fool would steal on a ship out at sea, with nowhere to run should they get caught, and nowhere to hide their ill-gotten goods where they won’t be found.

The sun hangs low on the horizon, taking its time setting, and Bucky rests his elbows on the gunwhale, watching as in the distance strange fish leap back and forth in the spray. Flat and broad, with long, whipcord tails, they launch themselves into the air and splash back to the surface, for no reason other than sheer exuberance.

“Stingrays,” comes a voice from behind him.

Bucky reaches for his choori, but does not pull the blade free, and Loki leans against the gunwhale beside him. Bucky hadn’t seen him at all on the ship, or with the crew at dinner, and had started to think he’d been left behind.

“Beer not to your taste?” Loki asks. He’s carrying a bottle of something dark and resinous, strongly scented with spices.

“I like beer well enough,” Bucky replies, if only to spare himself the offer of a drink.

“The company then?” Loki smiles, sharp and thin like the choori hidden in Bucky’s boot.

“The company is fine.” As if on queue a roar comes from below. “Your brother leads a merry band.”

“Doesn’t he just.” Loki rolls his eyes. “My brother is but a street dog, all lolling tongue and wagging tail.”

Bucky takes care not to smile. He has a sister, he knows what it is to complain about family. He could run his mouth for a year and a day over Becca, her willfulness and temper. But if another man uttered a word against her he would cut their throat without hesitation.

Loki snorts at Bucky’s silence, and takes a delicate sip from his bottle. “You must wonder what I’m doing here, amongst this rabble.”

“No I don’t,” Bucky says mildly.

Loki pauses, his bottle at his lips, and makes an enquiring noise.

“Your brother is generous, perhaps to a fault. He allowed me aboard his ship.” Bucky gives a mirthless smile. “He keeps a loyal crew, but I suspect your talents lie elsewhere.”

Loki turns his back on the sea, his gaze on some far-flung land instead. “Knowledge, that is my talent. I acquire information, and use it to my advantage. So when some fat, greasy-pawed merchant tries to undercut our prices, or claim our goods inferior and worth less than the asking…”

He leaves the rest to Bucky’s imagination, and takes another sip of liquor.

“And me?” Bucky waits. He waits for the questions, for Loki’s sharp tongue to flay him open and divine wisdom from his entrails. He is not disappointed.

“You?” Loki sneers. “You are on a fool’s quest.”

“Well, then I am a fool.”

Bucky straightens up, tiring of the company, and wishes Loki a good evening. He’ll not join the others down below, he needs the sky over his head and the earth under his back, and lacking earth the boards of this boat will do.

“Gyptian,” Loki calls after him, and Bucky stills. “I know why you are here. And why you will fail.”

Bucky turns with a glare. “What?”

“The Shah was once a great man, a great leader. He regained the territories lost to the Ottomans, and when that was not enough marched east and crushed the Mughal army. They say the battle of Karnal lasted three hours, despite his soldiers being outnumbered six to one.” Loki’s eyes, cold and cruel, narrow at the thought. “They stacked the severed heads in great towers for all to see. But now Persia
is spent. The Shah taxes his people ruthlessly, but all the money taken goes to his coffers.” Loki leans towards him, green eyes glittering. “They say he has gone mad, that even his tribesmen fear him. His own commander-in-chief plans to have him assassinated before he brings down the empire.”

Bucky tips his head to one side. “And you think what? That I am the one sent to kill him?”

“Yes.” Loki sidles towards him, graceful as a serpent and just as poisonous. “You can trust me, ‘Gyptian. I only seek the truth.”

Bucky’s fingers find the handle of his choori without his asking, the carved wood moulding to his fingers.

“The truth?” Bucky murmurs, releasing the handle. “The truth is I have no business with the Shah. I am sent to reclaim stolen property.”

“Stolen property?” Loki sniffs, his interest waning. “I doubt you’ll succeed.”

“As do I.” Bucky can agree to that. “But I must try.”

With nothing more to be said, Bucky takes his leave, and spends the night in his boat. He curls up in his travelling cloak, head pillowed on his arm, and watches the stars until sleep claims him.

He wakes with the sun and busies himself up on deck, checking the ropes and rigging until the bell sounds for breakfast. He eats thick, salted porridge with the rest of the crew, oats sticking between his teeth and catching in his throat. At least it’s quiet, but for the soft grumbles of those who drank a little too much and woke to find themselves on choppy waters.

The second day passes much like the first, climbing the ratlines and checking that the ropes that hold the mast and sails are whole and steady. In the evening he eats salt pork with the crew and lingers over a mug of ale, listening as they sing and joke and trade insults. He sleeps under the sky again, untroubled by the light rain that comes with the dawn.

On the third day he is sent down the curved hull to replace a frayed rope, and half the crew hang over the railings to watch him at work, clinging to the planks like a spider, choori between his teeth. No one throws rocks at him, and when the ship hits a wave at a hard angle and he momentarily slips, there are shouts of alarm that become cheers as he regains his grip.

When the work is done, he is given a draught of clear, sharp liquor that tastes like an old forests and could strip tar from a keel.

On the fourth day they reach Ordu.

The Bifrost sails past the busy port, its wide estuary leading inland and its harbour filled with ships, and continues east. There they find a smaller channel, a river flowing out into the Black Sea, and Thor gives the order to drop anchor.

“Will you not stay?” he asks, for what feels like the tenth time, as Bucky packs the last of his provisions into the bero. He had offered too much, and in such a way that Bucky felt it hard to refuse. But refuse he did, until they had reached a compromise. So Bucky stows away a pack of hard tack and loaves of dark, dense bread alongside a flask of sharp, clear liquor and skins of sweet water.

“Stay,” Thor says again.

He could say yes. He could run from his duties, from what lies ahead. And then what would happen? A few good years before the sands reclaim the sea, and all those who sail it?

“I cannot,” Bucky says softly, meeting Thor’s eye. “Thank you.”

“If you change your mind,” Thor persists. “There is always a place on my ship for hard workers.”

Bucky nods, lips pursed, and does not trust himself to speak.

“We will be back here at summer’s end, taking hazelnuts from Ordu to the west,” Thor continues. “I will keep my eyes open for a little dory with a spider clinging to her mast.”

“I thought I was a storm crow.” Bucky steps back as the crew winch his boat into the water. “You Northmen and your titles.”

“Titles well-earned.”

They watch the bero inch down to the water, landing with a heavy splash as the flat base hits the calm sea.
“Watch, but don’t linger,” Bucky says at last. “If I am not here, I never will be.”
“Understood.” Thor raises his hand, and the crew begin to assemble around them. “You have kinfolk of Dobruja, yes?”
“I do.”
“I will look to them on my return.” Thor gives him a last slap on the shoulder. “They will not hunger so long as I draw breath.”

Bucky grasps him by the forearm, and feels Thor’s thumb digs into the crook of his elbow, where the pulse of his heart can be felt. He thanks him again, heartfelt this time, and steps back to the railing. The crew rush forward to watch as Bucky vaults over the wooden rail, clambering down the wide hull and stepping into his bero. There is a last, ragged cheer as he lands, and Bucky takes up his oars, rowing out of the lee of the ship. Over his shoulder he hears Thor call his men to order, and the shout to weigh anchor and set sail grow fainter, carried away on the wind.

When he finally stops, setting aside the oars to lower his sail, he doesn’t look back. Perhaps he happens to look that way while he trims the sail, and sees the ship in the distance, a black shape against the blurred line of sea and sky. Perhaps he watches it fade from view, words on his tongue that the captain will never hear. Perhaps, but no one will ever know but him, and he sails inland, leaving the sea far behind.

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It feels strange at first, handling a boat after days spent on a full-rigged ship. But Bucky’s hands remember the work, as does his heart. The sands around Ordu quickly rise up into hills, and the river undulates gently between them. On either side of the river grass grows lush and green, rising up in gentle slopes and valleys. Sheep graze on the lower pastures, ambling up to the water’s edge and darting away as the boat sails past. But there is no time to sit back and enjoy the view. Unlike the Bifrost, the bero has no rudder, so Bucky uses an oar to steer. The river takes him south, the bends and turns gentle at first, although every now and then he yanks the paddle out of the water when the boat strays a little too close to the bank, and uses it to push himself back on course. The hours pass, and Bucky lets his mind quiet, moving with the flow of the river like a willow sapling, until the sun finally drops behind the distant mountains. He pulls the boat towards the shore as rain begins to fall, looping a rope around the base of an overhanging tree and tying it securely. He huddles down in the belly of the bero, pulling his waxed cloth over it to keep the rain out. The day ends with a meal of hard tack soaked in water, hardly the rich fare he was becoming accustomed to on the ship. He curls up in his travelling cloak, and falls asleep to the sound of rain.

The next day passes much like the first. After a breakfast of dark bread and dried fruit, washed down with water, Bucky pushes the boat back into the river, before climbing aboard. The gentle hills of the previous day give way to mountains, and the river twists its way between them. With the boat turning in every direction, including back towards the sea on some stretches, there hardly seems a point to setting the sail. So for now he keeps the canvas furled, and makes his way by oar until the mountains are behind him. He sees no signs of life as he rows along, bare arms wet with splashes from the oars. No shepherds run their flocks along these lands. He wonders if that has always been so, or if what Loki had said was true, that Persia was dying as the Shah waged war in the east. The day wears on, and though the mountains cast deep shadows the midday sun turns the river to silver, too bright to look upon. For some time afterwards Bucky sees red spots when he closes his eyes, and he rubs them with the heel of his hand until it passes.

Late in the afternoon the river widens out to a long, crooked lake, nestled between two mountain
ranges. He raises his sail and gives his arms a rest while the boat scuds across the water. Trees grow in sparse little clusters on the lower ranges, thinning out towards the cloud-shrouded summits. On the steep slopes that lead to the water goats pick a path down to drink, their long horns curved back and tapering like the blade of a kukri. As Bucky watches a bird perched in a tree by the water’s edge launches itself into the air. It spreads its broad wings, skimming over the surface before dipping its beak into the bright waters, and resurfacing with a fish. The bird soars upwards with its prize, circling around and flying back to its perch to feed.

Bucky pulls in his sail, and lets the boat drift as he picks up his spear and moves to the stern. He shifts from foot to foot, feeling the give and shape of the boards under his feet, and watches the water, letting calm settle over his shoulders like the weight of a blanket. The boat drifts with the whims of the river, and Bucky drifts with it, spear held loosely in his hand until he sees a flash of silver.

He strikes, quick and clean, spearing the fish neatly behind the head. It is already dead when he lifts it from the water, and he pulls it from the point of his spear.

One fish is enough to feed him, so he puts down the spear and sets the sail. The lake narrows as he passes beyond the mountains, and he has to steer by oar again.

When it becomes too dark to moor the bero again, before climbing out onto the long grass. He gathers up enough wood from a nearby copse to build a fire, skewering his fish on a long branch and angling it over the flames.

He warms his aching hands while it cooks, watching the embers spark and flurry up into the night sky, to dance and burn like the stars.

* * *

“Thor Odinson, you son of a-”

The bero catches on some root or fallen branch hidden in the sodden grass, and Bucky curses, dropping the rope and stomping over to see what’s happened now.

A few miles, Thor had said. When the river runs out you’ll need to drag your boat over land a few miles to reach the Euphrates.

When the river had given way to marsh the previous afternoon Bucky had thought little of it, climbing out and wading south through the mire, pulling the boat with him. The ground was uneven, one step barely and inch deep while the next sunk him knee deep, and Bucky had clung to the bero for support as he made it at last to grassland. He told himself he would clean the stinking mud off when he reached the Euphrates, and that would be the end of it.

But the sun had set and he was still walking, dragging the boat behind him on the end of a rope. He had made camp for the night, wary of stumbling into more marshes and half-assuming that when the sun rose he’d be able to see the river just ahead.

With the morning there was no sign of the river. With no other choice before him he kept marching, dragging his boat loaded with provisions behind him.

Midday passes with still no sign, and Bucky stops to drink water and unpack his compass. The ancestors would laugh at him for resorting to such a thing, but the ancestors are probably laughing at him anyway.

The arrow confirms it, and he keeps walking south.

The river comes upon him like a thief. One step it is nowhere to be seen, the next it is practically under his feet.

Bucky offers up thanks to the ancestors and the earth and golden-haired captains, and leaves the boat on the bank as he wades into the shallows. He lets the water wash away the last crumbs of stinking marsh mud from his clothes, sloughing away with it the exhaustion and mounting fear that he would spend what little time he had left in the world hauling a bero across grassland, like some foul tempered Sisyphus.

He cups his hands and drinks from the river, the water strange to his tongue but fresh, unlike the
increasingly stale water in his flasks. Sated, he climbs back onto the bank and pushes the boat into the river before climbing in. He leaves the sails furled, and lets the current take him where it chooses, sitting back with the oar in his hand, ready to push the boat back into deeper water if it gets too close to shore.
The Euphrates lead to Babylon’s gate, and thus he has little to do but guide his boat to his destination.
There is fish aplenty in the river, and water to drink.
It is not rest, but it is a respite.

* 

The days bleed together as he follows the river on its winding course. He wakes with the sun, curled up under his cloak in the bero, his back cold and his body stiff. After putting a blade to his chin and a gulping down a quick meal of whatever is to hand, he sets sail, following the river as it opens out into lakes and narrows into streams that twist through steppes and grasslands and plains. When the day draws to a close he moors up on the shore, and eats fish and hard tack before sleep.
As if overnight the green lowlands become desert, as if he has stepped from one room to the next. He misses the colour of green grass, and the dense clusters of trees along the water’s edge. But the river still sparkles with fish, and the water is sweet and clear.
The days last for a thousand years in the desert, with no trees or mountains to blot out the sun. But he pulls the boat to shore when the sky finally darkens, and sleeps fitfully in his blankets. He dreams of golden sand, cascading across the desert and into the sea, whipping up in storms that blot out the sun. When the moon is full and the river wide he sails through the night, and tracks the movement of the stars.

What awaits him in the ruined city?
The question gnaws at him as day slips into day and he stares out to the horizon, as he spears fish and cooks it over a little fire. He has salt pork and hard tack in his supplies, but will only touch it when he can no longer stomach the taste of fish. Better to save it for a day when there are no fish than to squander it now.
As the Euphrates flows east there are people, here and there, eking out a living on the banks of the river. He passes shepherds driving their thin, ill-tempered goats away from the water. Fishermen in their barijah and dhows watch warily as he passes.
Bucky pulls his cloak around his shoulders and keeps his head down, and soon they are far behind him.
The river widens to lakes, and narrow down again, and the people vanish.
There are no fishermen, no farmers working their sparse fields of kemet along the shore, no goats nibbling at the stunted leaves of gnarled trees. The air grows thick with dust, and even down in the swift water Bucky has to cover his face with a scarf.
He is looking for ruins, but he finds a city.
It’s not possible, how could it be possible? Babylon fell to the sands long ago, but here it stands, rising up out of the desert like like the burial tombs of the great pharaohs.
A monstrous stone wall straddles the river a ways upstreams, shining like gold in the sun. Bucky rises to his feet, the boat listing underneath him, and shields his eyes from the sun as he stares.
The wall is vast, impossibly vast, more than 300 feet tall by Bucky’s eye, and stretching out into the desert for several miles on each side of the water. Over the river itself is a drawbridge, near half a mile across. Guards patrol back and forth, ready to stop any unwary fisherman trying to enter the city.
With a wall at such a height that should be all he can see, but rising up from within there are towers, too numerous to count. Some are squat and square, while others spiral up in columns, half finished and swarming with workers. In the center is a great stepped ziggurat reaching to the sky.
Bucky lowers his sail, and rows the boat to shore, his hands white-knuckled as he grasps the oars. No power on this earth could raise a city in so short a time. He pulls the bero up onto the land, hiding it as best as he can behind an abandoned shepherds hut. The old stone walls sag inwards, the straw roof collapsed, and though the mast juts up like a banner, the rest of the bero is hidden.

Bucky strips off his travelling cloak and straps on his armour, the weight of it heavy on his arms, across his shoulders. He buckles his three belts in place and slips his choora between them, before finally strapping his sword to his back. He must move quickly, keep his load minimal, but fills the pouch on his belts with dried fruit and hard tack, and fastens a skin of fresh water to his hip. There are ruins scattered across the sands, abandoned buildings and collapsed walls, and piles of old, weathered stones hauled away from the city limits. He can make his way to the gate unseen if he is careful, and find a way past the drawbridge. Once in the city, he will have to rely on luck.

“Ancestors, show me the way,” he murmurs, and sets out across the sands.

As Bucky creeps closer, keeping his body low as he follows the river, he sees that it is not a single wall spanning the Euphrates, but a great enclosure. A walled city, like Babylon of old. Slaves climb the towers, buckets in hand. They crawl over the wall spanning the river, hoisting pallets of golden bricks up to the higher levels, as if the structures were not tall enough. Guards pace back and forth along the square sided towers, along the outer walls, shouting orders and cracking their whips as the people work.

There is no single open gate leading into the city, but a series of great doors, some in studded wood, embellished with golden reliefs, others in solid brass that blind when the sunlight catches them. There is a shrill cry from atop one of the towers, and a worker, overbalancing on the narrow platform, plummets down the side and out of view. No one rushes to their aid, only watching dolefully until the nearest guard swings his whip in a wide arc, and they return to work.

The air stinks of dust and fear and something terrible. Something bright and ravenous that lurks within the city, weaving its way through the blood and stones.

“Hey!” someone calls out.

Bucky turns toward the sound, hand on his choora. He must have been spotted by one the slaves, so intent on the towers that he hadn't kept an eye on the workers his side of the river. No matter, he’ll deal with them before they raise the alarm, and hide the body. His hand stills on the blade as a figure approaches. A man, his shoulders relaxed, his head tilted to one side. His skin is pale as milk, even under the desert sun, his hair like spun gold. Like the other workers labouring on the wall he wears long shalvar and a tunic of coarse linen, stained with sweat and dust.

“You shouldn’t be here,” the man says, looking Bucky up and down. His pale eyes widen. “You’re a ‘Gyptian.”

“And what are you?” Bucky hisses. “A Northman? You’re small for a Northman.”

For all his boldness the man is small, the top of his golden head reaching Bucky’s chin. He is whip-thin and but for his colouring bears little resemblance to Thor and his barrel-chested, bearded crew. The man bristles at the insult, but doesn’t raise the alarm. “I am bound in service to the Shah. What is your business here?”

“None of yours, slave.” Bucky should draw his choora and cut the man down, but for some reason he does not.

“Yes it is,” the man retorts. “You are a trespasser, and a thief no doubt.” He glances back at the wall, checking that they remain unnoticed, and turns back to him. “You seek gold, don’t you? That’s all your kind care for.”

Bucky growls, low in his throat. “And what do you seek?”

“Freedom,” comes the quick reply. “Same as any man.” He takes a few steps closer. “I know where the treasury is. I’ve seen it. Gold piled as high as you can reach.”

Bucky snorts, unimpressed, and the man licks his parched lips. “And statues. Carved from marble. A
great golden hourglass filled with ten thousand jewels.”

*Oh god of stone, no.*


The man points to the ziggurat. “There, in the treasury. I can take you there.” he pauses, tongue darting out again to wet his lips, red and ripe as pomegranate seeds. “For a price.”

So he’s cunning. Bucky can give him that. “And what price is that?”

“My freedom.”

Bucky regards him for a moment, a lion in the body of a mouse, and loosens his hold on the choora. Maybe the ancestors heard his prayer, and sent him baxt. “You have yourself a bargain.”

“I will take you to the treasury,” the man nods. “And you will set me free.”

Chapter End Notes

Choori/choora - knife
Chaves - child
Daj - mother
Baxt - good luck
"It seems strange to call something home, a place I have never been. Perhaps I will finally go there when I die."

The ancient city of Babylon was built in the form of a square, 14 miles on each side, and bisected by the river Euphrates. The outer brick wall was 56 miles long, 300 feet high and 25 feet thick, with an inner wall set 75 feet behind the first wall. Within the city there were 250 towers, standing at a height 450 feet, and at the center stood the Etemenanki, a great ziggurat said to have been the inspiration for the Tower of Babel.

They say Babylon was once a great city, housing more than two hundred thousand souls. New Babylon eclipses it. Bucky’s gaze is drawn to the stepped tower that dominates the city. No matter how many times he forces his attention away to the people labouring under the hot sun, he finds himself seeking it out again. The vastness of the city demands to be looked upon, from the golden walls reaching to the sky to the ziggurat at its center blotting out the sun.

He curses himself for being so easily awed by gazho excess. He is not some chaves sent out into the world for the first time, slack-jawed at all there is to be seen. A guard walks over to a cluster of workers down by the wall, and the man at Bucky’s side lets out a hiss, grabbing him by the arm and pulling him behind a crumbling stone wall.

“Get off me, klávo!” Bucky snarls. “You dare to put a hand on me, you unclean-”


Bucky yanks his arm away. He must have been mistaken. The ancestors would never have sent him this nuisance, too small to be a Northman, too pale to be anything else. They would have sent a storm. They would have sent a warrior. Not a little wasp to clutch at him and buzz in his ear.

“And what exactly was your plan, ‘Gyptian?’” he scolds. “Walk up to the gate?”

Yes.

“‘I was expecting a ruin,’” Bucky hisses. “‘Not this.”

The man looks back at the great wall, drawing his parched lower lip between his teeth. “Well you cannot walk through the Urash Gate,” he says, pointing to the immense wooden gate that stand almost as tall as the wall itself. “That leads straight to the Processional Way.”

“I wasn’t going to,” Bucky says, defensive. He has no idea what a processional way is, not does he care. He had planned on going by river, swimming under the drawbridge into the city. If he encountered anyone he would kill them, and let the Euphrates take the body.

“And there are guards posted on the bridge, watching the water,” the man continues. “Anything bigger than a carp will get a spear through its neck.”

“And what do you suggest?” Bucky asks through gritted teeth. Maybe he can drop the insufferable...
creature in the river as a distraction, rid himself of trouble and get into the city that way. But no one would come to his aid. The workers on the tower didn’t flinch when one of their number fell to his death, didn’t even reach out to them. No one would come to the aid of this one. “The Enlil Gate,” the man says, pointing to a smaller gate further to the right. “It’s mostly the workers on the wall who use it. There are a few guards, but they can easily be distracted.” Bucky gives him a doubtful look, but nods at him to proceed.

“What should I call you?” the man asks as they make their way around the ruins that litter the outskirts of the city, creeping ever closer to the city walls. Bucky says nothing, keeping low to the ground as the man watches the movements of the guards, and gestures when it’s safe to go.

“Be like that, ‘Gyptian.” the man huffs as they duck behind a heap of rubble. “I am Steven.” “I don’t care,” Bucky replies. The remark gets him a jab on the arm. So the wasp has a sting. When they reach the gate, Bucky spies a guard standing at the door. A Nubian, from the looks of him. He wears no armour, but carries a spear.

“Wait,” Bucky hisses as the wasp starts to move, grabbing him by the front of his tunic and pulling him down. “What are you-” “Trust me.” Steven’s pale blue eyes widen, his hand reaching up to unclasp Bucky’s fingers. “He’s a friend. He’ll let us pass.”

It stinks of a trap, but Bucky lets him disentangle himself. If he’s lying, it’s only one guard and a wasp to deal with. If not, maybe he is the baxt Bucky prayed for. “Thank you,” Steven says primly, straightening the front of his tunic. “Now come with me, and keep your mouth shut.”

They walk up to the gate, and the guard seems to recognise the wasp. “Steven, what are you doing out here? Did they put you on wall duty?” he asks, before his burnt almond eyes turn to Bucky. “Who’s this?” “A friend,” Steven answers quickly. “I need you to let us pass.” “No one comes in or goes out,” the guard replies. There is no anger in his tone, but a weary familiarity. Like a parent telling their child no, this fire is hot too. “You’ve been out in the sun too long.” “Sam, please,” Steven presses. “He’s going to help us escape.”

“I swore no such thing,” Bucky interrupts, drawing his choori and pointing it at Steven. “I said you, and no one else.” “Calm down.” Steven reaches out to lay his hand on Bucky’s, pushing the blade down before turning back to Sam. “You,” Bucky reminds him. “And you alone.”

“If he’s helping you get out, what do you need to go into the city for?” Sam asks. Steven leans towards him, his voice hushed. “My mother,” he says, almost reluctant, and some kind of understanding dawns on the guard. Bucky opens his mouth to argue again - he’ll be a mother goose trailing goslings out of the city gate at this rate. But he doesn’t, his teeth clacking together audibly as he catches his tongue. Something passes between the two men, something Bucky doesn’t know the details of, but understands too well. “Sam, please,” Steven asks again. The guard shakes his head, frustrated, and leans forward to check that no one’s watching. “You are mad,” he warns, cracking open the studded wooden door and checking that the way is clear. “You are mad, and I am mad for listening to you. Go on, before you get us all killed.”

“Thank you, Sam,” Steven says in a rush of relief, grabbing Bucky by the wrist and pulling his through the doorway.

As soon as the door slams shut behind them Bucky twists his hand free, shoving his choori back into his belt.
“Watch it,” he snaps, but Steven pays him no heed. They are standing in a short tunnel, maybe twenty five feet in length. Sunlight streams down through a lattice ceiling, providing enough light to see by. At the far end Bucky can see what looks like another door, sealed tight. He reaches out to touch the golden stone, realisation slowly dawning. This isn’t a walkway leading into the city, this is still the outer wall. How vast must the city’s defenses be?

“Come on,” Steven mutters. “There’s another gate to get past.”

He walks ahead, and by the time Bucky reaches the second gate Steven is already talking to another man on guard duty much like the last, dressed in workers clothes but carrying a spear.

“Heat stroke,” Bucky hears him say. “Sick everywhere.”

The guard, who unlike Sam outside wears a helmet and light armour, turns to look at Bucky with some alarm. Bucky, at a nod from Steven, puts a hand to his stomach and pretends to belch.

He has seen no mirror in weeks, but he can easily guess his appearance, and it’s enough to convince the guard to move them along. Steven grabs Bucky by the arm and hauls him along, and Bucky has to hold his tongue and endure the touch until they are through the second gate and into the city itself.

“Will you get off me,” Bucky shakes him off at last. He glances back to make sure the guard isn’t watching, but they seem to be clear. Steven is already turning his head this way and that, working out where to go next. Before them is a grid of low, square towers in various stages of completion. To the right Bucky can see the processional way Steven had spoken of, a wide thoroughfare bordered with trees that leads straight to the ziggurat. Guards walk back and forth along it, and Bucky can see why Steven had been so against using it. Even with his sword at hand Bucky would not have gotten more than ten paces before being brought down by the guards carrying swords, or the archers high up on the gate.

However grateful Bucky might be, if Steven lays his hand on him again, he will break it off.

“How do you know the palace guards?” Bucky asks.

“How do you know the palace guards?” Bucky asks.

“Sam?” Steven gestures for Bucky to follows as he turns right and into the maze of paths between the towers. “He’s not a guard.”

“He had a spear,” Bucky points out as they turn one way and then the other, steep sided walls all around them.

“He’s not a guard,” Steven insists.

Bucky gives up on trying to make him see sense, looking up at the nearest tower. It is half-finished, but no workers labour on the walls. He had seen them working on the outermost walls, the ones that faced onto the desert. Why would-

“Quick,” Steven whispers, hurrying ahead. “Before someone sees us.”

“Where are you taking me?” Bucky asks as they cross to another tower.

“The Etemenanki,” Steven replies, as if that means anything.

“The what?”

In answer Steven points up to the steep, terraced stories of the ziggurat. “The treasury is up on the highest level. We’re going there, remember?”

“Wait.” Bucky grasps Steven by the sleeve before he can dart off again. “You were the one who wouldn’t shut up about the damned treasury. That’s not why I’m here.”

Steven pales, looking more troubled by this news than seems fair. “It’s not?”

“No.” Bucky glances around, but there are no guards nearby. Still, it doesn’t hurt to be safe, and he pulls Steven into the shade of an unfinished tower. “I am looking for three brothers.”

“Brothers?”

“Yes.” Finally, the damned wasp is listening. “They are my kin. Goldsmiths. They were taken from their winter lodgings in Qazvin. The people there said that the Shah came for them, took them to Khorasan.”

“Khorasan is deserted,” Steven tells him. So Loki was true to his word. “The Shah ordered us all to march east with whatever we could carry, and set up camp here.”

“I heard rumours, and came here in search.” The truth crawls on his tongue, and Bucky swallows it
before it can slip free. “I must find them.”

Steven nods, understanding. “What do they look like, your brothers?”

“I don’t know,” Bucky says without thinking. “I have never met them.”

“But,” Steven says slowly. “They are your brothers.”

“We are all brothers,” Bucky answers impatiently. “We are nátsiya.”

Steven looks upon him with new eyes, it seems. “Where did you come from?” he asks softly. Bucky frowns at him, as if he would give away such a thing.

“Far away, yes? I mean from the look of you—” Bucky growls. “—you have travelled far. For three brothers you have never met.”

“Stop looking at me like that.” Bucky prods Steven’s shoulder, making him flinch. “Now tell me, have you seen them? Do you know where they are?”

Steven rubs at his shoulder absently. “There were three prisoners, and that hourglass I told you about, they came weeks after we did. I never saw them, but one of the others said they were the Shah’s personal goldsmiths.” He looks around at the towers. “When we arrived the city was in ruins. We made camp by Ishtar’s Gate, it was all that was left standing. Then the Shah arrived with the goldsmiths and…” he hesitates, as if doubting himself. “The city grew overnight. It rose out of the sands around us.”

He looks almost afraid, and that is the only thing that keeps Bucky from grabbing his shoulders and shaking the information out of him. “Where are they now?”

Steven blinks, as if waking from a dream. “They were taken to the Esagila.”

Steven crouches down to scratch in the dirt at the base of the tower. He marks out a square and divides it into quarters. “The city is in four parts, with the Etemenanki at the center here.” He jabs his finger in the center of the cross. “The Esagila is here.” Another jab, just below the first one. “We can get to it through the gardens.”

He doesn’t wait for Bucky’s agreement, just rises to his feet and starts moving again, ducking between the towers back the way they had come. Bucky follows closely, keeping a lookout when Steven comes to a sudden stop. He crouches down amongst a pile of discarded stones against a high wall and starts moving them around.

“The guards don’t patrol the gardens,” Steven says, breaths laboured as he rolls another stone out of his way. “We should be safe in there.”

Bucky kneels down to help him, picking up stones as directed and putting them to one side. “Anyone would think you were afraid of a few guards,” he remarks, a taunting edge to his voice. “I am afraid of them,” Steven says emphatically. “The guards at Khorasan were… they were guards, but they weren’t heartless. You could reason with them.” He tilts his chin towards the towers. “With the city came new guards. They don’t talk. If you’re in the wrong place they’ll strike you down without hesitating, whatever your reasoning.” He sits back on his heels, wiping the sweat from his brow with his sleeve.

Hidden behind the stones is a gap in the wall, and Steven quickly slips through it. “Come on,” he calls over his shoulder, and vanishes from sight.

Bucky bites down on the urge to shout back. A skinny little wasp might have no trouble worming his way through, but Bucky certainly will. He curses softly, crawling on his stomach through the gap, stone scraping his back and shoulders.

For an awful moment he thinks he might be stuck, boots digging channels in the dirt as he forces his arm through and hauls himself out the other side. Steven is squatting on the ground, watching him with barely suppressed laughter.

“What’s the matter, ‘Gyptian?’ he asks. “Are you stuck?”

Bucky growls, hauling himself to his feet and shoving his hair out of his eyes. He opens his mouth to say something cutting, and shuts it again.

Oh.

One of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the hanging gardens of Babylon had been lost to the
desert a thousand years ago. Until now.
Bucky pushes his hair back, tucking a loose strand behind his ear as he takes it all in. The gardens themselves are a series of tiered platforms, supported by silver-white columns, ascending to the sky in a verdant mirror to the ziggurat that dominates the city. Climbing roses crawl across the terraces between tamarisks and date-palms. Broad cedar trees spread their branches between the lower columns, while further up grape vines hang from the terraces, as if floating in mid air.
Hidden amongst the dense foliage are a series of Archimedes screws. Wild mints sprawl over their long pipes, each one housing a screw that with the turn of a handle will draw water to the upper levels.
Bucky walks toward the lowest terrace, ducking down to peer between the branches of a cedar. The upper terraces are not solid, but a network of walkways and platforms supporting all manner of creepers and climbers. Sunlight filters through to the ground below, and when Bucky raises his head it is like looking at a stained glass window in ten thousand shades of green.
In the dappled shade cast by the upper terraces there are ferns and mosses growing along the edges of a series of canals, feeding water by the screws to the higher levels. Beneath Bucky’s feet is a carpet of thyme and oregano and dill, sharp bursts of fragrance with every step he takes. He bends down to pick a sprig of oregano, pressing the soft, spear-shaped leaves with his fingertips, the flowers white and frothy as sea-foam.
He wishes he could linger, that he could sit in the shade of the trees and fall into a sleep unburdened by dreams or memory.
But wishes carry no weight, so he tucks the sprig into his belt, and turns back to Steven.
“Which way?”

Steven walks past, venturing deeper into the verdant shade, and kneels down beside the nearest pool, dipping his cupped hand into the water to take a drink.
“What are you, mad?” Bucky darts over and slaps his hand down, spilling water. “Never drink from still water.”
“But I’m thirsty.” Steven flicks what’s left on his fingers in Bucky’s face, making him hiss like a cat.
“How did you live this long?” Bucky mutters, striding over to the nearest Archimedes screw. Water trickles in a thin stream from the the top of the pipe, soaking a patch of creeping mint below it.
“Running water.” Bucky cups his hands under the stream and drinks. The water is clear and fragrant with herbs, and refreshes his parched throat.
Steven glowers at him, but cups his hands under the flow, spilling drops onto his white shirt.
“Alright,” he admits grudgingly. “You’ve made your point.”
Steven gulps down more water, saying nothing when Bucky splashes some on his face, rubbing the worst of the dust and grime off with his hands.
“Down here is all canals and reservoirs for watering the other levels,” Steven says as he wipes his mouth. “We can wade across, if you can swim, and don’t mind vipers.” He points to the terrace above them. “Or we go up.”
Bucky hums, cocking his head to one side as he walks towards the nearest column. The pillars are decoratively cut, offering better purchase than a ship at sea, and he takes a short run towards it. He jumps up, the toe of one boot catching a curved edge of a decorative scroll, and uses that to launch himself up further. His feet scrabble against the stone, moving upwards before gravity can catch hold of him, and he vaults easily over the trelliswork of the terrace. He lands on the raised platform, spinning around to look down on Steven, who glares up at him.
“Yes, very clever,” Steven grouses. “How do I get up?”
Bucky shrugs, and leaves Steven to work it out while he takes a look around. The garden on this level is filled with flowers, iris and ginger growing in dense clumps between roses of the deepest red Bucky has ever seen. He pulls the choora from his boot thinking to cut one, a loosely furled bud on the cusp of blooming.
And what would he do with it?
Bucky returns the knife to its hiding place, and goes back to see how Steven is getting on.
His little wasp is in the branches of a cedar tree, slowly climbing up. Since Steven offered Bucky no help getting under the wall, Bucky offers him no help climbing, resting his elbows on the railing and watching as he struggles.

“You’re doing very well,” Bucky calls out when Steven nearly slips in reaching for a branch. It gets him a string of curses in return, some quite creative, and when Steven is in range Bucky reaches down to grab him by the collar, hauling him up like a stray cat.

“Get off me!” Steven yowls, and Bucky dumps him on the terrace floor. “I was doing fine.” “And I don’t have time to watch you try and prove yourself,” Bucky says plainly. Steven glowers at him, brushing himself off and stalking off between the flowers. “This way.”

Beyond the swathe of blossoms the terrace gives way to several long wooden beams spaced a good distance apart, that lead to a more solid platform dotted with flowering trees ahead. The framework is no doubt there to ensure that light filters through to the floor below from the upper levels.

“Damnit,” Steven mutters, taking a wary step onto the nearest beam. “We have to go across.” Bucky takes the next beam along, testing it before stepping out.

“Be careful!” Steven shouts after him, as Bucky crosses the beam in several strides, arms out by his sides.

“Careful of what?” Bucky asks as he reaches the other side, spinning on his heel to face him. Steven’s expression darkens, and he takes a step forward. He tries to glare at Bucky, but his gaze keeps flicking down to his feet, and then to the fall below. He takes another step, and repeats the process again - glare, flinch, hesitation.

“Be careful!” Bucky sing-songs, which earns him an extra glare. Steven wobbles halfway across, and pauses to gulp air a minute. Whatever humour Bucky had found in watching him struggle vanishes. If he falls and breaks his neck, what use is he?

“Here.” Bucky starts walking across the beam towards him, hand outstretched.

“No!” Steven snaps. He sucks in another breath. “I can do this.”

“You’re wasting time.” At that Steven gives him another glare, and launches himself forward, running across the beam and crashing into Bucky’s open arms. He staggers backwards, tripping over a tree root and landing heavily on his back, Steven landing on top of him with a muffled “Oof.”

Steven scrambles to his feet, like the touch of Bucky’s skin burns him, and quickly brushes his sandy hair out of his eyes. The studied nonchalance looks so much like a cat caught in a moment of clumsiness and frantically washing itself that Bucky coughs out a laugh.

“What’s so funny?” Steven demands, and Bucky doesn’t answer, rolling to his feet and checking his weapons.

The similarity between them is not lost on him. “Nothing.” Steven picks a leaf out of his hair and drops it on the ground. “Well?” he says irritably. “I thought you were in a hurry?”

They walk in silence between the trees, Bucky occasionally catching glimpses of the ziggurat ahead. At least Steven is leading him in the right direction. Before long they reach another set of beams, though these ones are wider and made of stone. They extend much further, beyond even Bucky’s sharp eyes, supported by a series of pillars leading down to the canals below. Bucky peers over the edge, wondering how deep the canals are. If Steven fell, would he be crushed or would he drown? Steven spends less time on the view, stepping out onto the beam and walking slowly along. Bucky takes the next beam along, not bothering to keep pace with him and walking on ahead. The stone beams feel less stable than the wooden ones did. The stone god will shatter under the hammer, chaves. Wood turns with the blow and Bucky feels them shift and settle under his feet, his boots tapping out a rhythm swallowed up by the dense ferns below.

He glances over his shoulder at Steven, a ways back but still moving, and faster than before. His little wasp is tenacious.

Another stone shifts as he steps onto it, sloughing off a shimmer of dust that settles on the leaves and
still waters below. Bucky quickly walks to the next pillar and waits for Steven to catch up. When Steven shuffles alongside him, a few minutes later, he gives Bucky a wary look. “Were you waiting for me?”

Bucky doesn’t answer, instead pointing to another stand of trees up ahead. “We’re nearly at the other side.”

“Great,” Steven mutters. “And then we’ll have to walk across spinning poles over a spike pit.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” Bucky says, stepping out onto the next beam. It slips a little, but settles in place, and he strides forth quickly. All joking aside, the sooner he’s down from this thing and has his feet on good earth-

“‘Gyptian?’”

There is a low scraping sound, like a blade drawn across a rock, and Bucky turns to see Steven frozen in place. He’s halfway across a beam, grains of sand cascading down. Beneath him the beam is breaking apart, stone crumbling to dust under his feet. Steven takes a hesitant step back, trying to reach the nearest pillar, but the whole beam shifts with him, sliding along to the edge of its supporting column.

Bucky measures the distance between them, and it is a gap that he can’t leap without dislodging more stones, and Steven is in no state to jump over to him.

He can see it, clear as water, the wasp’s broken body floating in the canal below.

“Run!” Bucky shouts, charging forward.

The beam tilts, nearly sending Steven tumbling over. He throws his arms out, spinning them back and forth as he stumbles forward a few steps. Bucky reaches the end of his beam, his boots skidding across solid flooring as he runs across to the other one, the whole platform shaking. It feels desperately unstable as he races out, the beams sliding under the force of his footfalls, turning this way and that, and when he comes within arms reach of Steven he digs in his heels, feeling the whole structure start to give.

Steven latches on to his outstretched hand and Bucky hauls him along, each step sending the stones falling away and shattering on the ground below.

There is nothing beneath his feet, no stone or sand, and Bucky falls forward, slamming onto hard stone.

He coughs, his face in the dirt, and Steven collapses down with him, hand still tightly gripped around Bucky’s wrist.

It takes him a few seconds to gather his senses, and it’s only cold stone under his hands instead of moss that tells him they made it across. Beside him Steven is sprawled on his back, his eyes wide and sightless, his narrow chest rising and falling as he gasps for breath. Though he is pale and shaking, his grip on Bucky’s wrist is like iron.

“Shh, it’s alright drágo,” Bucky murmurs, keeping his voice soft as though calming a spooked horse. “You’re alright.”

He eases Steven’s fingers loose one by one, white marks left on his skin that slowly fade. Steven whines, high in his throat, and Bucky keeps a hand on his forearm, gentle contact as he sits up and checks their surroundings. The platform they’re lying on seems sturdy enough, wreathed in vines and climbers, and continues for some distance.

“Up we get,” Bucky says, rolling onto his feet and pulling Steven up. He weighs nothing as Bucky picks him up and sets him on his feet, a hand on his back in case his knees give way.

He can feel the moment Steven recovers, the second between lax in his arms to taut, and withdraws before Steven can shove him away.

“I’m fine,” Steven snaps, and stalks off into the tangle of vines.

Stubborn, petulant gazhe, Bucky should have let him fall.

They walk in silence for a while, the ziggurat looming ahead of them. Steven fidgets, glancing Bucky’s way now and then, and seems to be gearing himself up to say something. Whenever Bucky
gives him an expectant look he turns away again, and goes back to his fidgeting.
“Thank you,” he mutters at last, as though the words are costly.
“Think nothing of it,” Bucky shrugs. “You’re no use to me dead.”
“Oh,” Steven clutches a hand to his chest. “I’m so touched. You’re such a gentleman.”
“Damned wasp,” Bucky grumbles. “Go sting someone else.”

Steven pauses, staring at Bucky’s back as he continues on ahead. “What did you call me?”
“A wasp.” Bucky turns back to him and reaches out to ruffle his hair, getting an indignant yelp for it.
“Small and loud and a nuisance.”

Steven yanks his head out of range and smooths back his hair. “Well, you’re a horse’s ass.”
Whatever else he has to say is cut short as they approach another crossing, carved stone beams supported by pillars. On this occasion they are curved and interlocking, creating the shape of a many petalled flower.

Bucky looks down to see a reservoir below, the afternoon sunlight filtering down from above creating a delicate pattern on the still water.

Steven looks understandably wary, looking around for another way across. Showing concern will only get him stung, and fighting will waste time, so Bucky unceremoniously grabs him by the hand.
“What?” Steven snaps as Bucky drags him along. “Hey! Stop it.”

As tempting as it is to throw Steven over his shoulder and get moving, Bucky would no doubt get a kick in the balls for his troubles.
“Háide,” he says cheerfully, tightening his grip as Steven tries to pull free. “Come on.”

Steven stops struggling as soon as they are walking over the interlocking stones, keeping close to Bucky and taking pains to put his feet exactly where his have been. It brings a memory to mind, sharp and clear, and Bucky speaks without thinking.
“You remind me of my little sister, walking in the snow.”

Steven doesn’t look up, too focused on his task and the reservoir far below. “What?”
“She used to follow my footsteps in the snow, so her feet wouldn’t get cold.”

She complained if he walked too fast, that his strides were too long, stepping daintily from boot print to boot print, her skirts hiked up to her knees.

He should have kept his mouth shut.
“You have a sister?” Steven asks, the words finally filtering in. “Do you have any brothers? You people have big families, isn’t that right?”
Bucky hisses, but that doesn’t deter him.
“Do you really live in covered wagons? All of you?” Steven chatters on. “Isn’t it a tight squeeze, all packed in there like fish in a barrel? And are your-”

“Be quiet!” Bucky snaps, and gives his hand a sharp tug.
Steven shuts his mouth, and doesn’t say another word.

There is only silence as they reach the other side of the stone lattice, and silence as they walk across another wide platform, leaves and twisting vines winding across the floor. On the other side is a wide stone walkway, mirroring the one they had crossed with such misfortune. Steven doesn’t take Bucky’s hand, just walks behind him, his head bowed as he focuses on putting one foot in front of the other.

They cross without incident, though the air between them grows thicker, like the oppressive weight of an oncoming storm.

There is some respite when they reach the other side. The platform is covered with grass and flowers, soft and yielding under his feet. There is sweet fragrance of myrtle and mulberries as they brush past the shrubs stretching their roots out in shallow earth.
“I don’t have a family,” Steven says abruptly. “There’s only my mother.”

It feels like a peace offering, and Bucky takes it as such. “That’s family enough.”
Steven is quiet for a while, though it is a thoughtful silence rather than a sullen one. He draws sweet scented leaves between his fingers as they walk.
“Are you really from Egypt?”
Bucky snorts, shaking his head. “No.”
“Then why are you called ‘Gyptians?’
“I don’t know,” Bucky murmurs. “It’s not a name that we chose. You forced it upon us. Called us kings of Egypt, when in truth we were dalits.”
Steven doesn’t bristle at the accusatory tone, but it clearly troubles him. “Does it cause offence when I call you ‘Gyptian?”
“Yes.” There is a lot more Bucky could say on the matter, but he leaves it at that.
“What should I call you?”
Bucky hesitates, turning to look at Steven. There is no guile in his expression, no trickery that Bucky can see. “Rom,” he says quietly. “We are Rom.”
“Rom,” Steven repeats, though his gazhe tongue is unable to roll the r. “Rom.”
Bucky nods, approving, and keeps walking.

“I don’t know what I am,” Steven says.
It’s the kind of nonsense Bucky has heard from gazho before, and will never understand. “You are you,” he says.
“I mean I don’t know where I am from.” Steven picks a myrtle leaf, crushing it between his fingers. “I remember a ship. My father was a trader, and the Shah was unhappy with his shipment of wood, so he killed him. He burned down the ship, and took my mother and me for… for the inconvenience.” Steven rolls the leaf back and forth, staining his fingers green. “The palace staff say he was a great man once, a great leader, but now he sees treachery at every turn. He thought his own brother conspired against him, and had his eyes plucked out. If he could do that to his own brother I suppose we are lucky he let us live at all.” He casts the crushed leaf aside, rubbing the green from his skin. “Still, it seems strange to call something home, a place I have never been. Perhaps I will finally go there when I die.”
He shakes his head, striking out ahead as if he could leave the memory hanging in the air behind him, to trouble him no more.
It doesn’t work. They will follow you across the ocean and the vast desert, snapping at your heels.

“I heard tell that Persia was an empire without slaves,” Bucky says. Why does he ask? What does he care?
“I am not a slave,” Steven says, and the words are bitter. “I am a spoil of war. And the Empire is always at war.”
“But you can buy your freedom, can you not?” Bucky points out. “It is considered a noble deed to free a slave who has done you good service.”
Steven falls into a troubled silence, his eyes lowered, and he seems to diminish before Bucky’s eyes. “That is not meant to soothe you,” Bucky hastens to add. Why does he care? “No amount of petty privileges make amends for not being a free man.” Bucky walks towards him, hand twitching with the urge to touch, to offer something. “We will find my brothers, and we will leave this cursed place. You will live in freedom, I promise you.”
Steven murmurs something under his breath, woeful and inaudible, and Bucky cocks his head to one side, trying to catch his eye.
“I have a bero,” he says with a quick smile, and Steven finally looks up at him. “A boat.” Bucky gestures with one hand, cupping his palm and rocking it up and down, miming a boat on open waters. Steven’s mouth twitches up in a smile.
“You have a boat?”
Bucky nods, and the words spill out with sudden ease. His bero, with its patched sail and fishing net. The Black Sea, and the sun like silver on the waves. And Steven listens intently, whatever weight that had been pulling down his shoulders slipping away.

The moment passes, and they walk on, pushing their way through sweet-scented shrubs and tall
spikes of flowers. There are more shades of blue here than Bucky has ever seen, in the dense petals of nigella flowers and tall spires of iris, and he could so easily get lost seeking out every shade. They come at last to a set of wooden beams stretching out towards a rose covered terrace. Though he could walk alone and unaided, Steve follows behind him along a plank. It does not slip, and their steps do not falter, but Steven stays close all the same. When they reach the other side, they walk over to the railing to look out on the city again.

The sun hangs low in the sky, staining the golden stone in shades of rose and peach. The air is almost too sweet to breathe from the abundance of roses, the rich damask blossoms like heavy velvet to the touch.

Bucky cups a bloom in his hand, a beautiful thing in a world sorely lacking. He plucks an outer petal, plush and indulgent against his thumb, and tucks it into his belt.

“It’s late,” Steven murmurs, no doubt worrying for his mother. “It will be dark soon.”

“Harder for those guards to see us,” Bucky points out.

“Harder for us to see them,” Steve counters. He points to the stepped terraces of the ziggurat, rising past the high wall surrounding the garden. It is close enough for Bucky to see the pillar holding up each platform. To see the carved statues at the entrance either side of the stairway that climbs up into the sky.

“The Esagila?” Bucky asks, and Steve’s finger twitches south, to the very center of the city. Far less impressive, the Esagila is a temple and courtyard in the shadow of the ziggurat, surrounded by a wide wall patrolled by guards.

“We’ll need to climb the wall,” Steven explains. “I don’t know of any other cracks to squeeze through.”

“Not a problem,” Bucky assures him. The pillars holding up this side of the terrace look promising, and he vaults over the railing, gripping the top as he braces his feet against the curved stone. He gives Steve a sly grin. “I’m sure you don’t need my help getting down.”

Before Steve can answer he drops out of sight, his boots scraping against the stone as he moves from handhold to handhold, quickly working his way the ground.

He looks up to see Steven climbing down a twisted willow, his movements slower but no less assured.

A tenacious little thing, his wasp, his baxt.

“Hurry up!” Bucky calls up, and gets a stream of curses in return. His mouth twitches up, and when he walks over to offer a hand Steven slaps it out of his way, and drops to the ground.

“Come on then,” Steven huffs, out of breath. “I thought you were in a hurry.”

Chapter End Notes

Chaves - child
Baxt - luck
Klávo - ritually unclean
Natsiya - nation
 Háide- let’s go!

The Hanging Gardens of Babylon were one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, described as a remarkable feat of engineering with an ascending series of tiered gardens containing a wide variety of trees, shrubs, and vines. Its name is derived from the Greek word kremastós (κρεμαστός, lit. "overhanging"), which has a broader meaning than the modern English word "hanging" and refers to trees being planted on a raised structure such as a terrace.
According to one legend, the Hanging Gardens were built by King Nebuchadnezzar II (who ruled between 605 and 562 BC), for his Median wife Queen Amytis, because she missed the green hills and valleys of her homeland.
Chapter Summary

He swallows, his throat aching, and would kindness hurt so if he knew the taste of it better?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When the sun descends to the horizon, casting long shadows across the city and plunging the streets into darkness, Bucky climbs the garden wall. The stones are rough and uneven, jutting out in some places and recessed in others, and the climb is easy enough. He moves slowly, far more so than if he were travelling alone, waiting for Steven to get a secure handhold below him before moving up a little further. The stones scrape Steven’s hands raw, unweathered by rigging and saltwater, though he doesn’t utter a word of complaint. At least not for the climbing. Bucky, however, gives him plenty to complain about. It comes in a litany hissed under the breath as they scale the high walls; damned Rom with his big arms, followed by long-legged idiot, interspersed with much louder stop it, I’m fine! whenever Bucky points out where to move to next. Bucky’s grin stretches from ear to ear as he listens to the endless stream of complaints railed against him, because not one of them is thief or filth or ‘Gyptian. He reaches the top and pauses, hanging from the ramparts and motioning for Steven to stay where he is. The walkway at the top is not as wide as the others he has seen around the city, and maybe half the span of the outer wall, but three men could easily walk abreast along it. There are two guards further along the wall, standing with their backs to him. They are dressed in gold plate and wearing helmets bearing three sharp spikes on the crown, and each one carries an axe. Bucky watches them, wary of being seen, and pulls the choori from his belt. Steven freezes at the sight of the blade, and Bucky vaults onto the walkway, crouching low as he creeps up behind the nearest guard. He strikes, quick and clean, sinking the choori into the juncture between shoulder and neck and yanking it out again. The blade withdraws far too easily. There should be a spray of arterial blood, the man dying before he has even registered the strike. Instead there is a susurration, like desert winds, and the guard crumbles to dust. Bucky has no time to linger, no time to look in horror at how the sand’s influence has spread. He creeps over to the second guard who grunts, half turning his way. A slash across the throat, and a brief glimpse of hollow sockets lit from within where there should be eyes, and the creature is no more. For a moment Bucky can only stare, and wonder if the moonlight is playing tricks on him. He kneels down, scraping up a handful of sand where an armed guard had stood a moment before. There is no blood, no bone, no golden armour. There is only sand. He curses softly, throwing the handful down. It has already begun. He walks back to the wall, reaching through the square gap of the crenelation for Steven. For once he doesn’t hiss in defiance, reaching up to grab the offered hand and letting Bucky haul him up with ease. If he notices the piles of sand slowly being dispersed by the wind, he shows no understanding of what has transpired. From their vantage point they can see further into the city. Dense grids of square-sided towers with narrow walkways between them lie in every direction. The Processional Way bisects the city itself,
the heavily guarded, tree-lined walkway leading straight to their goal. The Esagila itself is housed in a courtyard surrounded by square towers of varying sizes, sticking out from the sand like jagged teeth. A few sparse looking trees cling to the shade of the inner walls, but nothing grows under the direct glare of the sun. Within that is a second courtyard, and there stands the temple itself. Several armoured guards bearing bows pace back and forth across the flat roof. Their movements look odd, even from a distance, though Bucky can’t put his finger on what is so strange about them.

If he had hoped that the guards would be lessened by night falling, he would have been disappointed. “Damn it,” Steven mutters, looking down at the guards patrolling the thoroughfare, their way lit by torches. “What did you think?” Bucky murmurs. “That we could walk up to the door?” “Yes,” Steven admits regretfully. Bucky pokes his head through a gap in the crenellations and looks down. The light has almost faded completely, but the waning moon provides some light, hopefully enough to find a way down by. A guard steps out from behind a tower, turning onto the narrow road that runs alongside the garden wall, and Bucky jerks back, dropping down below the stones. He puts a finger to his lips before Steven can say anything, and cautiously peers over again. The guard, wearing a gold breastplate and spiked helmet much like the others, walks slowly past, head moving from side to side. A sword hangs at their hip, clattering lightly against their mail surcoat as they march. The sight of them is an itch under Bucky’s skin. They are patrolling the streets, and Bucky can only guess how many there are, or what route they are taking. “We can’t go down,” he whispers to Steven, who peeks over the wall and drops down beside him again a moment later. “Damn it.”

Bucky gnaws on his lower lip, turning around to get another look at the street below. The last light of day has faded, and the moon and stars offer a weak substitute. Alone, he would climb down without hesitation, and fight any guard he came across. The streets are narrow, and the towers sheer-sided, they would not be able to surround him for long. He could scramble up a wall and over their heads, and lead them on a merry chase before shaking them off. He glances over at Steven, scanning the surroundings for other guards. But he’s not alone. He doesn’t doubt that the little wasp would put up a fight, more so if Bucky provided him with a blade to sting with. But what if he got hurt? Bucky’s thoughts shy away from the idea, as unpalatable as it was in the gardens. Bucky has no love for gazho, nor is that likely to change. But this one? This one is a scrawny, insufferable, mulish wasp, but he has spirit. There are no guards on the towers. Bucky frowns, scanning the city rooftops. There are guards posted along the Processional Way, at the entrances and rooftops of the temples scattered around the city. There are guards walking atop the outer walls, and over the gates. There are guards standing on the outermost towers, facing out to the desert. But there are no guards on those towers between the garden wall and the Esagila. “Steven,” Bucky raises his head above the crenellations, looking up and down. “How far can you jump?” “What?” Steven looks over, and with notable speed figures out what Bucky is suggesting. “No.” “Oh, come on.” “No.” “It’s not that far.” The coast is clear for now, but they are wasting time. “No.” Bucky grins. He knows exactly what to do. “It’s alright, I didn’t think you’d be able to do it.” Bucky climbs up onto the stones. It’s not far. He licks his lips. It’s not that far. “After all, you’re only a little thing.”
Bucky jumps, feeling the exhilarating rush of wind against his body as the tower rushes up to meet him. He bends his knees, keeping his back straight, and resists the urge to brace himself. He lands on both feet, toppling forward and catching himself with his hands before he plants face first in the dirt. He scrambles up and turns just in time to see Steven jump across, panic and stubborn determination warring across his features. He lands awkwardly, stumbling forward and crashing into Bucky, who grabs him by the waist before he keels over.

“See?” Steven manages before burying his face in Bucky’s shoulder, adrenaline shaking through his limbs.

“I should never have doubted you,” Bucky grins. “Bet you can’t do it again.”

Steven straightens up to glare at him. “Watch me.”

Bucky manages to stop him from running off long enough to offer a little advice, checking that there are no eyes in their direction before sending him on his way. He offers up his thanks to Babylon’s narrow streets as he gives chase, leaping from tower to tower on Steven’s heels as he throws himself from rooftop to rooftop, gaining confidence with every jump.

Bucky could catch him easily, overtake him as they traverse the dense cluster of buildings to their goal. But what would that gain him?

He catches up when Steven has reached the final tower, taking his time making the jump across and pacing back and forth along the flat roofs, ostensibly to check for guards below. In truth he is giving Steven time to catch his breath.

Maybe Steven understands it, as when Bucky finally joins him he doesn’t boast, nor does he complain about being cosseted. He is still a little out of breath, sweat beading on his brow. But his smile is wide and wonderous, his pale eyes shining.

Bucky crouches against the wall beside him, and takes a look through a gap in the ramparts. There are two guards posted at the entrance to the Esagila, another patrolling the walkway above the courtyard.

“Wait here,” Bucky whispers.

“What?” Steve starts to argue. “No, I-”

“Wait.” Bucky draws his sword, feeling the familiar heft and weight, and Steven’s eyes widen.

Bucky waits until the guards back is to them, and makes the jump, hoping for both their sakes that Steven will stay put until he signals for him to cross.

He lands lightly, crouching down in the shadows, and stalks after the guard. He is wearing armour much like the others, but his helmet is fashioned like the head of a bird, and he carries a curved bow and a quiver of arrows.

His movements are strange, like that of a puppet on strings, but his neck is exposed, and that is where Bucky aims. He swings his sword in a short arc, slicing into the exposed collar of the guards armour, a little too low. Again he expects to meet resistance, for the blade to connect with shoulder blade or collarbone, but it slices cleanly thought. The guard barely has time to cry out, head tipping back, before he crumbles into a heap of sand at Bucky’s feet.

Bucky curses his misfortune, and the vanity of kings, and turns back to where his wasp is in hiding.

Steve makes the jump at Bucky’s signal, landing gracelessly but in one piece, and Bucky stalks over to join him, sword out to his side.

“Where’s the guard?” Steve asks, looking around.

“Gone.” Bucky leaves it at that, more pressing matters at hand.

Steve doesn’t push him for further details, following silently as Bucky walks along the wall, looking for a way down for him.

“It is worse than I feared,” Bucky says. “The sand’s influence has begun to spread.”

“Rom,” Steve says with concern. “We are in a desert.”


“You’re speaking in riddles,” Steven grumbles. “What are you talking about?”

Bucky shakes his head. There’s no time, though the irony is not lost on him. He pats his shoulder.
“On my back.”

Steven recoils. “What?”
“‘There’s no time,’” Bucky hisses. “‘We need to find the brothers. They can still put a stop to this.’”
“You’re wearing a sword, Rom,” Steven points to him. “It’ll cut me in two.”

For a second Bucky can only stare at him. He had expected a fight, some kind of resistance, and the very real possibility of leaving the wasp behind. Bucky hadn’t expected him to be practical.

Chastened, he withdraws the sword from the sheath on his back and slides it into his belt, where it hangs at his hip. “Better?”

Steve nods. “Much. Turn around.”

Bucky obliges, and Steve climbs up onto his back, arms wrapped around his shoulders, knees bracketing his waist. He weighs almost nothing, though his cheek is warm where it presses to Bucky’s shoulder. Something about it makes Bucky’s stomach clench, an odd sort of ache over something of little import.

Bucky climbs down the wall, hands finding gaps and proud edges as he braces the soles of his boots against rough stone. Steve keeps still as possible, plastered to his back, though the slight weight of him makes little difference to the climb down.

He lets go before Bucky reaches the floor, dropping down and stepping back, spots of colour high on his cheeks.

“Are you alright?” Bucky asks, returning his sword to its sheath.

Steven nods, all words fled, and points across the courtyard to the entrance of a shrine.

“This way,” he says abruptly, finally finding his tongue.

The courtyard is unguarded, and they make their way across. There is a broad archway leading into the shrine, beyond a carved relief of a bearded figure flanked by four feathered wings.

“That is Marduk,” Steven says softly. “The shrine is dedicated to him.”

Bucky regards the carving with suspicion, as if it might burst into life, and Steven leads him into the temple.

They find themselves in an antechamber lit by torches along the wall. Bucky walks forward slowly, fingers dragging along the wall as he finds his way through the gloom, until Steven has the foresight to lift down one of the torches and hand it over.

His feet knock against decorative vases clustered together in the corner, the brittle sound of ceramics like a clanging bell in the silence. Bucky flinches, but no army comes bursting in to attack them, and after a moment of waiting he moves forwards again, towards a recess hidden in shadows.

There is a door in the recess, and the torchlight makes its surface gleam. A golden door, and upon it that same bearded figure, his wings outstretched as he does battle against a monstrous foe. The creature has the body of a lion, and the wings of a bird. Its head is a grinning, sabre toothed skull. In the flickering light the figures seem to move, the creature’s paw raised to strike.

Despite the lingering heat, a chill trickles down Bucky’s spine, and he pushes the door open.

They walk into a prison.

The stone floors are decked in thick, plush rugs, and the walls lined with bas reliefs in gold of gods and monsters in battle. There are three beds set a distance apart, each draped with rich silks and scattered with soft cushions.

Again one wall is a low table, it’s surface decked with platters of fruits and sweetbreads. The fruits; pears and apples and persimmons, have long since spoiled, their skins bloomed with mould and the plates sticky with rot. Between the platters are delicate golden cups and glass flasks filled with wine, left to sour and evaporate, until nothing more than a dark stain remains.

There are no windows looking out onto the city. No trees or flowers to bring life to the stale air.

They walk a prison.

There are torches spaced along the walls, between the reliefs, and Steven takes the torch from Bucky’s hand, walking around the room and lighting each one. The golden walls reflect the flames back and forth, bathing them in a shifting golden light as the figures around them seem to crawl and writhe as if alive.
“They’re not here,” Steven says, setting the torch in an empty sconce. “Yes they are,” Bucky rasps.

He walks to the center of the chamber, to the floor where the light doesn’t quite reach. There amidst the rugs and pillows are three shapes, shapes that might have first been mistaken for piled up cushions and throws. As Bucky moves closer he sees a hand, fingers splayed. A foot encased in a jewelled slipper. A mouth open in a rictus grin, displaying a gold tooth.

The rug underfoot is stiff, the air filled with the cloying scent of decay, and Bucky falls to his knees. They are dead. His three brothers are dead. He pushes them onto their backs one by one, lets sightless brown eyes so unlike his own turn towards the ceiling.

The brothers had been dressed in the finest silks, in robes edged with gold thread and jewels. They had been given wine and fruit, these prisoners three, and then had their throats slit.

What had the Shah promised them? What had he threatened them with, to see this madness through? It doesn’t matter, the deed is done. They had served their purpose, created the hourglass, and the Shah had them slaughtered. Worse, their spirits are trapped under stone, restless and bitter.

“Zhávo mánge, phrals,” Bucky whispers, his eyes prickling. “Zhávo mánge.”

It falls to him now, and Bucky trembles with the knowledge. He can’t do it, he can’t face the hourglass and see the moments of his wretched life spool out before him. The sorrows and the blood spilled, the harm done against him and by his own hand laid out like a tapestry.

He should push Steven away. He should get back on his feet, find the hourglass, and face what hell awaits him. He does not. The hand in his hair twists too hard to be soothing, the rug under his hands is stiff with blood, comfort imperfect and desperate and more than he deserves.

He swallows, his throat aching, and would kindness hurt so if he knew the taste of it better? Steven shushes him again, and Bucky rubs the base of his thumb across his nose.

“Bucky.” His voice is a sharp rasp against the light and shadows. “Shh,” Steve murmurs, short fingernails digging into his scalp. “Bucky,” he says again. “That’s my name.”

Steven doesn’t still, not for an instant, just scratches his fingers through the tangles in Bucky’s hair, murmuring the name as if committing it to memory.

It is no place to linger, a tomb of gold, and Bucky wrenches himself out of Steven’s hold and onto his feet long before he wants to.

“We have to go.” He coughs, his throat dry. “We have to find the hourglass.”

Steven looks aghast. “After all this you can’t be after treasure now.” He looks at the glinting gold around them. “What are you not telling me? What is this talk of sand?”

Bucky shakes his head, looking around the tomb. “I can’t tell you.”

“How am I supposed to help if I don’t know what’s going on?” Steve asks, still knelt on the floor with Bucky’s tears soaked into his shirt.

Bucky is bound to his secrets, but is he not also bound to his wasp? “There is a dagger hidden in this room,” he says. “I must find it.”

Steven points to the choori at Bucky’s hip. “You already have a dagger.” “Not like this one.”
Steven gets up and walks over to the nearest bed, stripping back the covers and turning the pillows. Bucky watches him set to work, calm and methodical as he searches for something he doesn’t understand, a task not put before him, but taken on anyway. Perhaps that is what loosens Bucky’s tongue.

“The brothers were Zargari, a clan of Rom goldsmiths to the east. The finest craftsmen the world will ever see.” The words tumble from his mouth, spilling like wine from an overflowing cup. “When our ancestors fled Bharât, they scattered to the winds. Some made their way north to the great tundras, while others ventured south in search of Pharaohs, and one tribe crossed the desert.” Bucky closes his eyes, and can hear his father’s voice, telling tales over the campfire. “They found great power hidden in the sands, great and terrible. A power that can raise cities and warriors from dust, can hold back the march of time itself, but the sand corrupts all that it touches, and one by one mankind fell before it.” Bucky pauses, looking down at the brothers. “The Zargari stopped the sands of time before it was too late, forged a dagger of gold to control it, and swore to never allow its release again.”

Steven listens to the story in silence, sitting down on the edge of the bed.

“What must you do?” he asks when Bucky falls silent.

“I must find the dagger, and drive it into the heart of the hourglass.” And all the things I survived once I must endure again. “Reclaim the sands. Then I will see them returned to the Zargari.” Or lost to the desert.

When Steven does not offer any more questions, Bucky begins his search anew, checking each brother carefully to see if the dagger is hidden on them.

It is distasteful, unclean, to lay his hands upon the dead. He does not linger, whispering his regrets to their bones, asking for a forgiveness that he will not receive.

It is one more desecration in a wrongful death, a cruel death, and it slices into his heart. It sticks in his throat, like a ball of molten iron, to see them weighed down under so many stones. To die under clay and not under sunlight. No one mourned when they died, or broke bread in their name.

He offers one last prayer to their spirits, that they might show him mercy, before moving on to search the room while Steven goes back to the beds.

“You believe this?” Steven asks as he moves to the next bed. “That there are… cursed sands?”

“We are standing within them,” Bucky says. “A city that rose out of the desert overnight.”

Steven pales, looking up at the golden walls around them, amber light flickering across his features.

“It did,” he whispers, though it does not seem enough to convince him.

The dagger is not hidden underneath the tables of rotten fruit, nor along the golden walls, and Bucky starts to despair.

“At least they lived in comfort,” Steve mutters to himself. “Soft beds and silk sheets.”

Bucky snatches up a wine flask and throws it across the room, snarling as it shatters against the image of a golden lion.

“You think this is comfort?” he takes up a golden plate, fear and frustration suddenly overwhelming him, and throws it after the flask. “This is a tomb!”

“Bucky,” Steven says, placating.

“We don’t belong under dirt.” Bucky snatches up a cup, but doesn’t throw it. “They don’t belong under dirt.”

This time it is Steven walking to him, hands raised, voice lowered as if calming a spooked horse. He doesn’t understand, why can’t he understand?

“We were not made to stand still,” Bucky turns the cup around in his hand. “We move with the seasons, we always have, treading lightly on the earth. But you,” He glares at Steven. “You raze the meadows and build your cities, you crush the earth under pillars of stone that will stand long after you have gone. Stay still, you tell us! Send your roots deep into the earth, become stone like us. And we do, we turn our backs on our ancestors and the ways of our people, and yet it is not enough for you.”
Steven wraps his hand over Bucky’s, prising his fingers loose of the cup and letting it fall to the floor. In his other hand is a bundle of red silk.

“What do you need?”

The words come forth without warning. “To be free.”

Steven nods, rubbing his fingers over the pale marks on Bucky’s palm from clenching the cup. “Alright,” he says calmly. “How do we set them free?”

Bucky swallows, his thoughts a tangle of rope, and the gentle press of Steven’s hands, of his words, seems to tease them apart again. “Fire,” he chokes out.

“You build a pyre? You dress them in their finery and surround them with their worldly goods?”

Bucky hesitates. “Yes.”

Steven gives him a cautious smile. “My people once did the same. They would build a boat, and fill it with all the things their dead had gathered in life. Then they would set it aflame, and push it out to sea.”

Steven hands him the bundle of silk. When Bucky unrolls it, the dagger is lying in his hand. The hilt is sand glass, with a delicate filigree of gold twisting from pommel to guard, the blade curving to a sharp point.

Steven takes another look around the tomb. “We burn it all.”

Since the moment Bucky first took up his father’s sword he has borne his burdens alone. He took pride in it, fierce and bitter, when pride was all he had left. He would have entered the city alone, he would have sought out the brothers alone. He would have died alone.

The thought comes to him as Steven drags a mattress across the courtyard, adding it to the pyre. He is no longer alone, and at some point his wasp has ceased being a nuisance and become…something else.

Bucky pushes the thought aside, lifting the silk-wrapped body of his kinsman and placing it with the others upon the pyre.

The dagger sits at his hip, tucked under his belt alongside the choori. The length of silk it was wrapped in tied around his waist. Red to ward off vengeful spirits, to remember that he still lives. The torches are laid around the pyre, the silks and rugs catching quickly, and although Bucky would stay until they were burned to ash, he cannot. Soon enough the fire will draw attention, and they can’t be here when it does.

“Come,” he says softly. “We have to go.”

Steve nods, his pale skin ruddy in the firelight, his mouth drawn.

In the restless light of the fire Bucky searches for a way up the wall and onto the walkway. He unsheaths his sword and slaps his shoulder, dropping down onto one knee. Steven makes no complaints, but there is something odd about the way he holds his arms around Bucky’s shoulders and lets himself be lifted up. He is no heavier than before, but there is a weight about him. Perhaps it is all in Bucky’s head, and he imagines the burden he shoulders has a physical weight.

“Hold on,” he murmurs, touching a hand lightly to Steven’s wrist. The grip around him tightens in reply, and Bucky scales the wall quickly, the firelight throwing handholds and purchases into sharp relief before him.

Sparks and embers fly up into the night sky above them, and he hopes they take with them those poor, restless spirits, that they may find peace.

Once they reach the top Steve is quick to scramble down, feet touching the walkway before Bucky has finished climbing up. He walks on ahead, looking out for guards as they follow the wall towards the ziggurat.

His father’s sword stays in Bucky’s hand as he follows, one eye on the pyre in the courtyard below. The high walls keep the flames hidden, but he doubts it will be long before the smoke and embers call attention. With luck by then they will be far away.

Steve stops at the far corner of the wallwalk and turns to wait for him, pointing out to what lies
ahead. Now they are in sight of the Etemenanki, Bucky sees that it is not a simple matter of walking up to the door. The great ziggurat that has loomed over them as they crossed the city stands within a high stone wall, accessed only by entryways on the south and east side. The high walls and four entrances are heavily guarded by the same sand guards that patrol the city streets, dressed in golden armour and wielding swords and spears.

The Etemenanki itself is a horror to behold, the lowest tier of the stepped pyramid more than a mile across. Each level after is shorter, creating the effect of steps leading into the sky, the great stairway rising up its center flanked by great stone statues of lions and bulls with the faces of men. Somewhere at the peak is the treasury, and the hourglass within it.

Steven draws in a deep breath beside him, letting it out as a sigh. “How will we get up there?” Bucky has no answer, only to put one foot in front of the other until they reach their end. “Come on,” he says, and walks over to the ramparts, seeking a way down.

There is a promising looking gouge in the wall, though he can’t imagine what would have made it, and he vaults over, dropping down to catch the jagged edge. He moves sideways along the wall, crablike, his boots making their own little gouges in the stone, and calls Steven to follow him. He climbs down while Bucky waits, one hand out ready to catch him if he should slip. But his wasp is sure-footed, and makes his way down with steady hands and clear eyes, and soon their feet are on solid ground again.

There are a scant few towers between them and the ziggurat, but they are low, as if in deference to the building’s magnitude. They are spaced widely apart, so even Bucky cannot jump across like they did to reach the Esagila.

Bucky gnaws at the inside of his cheek, pacing back and forth. They are close to the river, he can hear the sound of it somewhere nearby, bisecting the city. Maybe they can follow its course around to the far side of the ziggurat, and scale the wall there?

Before he can form any further plan, the ground shakes with approaching footsteps. Steven grabs Bucky by the arm and hauls him back, ducking them behind a low tower.

Despite Steven’s panicked hiss, Bucky sidles up to the corner and looks around, catching a brief glimpse of a procession of guards marching past, en route to the Esagila. The pyre has been discovered.

“Now’s our chance,” Steven hisses, tugging on his arm again and pointing down a narrow side path to the Etemenanki. There are guards still patrolling the wallwalks, but the ones at the entryways have been called to join the march. “Come on!”

Bucky nods in understanding, taking the lead and creeping down the path, his shoulders scraping against the narrow stone walls. He stops before reaching the end, peering out into the alleyway to check that the coast is clear. He can still hear the sound of marching feet, some distance away, and up on the walls the guards pace back and forth, indifferent to the smell of smoke on the air.

The way seems clear, and Bucky steps out, sword out by his side, and gestures for Steven to follow him. He approaches the entryway and finds it unguarded, moonlight painting the grounds beyond in shades of dust and indigo.

He twitches his sword towards Steven, and steps through the gate, turning around to check the wasp is still with him.

Steven is at his heels, his head down, and unaware of the company he has with him. He approaches the entryway and finds it unguarded, moonlight painting the grounds beyond in shades of dust and indigo.

He twitches his sword towards Steven, and steps through the gate, turning around to check the wasp is still with him.

Steven is at his heels, his head down, and unaware of the company he has with him. There must have been a guard further along the alley, one left behind while the others attended the fire. He wears the spiked helmet and breastplate of the others they had seen in the city, but this time Bucky can clearly see the ravaged features. Papery skin is drawn taut across a crumbling skull, and where its eyes should be there are bare sockets, burning with an unearthly light.

“Steven!” Bucky hisses, grabbing him by the shirt and hauling him forward. The guard unhinges its jaw and lets out a low, rasping cry, and Steven spins around to stare at it. The creature raises its sword, but Bucky is faster, pulling Steven to his left while striking out with his
right. The first blow slashes across the creature's chest, and does nothing. It cuts through armour and body but the creature only hisses in defiance. The second strike sends the sword through its gut, the tip punching out the other side, and the creature brings down its sword.

The blow is easily blocked, and Bucky steps back, hauling Steven with him. The last strike aims for the creature's throat, slicing a neat line from ear to ear. Sand spills from the wound where blood should flow, and the creature drops to the ground, crumbling to dust.

“What… what happened to it?” Steven gasps, gripping Bucky’s arm tightly. “What happened to its eyes?”

“The sands of time corrupt the living,” Bucky says grimly. “Mortal hands are not meant for such things.”

Steve looks down at the dust, wind dispersing the grains until there is nothing left. “That was a man?”

“It was,” Bucky nods. “As long as the sands flow freely that fate awaits every last creature on this earth.”

Steven swears softly, and Bucky leads him away into the grounds, keeping close to the wall.

“We can’t stay here,” Bucky says urgently, searching for a way around. “We need to find a way in.”

Steven clenches his jaw, resolute, and points the the western face of the Etemenanki, piercing the heavens like a blade.

“This way,” he says, moving forward, and Bucky trusts him enough to follow.

Chapter End Notes

Zhávo mánge, phrals - I’m sorry brothers

Roma tribes have customs and rituals regarding death, and the belief in the supernatural varies slightly from tribe to tribe. For Roma, death is a senseless, unnatural occurrence that should anger those who die. At the approach of death, Roma are concerned not only with the pain and heartbreak of the final separation from a loved one. They are also worried about the possible revenge the dead, or muló, might seek against those who remain in the world of the living.

Touching the body of the deceased is discouraged, for fear of marimé, or contamination. Because of this he or she is washed and dressed, in the finest clothes, immediately before death.

- Extract from Death Rituals and Customs Patrin
The Darro

Chapter Summary

“Little mongoose,” Bucky murmurs. Whatever spell had befallen him breaks, and Steven’s eyes narrow to a scowl. “What did you call me?”

“Mongoose.” Bucky sets him on the ground before he starts kicking. “A mere slip of a creature, but it can kill a snake.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The lowest storey of the Etemenanki stands 300 feet tall and a mile in length, its straight sided walls a challenge even for Bucky to climb. The level above it, receded in to make a vast stone step, stands at an equal height, and beyond that a third, a fourth, a fifth. Level upon level reaching into the clouds, until finally a golden citadel stands at the summit.

There is a vast stairway leading up to the entrance of the ziggerut, high up on the third storey. The wide steps are flanked by statues of gigantic winged bulls and lions with the heads of curly-bearded kings. Carved animals too fantastical to be real decorate the walls between the wide columns, their eyes and claws and wings picked out in gold.

Aside from the entrance high up at the top of the staircase there seems to be no other way in or out. The walls seem to bend and twist as Bucky stares up at them, craning his neck. If he looks too long his stomach churns, his eyes ache, and he has to turn away, pressing the heel of his hands to his eyes until the sensation passes.

The pale stones seem to reflect the moonlight as Bucky walks the length of the ziggurat, searching for a way in. Steven keeps close to his side, watching out for guards walking the walls encircling the Etemenanki, but his movements are slow, his limbs slack. They have been travelling through the city without pause since morning, racing to reach the three brothers, and Bucky knows how exhausted Steven must be.

In the end they were too late; the brothers were long dead, and the task of retrieving the sands falls to Bucky instead.

Steven stumbles again, knocking against Bucky’s hip, and he turns to steady him, shushing his mumbled apologies. Out of the corner of his eye he sees something, a darkness where there should be solid mass.

“Steven?” he murmurs. “What is this? Do you know?”

Steven follows where his finger is pointing, to a rectangular gap high up on the wall where bricks should be.

“It’s for ventilation, to let air flow into the chambers,” he says after a minute. “But that must be 200 feet up, you can’t possibly-”

Bucky lips twitch as he moves his sword to his hip. “Can’t I?”

Steven climbs onto his back with a little persuasion, muttering under his breath as Bucky runs his hands over the stones, seeking out a route. He finds a suitable starting point, a jut of brick that he can dig the tips of his fingers into, and hauls them both up.

At ten feet Steven stops mumbling to himself, and tightens his grip around Bucky’s shoulders. The wasp is a considerate passenger, keeping still and close to his back, a weight that he can use to brace his feet against stone and a leverage where he needs it. When he used to climb trees with Rebecca on
his back she was forever turning around, looking over her shoulder at the surrounding forest and throwing him off balance.

At twenty feet the way becomes harder, and he reaches a patch of smooth brickwork. With nothing close to hand and a run of jagged brickwork further above him, Bucky tenses before launching himself upwards, trusting in speed to get him to the next handhold before gravity takes hold of him. The move is ultimately successful, but it gains Steven’s ire, and he refuses to speak a word for the next thirty feet.

At one hundred feet the stones offer less purchase, and he has to move crabwise to the side to climb a crack that twists up through the stonework, no doubt the consequence of building so close to the river.

The further he climbs the slower his pace becomes. While on the lower part of the wall a misstep meant a few days of backache, now it means certain death. And if an archer patrolling the walkway around the ziggurat were to look their way, their arrows would take Steven’s life and not his own. The thought does not comfort Bucky. It weighs on him in a way that Steven’s slight frame doesn’t. Even with so slight a burden his arms start to shake from the strain, and he clenches his teeth, scraping up the last of his reserves as Steven’s voice creeps its way into his ear. Assurances, and directions, and the end being in sight filter their way down to his hands, and when Bucky finally reaches the shaft he chokes back a sudden, shocking sob of relief.

The shaft itself is long and narrow, the ziggurat walls as thick as those that surround the city. The stones are still warm from the sun, though they quickly become colder further in as Bucky hauls them over the edge and eels his way inside. It is too dark to see in the shaft and barely wide enough for the pair of them to lie side by side.

There is no part of him that doesn’t ache as Steven slips from his back, stretching out on the stones beside him, breaths unsteady as though it had been him doing the climbing. Bucky moves onto his hands and knees, ready to crawl his way through the passage, but Steven presses a palm to his shoulder, breath hot against his ear.

“Rest,” he whispers. “Just for a minute.”

Bucky starts to argue, but Steven’s grip on his shoulder stays firm. They’re both exhausted, he knows that, and what transpired in the Esagila still weighs heavily on him. He silently gives way, lowering himself down and rolling onto his side, pressing his back to the cooling stone to give Steven a little more space.

Instead of spreading out, taking the room made available to him, Steven curls up against him, head pressing against the curve of his shoulder. Bucky can feel the flick of his eyelashes as Steven blinks, a strange sensation but not unwelcome, like the brush of a moth’s wings.

In a few moments Steven’s breathing slows, and that light flutter against Bucky’s shoulder stills. Cautiously, his hand unsteady in the darkness, Bucky brushes the tips of his fingers over Steven’s hair, barely touching in case he wakes, and takes a single strand between thumb and forefinger. Gold, he thinks, before sleep finally claims him.

*  

A little after dawn, when the first traces of light seep between the bricks around them, Steven shakes Bucky awake. He flinches, hand reaching for his choora and instead closing around the dagger, and wakes. If it were not for Steven hovering over him Bucky would have sat up and cracked his head on the low roof of the shaft. Instead he blinks at the faint light that catches loose strands of Steven’s hair, and reaches for his waterskin. There is no need to warn Steven to be silent, he already seems to understand the need for stealth.

He offers the first drink to Steven, who takes the skin gratefully, sipping slowly while Bucky scratches his hands through his hair and teases out the tangles. When Steven has drunken his fill Bucky swallows down his own share, before hooking the skin back onto his belts and pointing down the shaft.

Steven nods, waiting as Bucky shifts onto his hands and knees, and starts crawling.
The shaft opens out to an immense vaulted chamber, the walls formed of basalt columns, some splintered and half-formed, others reaching up to the arched ceiling. Lanterns hang from the high arches on long chains, casting a diffuse golden light over the black columns and the intricately tiled floor far below.

“I thought ziggurats were solid stone,” Bucky mumbles. “Built over a tomb like those temples in Egypt.”

“Not this one,” Steve says, craning his neck to study the ceiling. “The Etemenanki is a maze of chambers and temples leading up to the citadel on the highest level.”

“And you know the way there?” Bucky can’t hide his disbelief. Knowing the city is one thing, but for a slave he found on the outer wall to know the inner workings of the great ziggurat seems improbable.

“I have…” Steven hesitates. “I have seen a map.”

Bucky nods, casting his gaze at the basalt columns around them, steep-sided platforms staggered down to the tiled floor. “Well then, you can lead the way.”

In the end it is Bucky who seeks out a way down, sliding from the shaft onto the nearest platform. The rock feels sturdy enough under his feet, and the drops down to the next column are not too taxing.

“Stay close,” he calls up. “Don’t jump either. Lower yourself down by hand as far as you can before letting yourself drop.”

“I know how to fall,” Steven answers crisply, coming out of the shaft feet first and dangling over the edge before sliding down to the platform.

“I’m sure you’ve had plenty of practice,” Bucky huffs, mouth twitching up. “Be careful, Rom.” Steven taps the corner of Bucky’s mouth, presumptuous as ever. “If the wind changes you’ll stay like that.” He lowers himself over the edge of the next platform, feet swinging in the air before letting go. “People might mistake you for having a sunny disposition.”

Bucky watches him descend, something brittle and sweet lodging in his throat, like spun sugar. “Well, we can’t have that.”

They make their way down as quickly as they dare, Steven taking the lead most of the time in some childish urge to get to the bottom first, and Bucky having no reason to stop him. The further down they go, the longer the drops become, until Steven starts waiting for him to go down first. The last drop down to the tiled floor is no worse than the others that came before it, but the diamond shaped tiles spiralling across the floor make Steven dizzy whenever he looks down at them.

“Come on,” Bucky calls up to him. “It’s not far.”

“Give me a minute,” Steven grouses from his perch on the ledge.

“You said that a minute ago.” Bucky’s mouth twists up again. “Well give me another, damn you!”

Bucky holds up his arms. The tiles are no pleasure to look upon, and he much prefers casting his gaze up. “I’ll catch you.”

“Just you try,” Steven snaps. “I’ll aim for your face.”

“Come down, Steven,” Bucky says softly.

Something in his tone must be persuasive, because Steven finally shifts forward until he is sitting on the edge, feet dangling down. He gives himself a push, dropping down like an arrow, and Bucky catches him easily.

Steven lets out a yelp as he’s caught, hands braced against Bucky’s shoulders, and stares down at him with wide eyes. His lashes are a shade darker than his hair, feathered against his cheeks, and to Bucky he resembles some soft, small creature caught in the stare of a viper.

“Little mongoose,” Bucky murmurs.

Whatever spell had befallen him breaks, and Steven’s eyes narrow to a scowl. “What did you call me?”
“Mongoose.” Bucky sets him on the ground before he starts kicking. “A mere slip of a creature, but it can kill a snake.”

“Oh.” The urge to fight falls away as quickly as it had risen up. “How many names are you planning on giving me?”

“Three, of course,” Bucky replies. A Rom needs three names, doesn’t he know that?

Steven frowns at him, but lets the matter drop.

There is a grand entrance to the shrine to their right, high arches and a golden door flanked by statues of winged lions, but Steven points Bucky to the left, and a narrow doorway leading deeper into the ziggurat.

“This way,” he says, and starts walking.

“Wait,” Bucky calls, snagging the sleeve of his shirt. Steven turns back to him, his expression oddly wary as Bucky pulls the choora from his belt.

“Here,” he says, holding it out. “You’ve seen the guards, and I doubt even your sharp tongue will fend them off for long.”

Steven takes the offered blade, testing the edge and getting a pricked finger for his foolishness.

“Where did you get this?” he asks, sucking the bead of blood from his finger.

“You think I stole it?”

“No!” Steven is quick to demur. “No, I just… I’ve never seen one like it.”

“It was my father’s,” Bucky says quietly. “As was my sword.”

Steven starts to push the dagger into his belt, and Bucky grasps his wrist before he can do anything harmful.

“No, not like that, you want to cut your belt in two?” Bucky regards Steven’s plain canvas belt with annoyance. “It’s not like you have one spare just lying around?”

“You do it then,” Steven huffs, holding the choora up. He watches unafraid as Bucky takes the blade, sliding it neatly into his belt to lie against his hip. “So was he a king of Egypt, your father?”

Bucky’s mouth twitches again. “He was a king of the ‘Gyptians.”

“He was?” Steve looks taken aback. The remark was clearly made in jest, and Bucky’s reply unexpected.

“No in the way you mean,” Bucky straightens up, satisfied that Steven can withdraw the choora without cutting something vital off. “But yes. He was.”

“So you are a prince.”

“I suppose so.” Bucky shrugs, and gives the choora a tap. “Be careful with it, okay?”

Steven practices drawing the choora and putting it back a few times, until Bucky is satisfied that no harm will befall him doing so. Assured, he lets Steven continue on, leading them deeper into the ziggurat.

The second doorway leads to a passage, small but not so narrow that they cannot walk abreast. It is dark, the air stale, and the only light to see by filters through the gaps in the brickwork around them.

“What is this place?” Bucky asks, looking ahead where the path turns sharply.

“The servant’s way,” Steven says, matter-of-fact. “You think the Shah allows us to walk his golden halls? Of course not, so when he calls for food or clean sheets, we scurry about the walls like rats.”

His expression sours, and with good reason, but Bucky can think of nothing to say that might ease him, and keeps his silence.

“So tell me, what is a prince doing out here?” Steven asks as the path splits in two, and he takes the left fork without hesitation. “Don’t you have a wife and children back home worried about you?”

It’s an odd question to ask, but Bucky sees no harm in answering. “I am not married, nor am I likely to be.”

“Why not?” Another fork in the way, and Steven takes left again. “So you have the looks and temperament of a street cat.” He sniffs, considering. “A person could do worse.”

The words have no sting behind them, and are spoken with something like fondness.

“I’m sure they could,” Bucky hums. “But I have no money for the darro. Whatever I do make goes
“Darro?” Steven turns on his heel to face Bucky. “You mean a dowry?”

Bucky frowns, even in the poor light he can see when his wasp is ready to sting. “What?”

“A dowry, a bride price?” Steven’s voice pitches up when Bucky nods. “You buy and sell your women as if they were cattle? When you get to the treasury are you going to pocket a little extra gold, buy yourself something young and pretty-”

It’s dark, but not so dark Bucky can’t clap his hand over Steven’s mouth, silencing the rising volume of his sharp little tongue. Steven squirms, grabbing Bucky’s wrist and trying to force his hand away, and when that doesn’t work bites down on his palm.

Bucky clenches his teeth, the pain is sharp and stinging, but he has suffered far worse. He has suffered far worse. He does not strike at Steven for biting him. There is not enough venom in his heart to break skin and taste blood, soon enough he’ll give up.

“Are you done?” he hisses, and in answer Steven bites down again.

“Listen,” Bucky snaps. “What happens when a girl marries? She leaves her mother and father, and joins her husband and his kin, yes?” Steven doesn’t try to answer. “Her parents lose a pair of hands, you understand me? They lose her skills, her company, all that she brought to the camp. And for some of us that makes the difference between living through a winter or not.” Bucky pauses, Steven’s grip on his skin loosening. “The girl needs to know that her family will continue without her. That her husband has heart enough to see them taken care of. That he understands her worth.” Why is he shaking? Why does it matter so much that this one, irritating creature understands the ways of his people?

Steven loosens his teeth completely, letting go of Bucky’s wrist. And though he could step back from Bucky’s muffling hand, nothing holding him in place but his own belligerence, he stays still.

“Are you done?” Bucky asks again, and Steven nods, lips still pressed to his palm.

Bucky lowers his hand. Despite the force of Steven's bite he didn't break the skin, but Bucky can still feel the ghost of his teeth in the fading marks.

The passageway is suddenly too dark, too narrow. The air between them tastes sour and fever-hot, and he has to retreat, his back pressing against the rough brick walls.

Steven wipes his mouth with his sleeve, his face flushed, his eyes downcast.

“I’m sorry,” Bucky utters softly. “That was wrong of me—”

“No.” Steven pulls at his lower lip. “No, I shouldn’t have assumed.” He pauses, as if he had more to say, then resumes tugging at his lip.

The silence is deeply uncomfortable, and far different from the other silences that have fallen between them after an argument, though Bucky cannot put his finger on how. If he could he would set a flame to the distasteful air between them, burn it away and leave only ashes. He would stifle the strange, disquieting sensation churning in his gut.

Instead he points down the passage. “This way?” he asks, and Steven nods, as if grateful to put the sorry mess behind them.

“Yes,” he says, his mouth deep red from where he worries at it, and hard to look away from.

At the next fork in the path Steven turns right, leading Bucky to a low stone arch blocked by a tapestry. The colours on the loops of woven thread are muted, the pattern odd-looking, and it takes Bucky a moment to realise that he is looking at the underside of a wall hanging.

Steven reaches up to push the drape aside, and Bucky gestures for him to stop, still wary of laying a hand on him after what transpired last time. Instead he puts a finger to his lips, pushing past Steven and twitching the edge of the cloth back.

Through the gap he sees another large chamber. Where the last had been dark walls and mosaic flooring, this one is white marble, marble so bright that it burns Bucky’s eyes after spending so long in dark passages. There are two guards pacing across the floor.

Bucky watches their movements closely, hand reaching automatically for the choora at his side. But
he no longer has it, he gave it to Steven. He pulls out the dagger instead, slipping out into chamber and sneaking up behind the nearest guard.

Something strange happens when he drives the dagger into the creature’s neck. It seems to shrivel, like paper tossed onto the embers of a fire, not igniting but curling up and crumpling to sand.

He tracks the second guard as he marches down the length of the chamber, cursing under his breath as the creature hears him and turns with a roar. It strikes out with its sword, and Bucky manages to block the blow with his vambrace, the blade scoring the boiled leather. The creature strikes with its free hand, catching Bucky on the chin, and he buries the dagger in the damned things gut, slicing upwards as it crumples in on itself.

The chamber cleared, Bucky turns back to the tapestry to let Steven know it is safe, only to find him already standing in the chamber, watching intently.

He had seen everything, not just the creatures demise, but the way Bucky ended them, quick and merciless. He could have turned his back on Bucky, run down the passageway and never looked back. Instead he stayed.

“What is this place?” Bucky asks.

In truth he cares nothing for the shrine. Bas reliefs are carved on the high walls of eight pointed stars shining down on seated figures. Down near the floor painted lions prowl along the wall between borders of many petalled flowers, their teeth bared. Enormous statues carved out of pale rock, bearing staffs and scepters, cast their sightless eyes heavenwards.

He cares nothing for the shrine, but the wasp? That is becoming another matter entirely.

“A shrine to Ishtar,” Steven seems to come to a decision, walking out to join him. “The lowest level of the Etemenanki is devoted to the gods.”

“And the others are devoted to...?” Bucky asks warily.

“The Shah,” comes the response. “Though his private chambers are on the fourth floor, below the treasury.”

“And between here and there?”

Steven puts his hands on his hips, looking up at a sculpture of a woman baring her breasts. “A lot of shrines.”

It seems distasteful to Bucky, to leave such an indelible mark on the world, but so much about the gazho is offensive. He paces across the marble floor, polished by sands to a high shine, and clears his throat to get Steven’s attention.

“When you’re finished?” he asks, a little more sharply than he means to.

Steven glances at him, but he doesn’t blush or stammer, like Bucky might expect from someone staring at a statue of a naked women. Instead he points, his tone a little incredulous. “Her feet.”

Bucky follows the line of his finger, and sees the shapely legs of the statue end in talons, balanced on the back of a lion. Steven, losing interest in the bizarre figure, gestures to a mezzanine up on the wall, overlooking the shrine. Behind the ornately carved railing Bucky can make out an archway leading to another level of the ziggerut.

“Can you get us up there?”

What would Steven’s darro be?

The thought comes unexpectedly, as Bucky climbs up the carved staff of one of the great statues and hauls himself onto the outstretched arm. Steven climbs a little more slowly, the soles of his feet digging into the crosshatched design for purchase, and brushes off Bucky’s offer of assistance, scrambling onto the robe covered arm himself.

It would have to be a high price, for one so fearless and resourceful. More than his bero is worth, not that he would sell it. Bucky tries to push the thought aside, climbing up onto the shoulder of the statue, but it won’t shift, no matter how much he tries to ignore it. It drifts to the forefront of his mind like those bright spots that appear before the eyes when you’ve stared too long at the sun.

Between the statue’s shoulder and the mezzanine is a wall hanging decorated with eight sided stars, and it’s an easy enough jump to reach it. Bucky sends Steve across first, watching him climb until he
is in reach of the balcony, the cloth twitching and twisting as he scrambles up. He half falls over the railing and lands with a muffled yelp.

Bucky makes his own leap, grasping the rumpled hanging and hauling himself up hand over hand. Steven rights himself, leaning over the railing to check on Bucky’s progress, and he is about to make the final jump to the balcony when far below the doors swing open, and two men enter the shrine.

Steven just stops himself from yelling in alarm, and Bucky freezes in place, dangling in arm’s reach of the mezzanine. The men below are walking towards them, and if he moves that will set the wall hanging in motion again, drawing attention to them both. He cannot risk that, so he holds fast, waiting for them to turn away.

“Are you certain?” the first man, dressed in red robes and an elaborate guards helmet, hisses to his companion, who looks back at the doorway, too briefly for Bucky to take advantage.

“His Excellency is at the Esagila.” The companion is shorter, thinner, and wears robes of blue. At the sight of him Steven drops down out of sight. “Inspecting the remains of the fire from last night.”

“He still believes there is an assassin hiding in the city?”

“Assassin?” The man in blue grabs his companion by the arm. “The man is deranged, can’t you see? He sees spies in every shadow, conspirators in those he once called friends.”

“And if he finds out we are here he will have us executed for treason!”

“He will not find out!”

They fall silent, listening out for any sounds of scurrying feet or witnesses to betray them. Bucky’s hands, gripping tightly to folds of cloth, begin to ache.

“We cannot continue like this,” the man in blue says forlornly. “All this military spending has left the empire bankrupt, and what does the Shah say? More taxes! So the people revolt and the militia crush them into the dirt and you cannot tax the dead.”

The moment their backs are turned Bucky makes his jump, Steven reaching to grab him and pull him down behind the railing. They land awkwardly, but the men below are too preoccupied to notice.

Bucky puts his eye to a gap in the railing, watching as they pace in circles.

“Who are they?” he whispers as Steven tries to pull him away out of sight.

“The one in red is the captain of the guard,” Steven mutters, grasping his arm and tugging. “The other is the head of the household.”

His panic makes no sense. Unless. “You know him?”

Whatever Steven has to say is cut short as below them the fight intensifies.

“What would you have me do?” the captain shouts. “You talk about taxes? My men are dead! Taken by this cursed sand and made into monsters. And what manner of creature is it that prowls the streets in the night?”

“You must do something!”

“If he suspects a plot against him, he will have us both killed,” the captain says grimly. “Have you not heard, he has-”

“We have to go!” Steven hisses, pulling on Bucky’s arm with increasing desperation, and Bucky finally lets himself be drawn away, slipping through the archway into another passage, leaving the men to their argument.

Steven hurries along, dragging Bucky by the wrist through a labyrinth of narrow passages as though there were an army at their heels. For several minutes Bucky lets himself be pulled along, trying to trace their route through the ziggurat. They duck past doorways to other shrines, back and forth through the maze of passages in Steven’s urgency. They dart across covered walkways over the main corridor that winds through the ziggurat.

When he has finally had enough Bucky simply stops, bracing his weight as Steven keeps trying to force him to keep going.

“Come on,” Steven hisses, and it would be comical to watch him trying to drag Bucky along if he didn’t look so upset by his failure.
Bucky grasps his hand and turns it palm up to study. “Your hands are soft.”
“So is your skull,” Steven snaps. “We need to go.”
He doesn’t try to pull out of Bucky’s grip, so Bucky doesn’t let go. “When I met you, you were working on the wall,” he says carefully. “These are not the hands of someone who works with bricks and mortar.” He takes another look at Steven’s milky skin, at the freckles on the bridge of his nose. “Nor do you look like one who spends all day in the sun.” He drops Steven’s hand, and to his surprise Steven doesn’t run. “What are you not telling me?”
Steven wraps his arms around himself, and he seems to shrink under Bucky’s stare.
“I worked in the baths, back in Khorasan,” he says eventually. “We both did, my mother and I. I fetched clean sheets and poured water and stoked fires. The head of the household was my master.”
“So why were you out by the wall?”
Steven glances up at him, then away. “Why do you think?”
That at least isn’t hard to guess. “You were being punished,” Bucky sighs.
“It isn’t enough for the Shah to have Babylon, New Babylon must be impressive. The city can rise out of the sands in a single night, but everything is made of sand and sand alone. We were tasked with… gilding the lily, you could say. Ten thousand tiles, in blue and white, to be pasted over the stones. They work us sunrise to sunset, with no rest or respite and I…” He shrugs. “You were a way out.”
No wonder he had been so quick to offer help.
“Well.” Bucky’s tone softens. “I see.”
“My mother,” Steven hesitates, and Bucky hates to see him look so small. “She’s getting sick. She can’t manage the work anymore.” He shakes his head, and Bucky watches as he forces it all down, all the frustration and the fear and the anger, just shuts it all away somewhere inside of himself. “We should keep moving. If they suspect you’re in the city, they’ll be arming the traps anytime now.”
Bucky frowns. “Traps?”
Steven doesn’t explain, just keeps walking.
In the sparse light Bucky cannot afford to linger, even though he is sure Steven would not leave him behind. Maybe that is what sets his tongue working. Maybe not.
“After we reach the treasury,” Bucky says quietly. He does not go into detail about what will happen there, his own thoughts shy away from it. “We could take a detour.”
Steven, walking ahead while he has the energy to, glances over his shoulder. “What do you mean?”
“I mean when we leave. We could go by the wall, see if your mother is there. Maybe a few others.”
Steven stares back at him, though the light is too low to see his expression. “Not many, you understand. The bero is not that big.”
“Sam knows where there are more boats.”
Bucky’s mouth twists up at that. “You cannot come to Dobruja. Outsiders are not welcome in my kumpania.” It’s a lie, and he knows it is. “But I know some Northmen traders, they would help you.”
He passes Steven, still frozen in place, and walks on.
“Why?” Steven calls after him. “Why would you do that?”
The twist in Bucky’s lip stretches to a wide smile. “Well, I need to meet your mother.” He looks over his shoulder as his wasp. “So I can offer a darro for you. I’m thinking a nice, freshly caught carp should be enough.”
Steven lets out a sharp little yelp, and Bucky’s grin stretches so wide it makes his cheeks ache.
“You jackass!” Steven scoops up a handful of dirt and throws it at Bucky’s back, sprinkling his shoulder with sand. “Well, I am coming with you to Dobruja to offer your mother a darro on you!”
Steven sniffs, wiping his hand on his pant leg. “You know what I’m going to offer her? An onion. A big, stinking onion. And she’ll thank me for it.”
Bucky stops, waiting for Steven to catch up with him. “A whole onion? I’m touched.”
Steven only growls at him. “Half an onion,” he hisses, and stomps on ahead.
Bucky watches his disappear into the shadows ahead. “A fair price,” he murmurs, and follows after.
Some information on darro and Romani marriage customs [here](#).
“You turn the cards, you drink the tea, those things you influence, and from that your fortunes may be told.” He throws his hand up to the planets before them. “What influence could we possibly have on things so distant? And what hubris would make a man think his life matters to the stars?”

In 1721, 220 years before Hitler, Emperor Karl VI of the Austro-Hungarian Empire ordered the extermination of all Romanies throughout his domain; in 1725 his successor, Friedrich Wilhelm I, condemned all Romanies of eighteen years and older to be hanged.

The passage ends in a set of stairs, rough edges hewn from the rock itself. In the sparse light they curve slightly, describing a vast spiral flowing ever upwards. There are no forks ahead, no side passages leading to more shrines, only a single stairway that seems to go on forever. Steven glances back at Bucky and starts climbing, his footfalls light on the stones ahead of Bucky’s heavier tread.

The gentle bickering back and forth over darro and dowry finally stutters out, breaths devoted to the winding stairway instead of whether the half onion Bucky was worth would be fresh or drying out a little. But the silence between them is a comfortable one, even when Bucky stops, supposedly to check the pouches on his belt for something or to take a stone out of his boots. Each time Steven leans against the wall, breath rattling in his lungs and colour high on his cheeks while Bucky pantomimes his misfortunes in the half light. If he suspects that there are no stones to be shaken out of boots or compass to be checked, he says nothing of it. Instead he waits for Bucky to announce that he’s ready to continue, and leads on without comment.

With no certainty where the next source of clean, flowing water will come from, Bucky sips from his skin sparingly before handing it over. Steven takes the offered water with a murmured thanks and drinks a little, not enough, before handing it back.

It is hard not to feel like a rat in a trap, with nowhere to go but down if something came at them from above, and only the unknown lying ahead if something came up behind them in pursuit. But Steven insists that it is safe, or at least as safe as can be, and Bucky believes him.

If there is any comfort to be gleaned, it is that they are not out in the heat of day, though it feels like far too long since Bucky last felt the sun on his face, and he is grateful when there is finally a glimmer of light ahead. The passage opens up onto a balcony, looking down over a vast arena that must surely take up the entire second level of the ziggurat. The expansive chamber spans half a mile or more, the tiled walls shaping it into a vast sphere. It stands as tall as the level before it, some 300 feet, and their balcony is at the uppermost reach of curved wall that rounds into a sloping roof. But Bucky pays no attention to the walls, decorated in tiles fired deep blue and crisscrossed with silver threads. His focus is on the wide space of the chamber itself, where vast spheres hang in an
approximation of the solar system.

Bucky grips the carved stone railing to keep from keeling over. He is aware of Steven standing beside him, looking out at the complex of arms and gears that make the planets turn around a central sun of gold, but he cannot tear his gaze away from the orrery itself.

The sun is not a smooth golden ball but a chaos of spirals and curlicues flaring out from its surface, licking around the bands of hammered gold that wrap its equator like belts. Spiralling out from it on golden spurs are the planets themselves, some no bigger than the span of his hands, others bigger than the bero at full sail. The last of them is circled by a wide, flat disc, its surface etched with delicate filigree in contrast to its size.

“What is this place?” Bucky murmurs, not daring to loosen his grip on the railing just yet.

“They call it Sitara yab, the taker of the stars.” Steven turns to point at a wide band of silver that spans the walls at an oblique angle. “That is the horizon line, you see? And above it the stars that rise and set each night.”

Bucky tears his gaze away from the planets to follow Steven’s finger. In the tiles diamonds of different sizes and hues have been set to represent the stars, the lines of constellations marked between them in silver thread. The world seems to shift, twisting into focus, and Bucky can see them all. All the nights spent on his bero looking up at the sky, and those same cheran look down on him here. There is O lanordősō, the North star, and here the Huntsman, all rendered just as if he were looking up at the celestial sphere itself.

“When the Shah occupied Delhi he availed himself of the Mughals greatest treasures,” Steven says, leaning back to look above their heads. “The Daria-i-Noor was used to make the North Star, and the Koh-i-Noor the Dog Star.”

Bucky listens, his head cocked to one side, as Steven names the stars. Along the walls are several balconies much like the one they stand on, and far below a dais. From there, with the use of large levers and mechanisms, the planets can be made to move across the heavens, and the wide silver band tilt with the turn of the year. The sun alone is the only part of the machinery that does not turn, suspended at the top of a pole as thick as a tree trunk. From that pole the spurs that support all the planets branch out in different directions, and just below the sun itself is a platform, like a crow’s nest on a ship. A hand crank of wood and bronze stands on the platform, the long handle pointing out towards the earth.

“What is it for?” Bucky asks eventually.

Steven shrugs, as if he had given it no great thought. “To track the stars. They say the stars hold out fortunes, and by the study of them we find our destinies.”

Bucky snorts. It sounds like more gazho nonsense. “What do the stars care for us?” he asks. “You might as well seek meaning in the passing of clouds, or the movement of fish in a river.”

“Some people do that,” Steven points out. “Divine the future from fish or clouds, in smoke or flames.”

Bucky snorts. “What arrogance! To think that we have such an influence on the world, or that the stars have secrets they want to whisper to only the wealthiest.”

“You don’t have an ounce of poetry in your soul, do you Rom?” Steven gives him a half-hearted frown. “Don’t your people tell fortunes with playing cards?”

Bucky gives him a reproachful look. “Is that what we are to you? Beggars and thieves?”

“No, I just—”

“Would a physician listen to the wind in the trees, or would he put his ear to your chest before telling you what manner of sickness befalls you?” Bucky interrupts, reaching out to touch his finger to Steven’s chin and tilt his head up. “Would he cast sticks into a river and divine their movement, or would he check your colour and constitution?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Steven mutters, leaning away from Bucky’s touch. “Of course he wouldn’t.”

“Because it is the same with drabaripé,” Bucky finds himself explaining, spilling secrets like water. “You turn the cards, you drink the tea, those things you influence, and from that your fortunes may
be told.” He throws his hand up to the planets before them. “What influence could we possibly have on things so distant? And what hubris would make a man think his life matters to the stars?”

Steven says nothing for a long moment. He doesn’t look angry, or as if gearing up for an answering salvo in a war of words. Bucky turns to look at the vast orrery, impressive, but ultimately a folly. “Where do we need to go?” he asks, and Steven points across to another balcony further up the wall, looking over Mars.

He shrugs at Bucky’s wide eyed expression. “You like a challenge.”

A challenge is putting things mildly. Getting to the balcony is impossible. Bucky paces back and forth, staring at the chasm between them and their goal, and wonders how long before Steven admits that it was a trick, that there is another, easier way up. With the smooth tiles and concave wall he cannot run across - he would fall to his death. Nor are there tapestries or wall hangings.

“If it’s too hard,” Steven says with that sly look of his. “We can-”

“No.” Bucky raises a hand to silence him. “No, I have an idea.”

That last planet, the one encircled by a ring on the outermost spur, stands in easy reach of their balcony. If it could be moved…

“Bucky, there’s another.”

“Shh,” Bucky murmurs as he climbs over the balcony. “Wait here.”

He jumps, taking a little bit of satisfaction in Steven’s yelp of alarm, and lands on Venus. The surface, white marble, is slipperier than he expected, and his boots skid, sending him off balance. He rights himself, skidding across the surface to where the supporting arm juts out from the side, and drops down onto the golden spar. It’s as broad as the beams he walked across in the Hanging Gardens, and Bucky hurries along, his arms out to provide balance as he makes his way over to the sun.

It looked enormous from a distance, but close up it is enough to send Bucky cross-eyed. He blinks, shaking his head, and keeps his attention on his feet, passing underneath the vast golden sphere and down to the pole supporting it.

From there it is a matter of climbing the pole, and he is grateful that it is stone and not polished gold, there’s no way he could climb that.

Once he reaches the platform he turns to look for Steven, shielding his eyes from the false suns glow. Bucky can see him leaning over the balcony, a pale smudge surrounded by blue. Bucky waves, hoping that it will be seen, and turns his attention to the crank. He doesn’t expect much success - the damn thing will probably control the horizon line or some other obscure feature of the astrolabe - but he tries anyway, grasping the long pole and pushing. He feels the wood catch on a system of gears, far below, and a great clattering sound fills the chamber as they slowly begin to turn. The golden spars below him shudder into motion, and the wheel of planets turns around the sun.

Bucky stops as soon as he had begun to gain traction, swearing under his breath. They move, but they move in the wrong direction, and he’d rather not kill himself hauling a planet all the way around the sun when the same results could be achieved with a quarter turn backwards.

He braces his heels on the platform, adjusting his grip, and pulls. Again, there is the distant clatter of gears, of iron teeth meeting as cogs connect and finally begin to spin. The spurs below him start to inch back on themselves, and Bucky takes another step back, dragging the pole with him.

He finds his rhythm quickly, once the great structure is in motion it gets a little easier, the mechanisms working smoothly, and before long he looks over to see Saturn reaching Steven’s balcony.

He lets go of the crank, straightening up to watch as Steven drops down onto the ring. The cunning little wasp doesn’t need to be told to hold on tight, he crouches down at the edge and clings for dear life.

Bucky just about makes out his shout and leans into the crank again, any other sounds drowned out
by the turning of gears and clatter of cogs, until he lets it stop again with Saturn under Steven’s desired balcony.

He looks over to check on Steven, who waves back at him before climbing up to the balcony. It settles something taut in the back of his throat to see him make it safely. He swallows the sensation down, and steps out onto the spur after him.

The climb is less easy on this spur, the arm no less wide than the last one but the incline steeper. Bucky’s feet slip a little, until he has to scale the last part on hands and knees. At least the spurs are affixed to the side of the planets and not the base, he doesn’t think even he would be able to climb up from there.

It’s still a relief to step out onto the ring, and marvel at the detail on the etched surface. But there is no time to linger, and Steven is waiting for him. He does make one detour, over to the tiled wall just below the balcony, where a cluster of stars are. He pulls his choori from his boot as he makes his selection, picking a blue diamond, the colour of Steven’s eyes, and levering it out of the tiles with the point of his blade. It drops into his hand, a little thing compared to the others, the size of a thumbnail, and he holds it up to the light.

A fine darro, almost worthy of a wasp. He slips it into a pocket and returns the choori to his boot before climbing up to join Steven.

Steven reaches down to grab his arm, hauling him up onto the balcony. “Show off,” he grumbles, but there is warmth in his tone.

“You said you wanted to go this way.” Bucky gives him a small, fond smile. “Who am I to refuse you?”

Steven should scold him some more, should mock his pride or his apparent recklessness. Instead he falls silent, only pointing to the doorway and the passage beyond sloping up to the next level of the ziggurat.

After so many narrow little rat alleys and tunnels, Bucky is grateful to step into a wide, open corridor, even one that zigzags back and forth like this.

The floor is even stonework, and the walls solid brick, with lit torches in iron sconces above their heads to show the way ahead. “Well, this is a little better,” Bucky remarks. By the torchlight he can see efforts have been made to decorate the walls, simple designs carved into the stone walls and floors, with odd little details picked out in red.

“The upper levels are devoted to the Shah’s palace,” Steven explains. “On this level is the harem and baths, as well as his private garden overlooking the city. Above that are his personal chambers.”

“And atop that the treasury,” Bucky remembers.

“And atop that the treasury,” Steven repeats. “Were things as they should be, there would be servants up and down these halls all day, bringing food up from the kitchens and tending to the gardens. But we are alone, it seems.”

“And the harem?” Bucky asks, getting a sharp look from Steven. “I have no interest in seeing the harem,” Bucky is quick to point out. “But the sands spread their influence, and anyone who lingers up here will be affected. You saw what came of the guards.”

Steven shudders, drawing his shoulders up about his ears. “There is no one here save the Shah himself. We were all sent out to work the walls, and the girls are water-carriers now, if I remember.”

“Well, good for them,” Bucky says absently. “Better to be out there than in here.”

Though they have spent so little time together, days he could count on his thumbs, Bucky has come to learn the quality of Steven’s silence. He knows mute and outraged, curses and accusations building up until he is ready to sting. He knows the sorrowful silence, when the weight of life itself seems to crush all the defiance from his narrow frame, and every step is heavy with remorse. This silence, however, is weighted with potential, as Steven considers his words, the door of his mind creaking open a little wider.

“Is that what has happened to the Shah?” he asks at last. “Is it the sands that have poisoned his
mind?"
“No.” Bucky shakes his head. “Whatever sickness has befallen him the sands have played no part in. They are not the root of anger or greed or hate. That is all mankind’s doing.”

Steven gives him a dubious look, keeping pace as they turn left and down another wide passage.
“You have a poor view of men, don’t you?”
“I have,” Bucky agrees. “And for good reason.”

He falls silent, hoping that is the end of it, but Steven continues to watch him. The weight of his silent study tugs at Bucky’s skin, like the pricking of needles. It should annoy him, it should send him into a rage, but it doesn’t.

Of course it doesn’t.

“Do you know of Wallachia?” Bucky asks.
“No.” Steven doesn’t resist the apparent change of subject. “Should I?”
“It is west of the Black Sea.” In spite of everything, Bucky finds it in him to smile. “We travelled wherever there was work, as we had done for generations, returning to farms year after year to help with the harvest, and in the winter months we made camp in the lowlands.”

“That sounds like a good life,” Steven says, a little wistful.
“It was hard, but it was ours.” Something clogs in Bucky’s throat, it tastes like blood and dirt, and he can’t swallow it down or spit it out. “And then the Emperor ordered the extermination of all ‘Gyptians on his lands.’

Steven stumbles to halt. “What?” he asks, as if Bucky hadn’t asked himself a thousand times and still had no answer. “Why?”

“He died,” Bucky ignores him. “Four years after this commandment. We had friends, people who allowed us to hide among them, and we prayed that his successor would show us compassion. He did, after a fashion. Friedrich Wilhelm I only condemned Rom over the age of 18 to death.” Bucky pushes the toe of his boot along the edge of a stone slab. Anger, old and bitter, fills his breast. It is familiar, like the embrace of a trusted friend.

“I must have been thirteen when they came for us. One of our gazhe friends told the soldiers where we were to be found.”

He will have to see it all again soon enough, when he drives the dagger into the hourglass. He will see it and be powerless to stop it, just as he was then.

“Bucky,” Steven whispers, reaching out to touch his bare arm, fingers cool against his skin. Bucky barely has to turn his head to speak, let alone pull away.

Bucky bites down on the rage and the helplessness and the weight of a sword in a boy’s hand. Gnares at it until it is in little pieces that he can swallow down.
“We were a fierce people, a proud people.” He shakes his head. “And then we were nothing. Good men mown down like wheat.”

If he lets them the memories would consume him, so he does not. He locks them away in the deepest recesses of his heart, where it cannot trouble him.

“Ask me again,” Bucky says with quiet menace. “Ask me about my hatred of gazho.”

Steven does not ask, his tentative hold on Bucky’s arm tightening until it is a vice. He tugs Bucky towards him, hands sliding up to encompass his boiled leather armour and the tangled, wretched mass within it, and holds him tightly.

For a long minute Bucky isn’t entirely certain what is happening, letting his arms hang by his sides as Steven holds on to him. What his mind cannot comprehend his body remembers, starved of contact since he parted ways with the Bifrost, and he cups his hands against the jut of Steven’s shoulders. The flat blades of bone feel almost brittle under his palms, like slices of marble warm to the touch. He breathes out, tension ebbing away in increments, and only then does he become aware of the noise.

“Do you hear that?”

Steven’s face is pressed to the muscle of Bucky’s shoulder, earlobe to the stubble of his jaw. Bucky barely has to turn his head to speak, let alone pull away.
“What?” Steven raises his head, and Bucky misses the heat of his breath, the rhythm of his pulse. The loss of sensation as abrupt and jarring as stepping out from the shade and into the midday heat. Steven turns around, all thoughts of comfort forgotten as he listens out for something on the edge of hearing.

A rasp of chain and creak of wood, followed by the unmistakable sound of a keen blade slicing through air.

Bucky puts a steadying hand on Steven’s shoulder, firmly keeping him in place as he walks towards the next turn in the path ahead.

Is it swords he can hear whistling through the stale air of the Enetanmaki? Are there guards waiting around the next corner, are they about to walk onto the middle of a training ground?

It is disorienting to hear the sounds of straining wood, the creak of planks rubbing together and masts straining against sail when he is not at sea.

“Bucky,” Steven hisses, and Bucky holds a finger up to shush him, pressing up to the stone wall and risking a look around the corner. Steven follows, refusing to be left behind. Stubborn wasp.

There are no guards lying in wait. No ships at full sail.

What lies beyond is far, far worse.

“The Palace defenses,” Steven curses under his breath. “They have been activated.”

In the passageway ahead wood and iron twists and spins.

Those details picked in red along the passages Bucky had admired before simply marked the location of long, sharp scimitars that slash out of the wall and through the air at waist height. They must operate by some mechanism, for the blades move in a repetitive, rhythmic manner, swinging out and withdrawing in a way that is almost hypnotic.

If that were not enough to contend with, beyond those scimitars are a series of spinning logs embedded in the floor, each one studded with sharp, curved blades.

“What the hell?” Bucky hisses.

Steven stares at the blades slicing through the air. “When the Shah heard there was a search for the brothers, he became convinced that they would send someone here.” He glances at Bucky, wary and discomforted. The Shah had not been wrong. “That they would murder him in his bed.”

Bucky scowls, tracking the movement of each trap. “And what made him think that, I wonder?”

“One of his advisors crept into his rooms and tried to stab him,” Steven admits. “He killed them before they could finish the task, and demanded additional defenses around his quarters. His personal guard he… he had them thrown from the highest tower for their failings.”

Bucky presses his thumb to the bridge of his nose, and tries to remain calm. “You couldn’t have mentioned this earlier?”

“I didn’t know,” Steven pales a little. “We were banned from entering the Ementananki and sent to work the walls after that. I thought it meant more guards, not this.”

Bucky steps back, fingers clenching. He can almost see it, like smoke on the air, a way through.

“Come here,” he murmurs, holding out his hand.

“I know that look,” Steven says warily, but comes closer, letting Bucky’s arm wrap around his shoulder.

“Go when I say go, stop when I say stop,” Bucky says, tensing. “And duck when I tell you to.”

Blades slice through the air, singing out like a bow drawn across a string, and Bucky’s feet move with the melody.

“Háide! Go!” he shouts, his hand pressing to the small of Steven’s back.

Steven runs forward, straight into the path of the blades. He doesn’t flinch, doesn’t recoil, but trusts in Bucky’s instruction, and when he is a hand’s breadth from the blades they retreat into the wall, leaving the passage clear.

Bucky counts the stones under their feet, measuring time with the thumping of his heart as they run down the passage, boots loud on the stones. He feels it in his gut, an animal instinct, and drops to his knees. “Down!”
Steven throws himself down, hands braced against the stones, and a blade shears past above him.

“Up!” Bucky snaps, gripping hold of Steven’s tunic and hauling him to his feet. They stagger forward a few paces, beyond the reach of the scimitars, and Bucky pulls him up short.

Before them are now the three wooden columns, spinning in place. Each one is embedded with jagged blades spaced irregularly across the surface. Bucky had already noticed the deep notches in the floor, and it does not surprise him when their approach triggers some hidden mechanism, and the columns begin to move. The sound of hidden gears turning each column only gets louder, accompanied by the teeth-jarring scrape of metal on stone.

“In front,” Bucky says, loud enough to be heard over the noise, putting his hands on Steven’s shoulders. “Elbows in,” he warns. “Do as I say.”

Before Steven can answer Bucky sees their chance, pushing him forward between the spinning columns.

Again, Steven doesn’t baulk at being pushed in to the line of fire, trusting in Bucky to guide him safely.

He leads them both through the winding columns, stepping left and right where he sees a chance, blades mere inches from the bared skin of his shoulders. When they step onto flat, unmarked stone Steven curses softly, his shoulders slumping.

Bucky doesn’t give himself time to relax, already focused on what is waiting for them ahead. There are no strange markings in the wall, nor channels carved into the floor. The floor itself is oddly patterned, a mesh design that stretches all the way to the far end of the passage, where another corner waits.

It looks harmless. Bucky doesn’t trust it.

“What is it?” Steven asks.

Bucky isn’t willing to part with a choori to test a theory, not will he give up the darro hidden in his pocket. One of his belts, however, should suffice. He unfastens a cartwheel shaped buckle and slips off the belt, twining the length of it around one hand until he has a solid, weighted mass to throw.

He tosses the belt onto the mesh floor, half-hoping that his fears are to naught, and the coiled belt will unspool harmlessly.

For a moment it does, unravelling while Steven looks at him askance. “What are you-”

A ratcheting sound, sharp and discordant, suddenly fills the passageway, and a grid of of spikes spears through the section of floor before them. After a few seconds they slowly retreat, leaving the ragged, twisted remains of Bucky’s belt behind.

Bucky stares at the corner up ahead, a short distance but it might as well be miles. “How fast can you run?”

“What?” Steven looks aghast. “No. No we can't possibly-”

Bucky grabs him by the arm and starts running.

Every step feels like it might be their last. A man might survive a spike through his foot, might be able to walk again, might be spared the agony of sepsis. But to be speared by a bed of them? To have them drive up into your body over and over, puncturing flesh and shattering bone as you try to crawl to safety? Bucky can’t imagine many worse ways to die, and he has seen many terrible deaths first hand.

That is the thought that drives him forward, palm flat against Steven’s back as he forces him on ahead. The walkway seems to stretch on without end, and at their heels that grinding, steel on stone sound of spikes shearing upwards, getting closer and closer as Bucky pushes them both to run that little bit faster.

He can feel the rattle of air in Steven’s lungs, though it should not be possible. He can hear the soles of his boots striking the stone floor, and half-fancies that they strike up sparks.

A little further, and there is a clear space ahead, a smooth square of golden stone in the corner where the passage turns right. There is a depression in the center, a red circle inscribed around it.

If he lives the sound of steel punching through stone will haunt his dreams, drawing closer and closer
as he tries to outpace it.

Steven wheezes in triumph, his feet hitting the golden stone, and Bucky swears he feels the edge of blade on his heel as he follows. He braces his hands on his knees, bending over double, his ears filling with the pounding of his own heartbeat and the low rasps of Steven labouring for breath. The depression in the center of the floor moves a quarter turn, and Bucky remembers the meaning of red marks on the stone. A wooden pole rises up from the center, and Bucky lets out a wordless yell, grabbing hold of Steven and shoving him against the wall. Bucky crashes against him, pinning him in place, far too much skin touching far too much skin and making his thoughts scatter, leaving only animal instinct and keep him safe.

He hears the all too familiar sound of steel slicing the air, and warmth spills down his back. “Bucky!” Steven cries out, grabbing Bucky by the upper arms and hauling him closer, until they are pressed chest to chest.

Steven stares up at him, his lips ripe and red like pomegranate seeds, his pupil wide in the dim light, and Bucky cannot look away.

“You’re bleeding,” Steven whispers, plaintive. There is red smeared on his fingers.

Bucky’s hands grip Steven’s shoulders of their own accord, blood shaking through his veins as Steven holds him steady in turn. Wherever his fingers brush sears, and Bucky’s flesh feels like oil, feels like gunpowder, as if the slightest touch would cause him to to catch fire, burn up in an inferno until there was nothing left of him but ash and dreams.

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“Bucky?” Steven’s voice is clipped, concerned, and it drags Bucky’s mind back from whatever hinterland it had strayed into.

Steven is thankfully unhurt, his hand gentle against Bucky’s shoulder, where a stray blade has caught his skin, spilling blood down his back.

Bucky looks but can’t quite see the wound, only feel the edge of it. It is not deep, the worst of the damage taken by the cuirass, deeply scored along his scapula. “That was close,” he says, the attempt at mirth failing when his voice shakes.

Steven curses softly, and Bucky isn’t sure if he’s going to get hugged or punched. He almost hopes for a punch, anything else might be the end of him.

“You need to be careful,” is all Steven can manage to say.

“I’m always careful,” Bucky retorts, and Steven presses a finger against the cut on his back, making Bucky flinch. “Alright, you’ve made your point.”

He turns around, slow and awkward, shoulder knocking against Steven’s as he keeps out of range of the spinning blades. There is enough room for them to edge around it, backs pressed to the wall, and as quickly as they dare they sidle past and into the passage.

The way looks clear, but Bucky still checks for red marks or notches in the stone, pointing up to a series of pits along the wall.

“What are they?” Steven asks.

“Nothing good,” Bucky replies, crouching down. He still feels restless, unsteady, as through threads of fire twist and burn under his skin instead of blood and sinew.

Whatever it is, he can’t seem to shake it, and carries it with him as he inches forward.

There is that terrible sound again, of steel scraping against stone. Long, wickedly sharp darts fire out of the pitted wall, and embed into the stone opposite, raining chips of stone fragments onto the floor. “Son of a-” Bucky grabs Steven’s hand and darts forward, head down as the sound of strings ratcheting along crossbows fills the air.

Over their heads darts fly past. Some embed themselves into the walls while others fly off at angles, raising sparks as they ricochet off the stones and land around them. Bucky flinches every time he hears the sound, bracing himself for the punch of blade through muscle and bone. It does not come, and finally, finally, the passage falls silent.

The stone floor before them is unmarked, as are the walls, and ahead the passage splits into two. One
slopes up to the right, while the other turns sharply left. “This way,” Steven says, pulling Bucky to the left. Their hands are still clasped, Steven’s pale fingers intertwined with Bucky’s, roughened from sea and salt air. “Wait,” Bucky says, uncertain. Though he does not know the ziggurat like Steven does, he has been keeping track of their progress. “We need to go right.” He is almost certain. Almost. Steven’s grip tightens. “This way,” he insists. Bucky brushes his thumb along the sensitive skin of Steven’s wrist, feeling his heart beating steady and strong. “Of course,” he says softly. “Lead on.” He needs no persuasion, he is not a horse that has to be coaxed onwards, but Steven does not let go of his hand, and Bucky does not let go either.

Chapter End Notes

O’lanodorsko cheran - the North star
Cheran - stars

1714. In Mainz, Germany, all Roma are to be executed without trial on the grounds that their way of life is outlawed.

1719 In France, sentencing for being Roma is deportation to French colonies.

1721. Emperor Karl VI of the Austro-Hungarian empire orders the extermination of Roma throughout his domain.

1723. Roma are prohibited from residence in the Lorraine, gathering in the woods or main roads. Punishment is banishment. Communities are encouraged "to gather, march in formation and open fire on them."

1724. All vagabonds and vagrants are prohibited by Louis XV of France from residence and nomadism and gathering of more than four adults in a house. Adult men are sentenced to the galleys for five years. All others are flogged and sent to the poor house.

1725. Frederick William I of Prussia condemns any Roma over eighteen caught in his territory, man or woman, to be hanged without trial.

1726. Gitanos in Spain are forbidden to appeal against the sentences of the courts. Charles VI of France passes a law that any Rom found in the country are to be killed instantly. Romani women and children are to have their ears cut off and whipped all the way to the border.

1727. Berne, Switzerland decrees that Roma are forbidden to stay. "Gypsy men and women of more than fifteen years of age shall have one ear cut off the first time they are caught ... but if they are caught a second time they shall be sentenced to death."

1728. The town council of Aachen, Germany, passes an ordinance condemning Roma to death. "Captured Gypsies, whether they resist or not, shall be put to death immediately. However, those seized who do not resort to counter-attack shall be granted
no more than a half an hour to kneel, if they so wish, beg God almighty to forgive them their sins and to prepare themselves for death."

1734. Frederick William I decrees that any Roma caught in his territory, man or woman, will be hanged without trial. A reward is offered.

1745. Gitanos in Spain must settle in assigned places within two weeks. The punishment for failure is execution. "It is legal to fire upon them to take their life." The Churches no longer provide asylum. Armed troops are ordered to comb the countryside.
Chapter Summary

Beneath his sun-bleached linens Steven’s skin is pale as cream, the notches of his spine and the blades of his scapula stark prominences. It is like seeing one of the marble high reliefs along the walls come to life, all delicate curves and sharp contrasts.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

On and on the passage twists and rises, gradually becoming so narrow that they must walk in single file. Bucky catches the faintest hint of perfumed air as they make another turn, and hears the trickle of running water. Steven’s hand is still in his, fingers interlaced, thumb dragging along an old scar that curves along Bucky’s palm, a twisted, pale life line.

“Where are you taking me?” Bucky asks, curious but not impatient. By way of answer Steven leads him up a final set of stairs.

In the long journey they have passed many shrines and temples, great statues and tapestries, battles chiselled onto stone walls with laborious skill. It has been like walking through a tomb, with no sense of life or the living, only the sands and conquests. Before them is a balm to Bucky’s weary soul: the royal baths.

The chamber is a considerable size, but arches and columns stand throughout the rooms, silks draped between them to give the baths a sense of privacy. The marble walls were once polished to a high shine, though the stone has lost its lustre. Bucky can still make out depictions of figures reclining under trees and conversing over coffee, etched into the stone with care. They overlook wide couches and daybeds positioned against the walls, each one draped in silks and scattered with soft cushions. Carved wooden cabinets stand beside the beds, bearing water pitchers and glass bottles decorated with gold paint, all coated a fine layer of dust.

One wall is open to the city, with a rose strewn balcony overlooking the river. A cool breeze stirs the drapes, offering relief from the heat of the day.

If that were not already more luxury than Bucky has witnessed in his long, pitiable life, there are the baths themselves. In the center of the chamber is a fountain trickling sweet, clear water into a wide marble basin. Carved vines and flowers drape over the lip, and water spills down to fill the baths themselves, flowing down steps and along channels to the six pools spaced around the room. Vines creep up the walls, burdened with sweet, dark grapes, while further out from the baths the water trickles into deep planters filled with earth where trees spread out indulgently, apricots and pomegranates weighing down their branches. Fallen leaves litter the paths between the baths, yellowing and curled at the edges.

Steven tugs at Bucky’s hand again. “Come on.”

Bucky allows himself to be led deeper into the chamber, boots sounding heavily on the polished floors.

“Steven,” he murmurs, low and wary. “What are you up to?”

Steven walks down to the nearest pool, and sits down at its edge to unfasten his boots. “You want that cut to get infected?” he asks lightly.
An infection would be the end of him, there’s no doubting that. “Of course not.”
“So take off that damned armour and have a bath.”
He hauls off one boot, putting it to one side, and sets to work removing the other while Bucky looks at him incredulously.
“What?”
Steven sets down his other boot and dips his feet into the water, sitting back with a sigh. “We are almost at the treasury, yes? You can spare a few minutes to get cleaned up.”
The water is cool and inviting, and Steven’s words have their own persuasion. They have come far, Bucky has to admit, and their goal is at hand. What could it hurt to rest a little, to regain his strength for what lies ahead?
“No one will disturb us,” Steven adds. “With no palace staff it has been abandoned.”
It is true that there are signs of neglect, the dust gathered in the hanging folds of silk, the leaf litter on the floor stirred by their movements. And the water is cold and free-flowing.
Bucky huffs, more amused than impatient, and sits down to take off his boots as well.

Steven seems to take his sitting as free license and strips off his clothes, dousing them in the pool to rid them of the worst of the dirt and sand and hanging them up to dry in the breeze. Bucky lowers his head, his hair falling in a curtain across his face. Though it offers a semblance of privacy, it does nothing to obscure his view. Beneath his sun-bleached linens Steven’s skin is pale as cream, the notches of his spine and the blades of his scapula stark prominences. It is like seeing one of the marble high reliefs along the walls come to life, all delicate curves and sharp contrasts.

Shorn of all clothing, Steven walks over to the next pool and dives in, his slight form barely making a sound as he disappears under the surface. Bucky gives up all pretence of indifference, watching the water for him to reappear with trepidation.

Steven breaks through the surface, water cascading down his back, and dives down again, leaving ripples in his wake.

Reassured, Bucky resumes pulling off his boots, leaving them to stand alongside Steven’s while he unfastens his belts. Each one he coils up, dropping them to unspool by his boots, before moving on to the vambraces. The right is deeply scored, the plates buckled from where he was struck by a guard’s sword. He tears a strip of silk from one of the drapes, dipping it into the water and rubbing down the leather pieces one after the other. At last he unfastens the cuirass, easing it off his shoulders with a low groan.

The boiled leather of the back is deeply slashed in several places, no doubt from the spinning blades of the palace defenses. Bucky suppresses a shudder, running his thumb over where the blades almost sever the cuirass completely. A harder armour and the blades would have caught, dragging him around to a poor end. He dips his cloth into the water again, and wipes away the blood that has smeared and dried on the inside, irritating his skin. He rinses out the cloth and works over the rest of the gold and leather, the wet cloth dripping beads of pink stained water back into the pool.

It is hardly an effective clean, but he is grateful nonetheless. If he must face demons he will do it in bright armour, a baro Rom proud and strong.

Steven reappears, swimming over to lean against the edge of the pool, and watches as Bucky turns the armour over, checking for damage. He flicks water, droplets landing on Bucky’s arm and pulling him from his circling thoughts.

“What?” Bucky brushes the water away.
“You’re supposed to be washing yourself, not your armour.”
Bucky resists the urge to flick water in return as it is unclean, tainted with blood and filth. He will just have to get back at him later.

He sets the armour aside, getting up to strip off his pants, and Steven swims away again. The trousers he leaves where they fall, salt-stained and travel weary. He walks, naked and without shame, to a pool a little further from the balcony, away from where Steven swims in his little circles.

The water is chill and refreshing, and he lets himself slip under the surface. When he opens his eyes
the world seems far away, distorted as if seen through a sheet of ice. He blinks, letting the water raise him up again, the warm air sweet on his skin as he breaks the surface. He hears the pad of bare feet on the floor, and rolls over onto his front as Steven walks over to sit at the poolside. He has something in his hand, and Bucky pushes his wet hair out of his eyes and swims over to see.

“Here.” Steven holds out his hand, offering Bucky a brick shaped piece of soap.

It is soft, his thumb leaving an imprint in the surface, and smells faintly of sesame. The soap he knows from Dobruja is hard and harsh, good for cleaning clothes but rough on the skin, though his sister hoards a little stash of sweeter-scented soaps that she claims would be wasted on Bucky’s salted hide.

“Thank you,” Bucky murmurs, and Steven leaves him to wash.

The soap offers little lather, but the smell is pleasant enough, and Bucky scrubs himself down sparingly, taking his time with his shoulder where the wound is still tender. The choora that was tucked into his boot is sharp enough, so he rubs soap into the coarse stubble on his chin. With deft swipes of the blade he shaves his face, rubbing fingers against the grain under his chin before passing the blade up his throat again to catch the stray hairs.

He rubs the soap into his hair last, working suds through the tangles before ducking his head underwater, watching as the clear water turns cloudy and grey.

He wonders if Steven has a bar of the same soap, if while Bucky washes himself Steven is doing the same. He bites down on the urge, impulsive and foolhardy, to climb out and offer to wash his back, satisfying himself with combing his fingers through his own hair instead.

It is a small thing, a foolish thing, but he hopes that Steven made use of the bar before giving it to him. He likes the thought of them smelling the same, of sesame and burnt herbs.

Bucky has spent most of his life washing in cold rivers and frigid streams. Though his mother and sister would often take the time to heat water over the fire and sponge themselves down, Bucky has little patience for such things. Cold water, a little hard soap if he needs it, brisk and brusque and over quickly.

Here in the baths, however, he can see the sense in lingering. The water is pleasingly cool, and the drapes and pillars give a welcome sense of privacy. He has no intention of floating around in his own dirty bathwater, so he swims to the edge and hauls himself out, looking around to see where Steven has gotten to.

He is easy enough to find, rummaging through a cabinet in search of some bottles. With his clothes hanging out to dry, he has fashioned himself a wrap from a strip of blue silk, the ends tucked in at his hip. Though it covers his modesty it leaves little to the imagination, silk moulding to his damp skin as he rises to his feet.

“There you are,” Steven says at the sight of Bucky. “Go, sit. I’ll bring these over.”

He doesn’t direct Bucky anywhere in particular, so he slips into the nearest pool, the one Steven had been swimming laps in, finding a raised seat under the surface in one corner and sitting down. He crosses his legs and folds his hands in his lap, playing at being demure. It gets him a light tsk from Steven, so it was worth the effort.

Bucky leans back in the water, elbows resting on the tiled lip, and tilts his head back.

“You look like a cat,” Steven murmurs as he sits on the edge of the pool beside him. “Lounging in the sun.”

“Do I still smell like a cat?” Bucky asks, offering his arm out for Steven to sniff.

He makes a show of smelling the length of Bucky’s arm from wrist to elbow, and the light huffs of his breath make the hairs stand up on Bucky’s arm. “Yes,” Steven announces. “Irredeemably.”

Bucky snorts, pulling his hand away. Steven gives him a brief, fond smile before picking through his bottles, the clinking of glass a sweet counterpoint to the trickle of running water.

Steven douses a bundle of silk in something from the first bottle, resinous and sharply scented.
Bucky hisses as Steven scrubs at his shoulder, opening up the wound. He is neither tender nor restrained, washing away the scab and letting the wound bleed.

“I thought you wanted to stop me bleeding everywhere?” Bucky grouses. Whatever it is, it’s not pleasant, and Bucky lets out a sharp yowl when Steven pours more from the bottle straight onto the wound.

“I said I didn’t want you to die of sepsis,” Steven says briskly. “Calm down, it’s only a bit of tincture.”

Bucky growls, low and loud, and Steven flicks his ear.

“My bedside manner is fine,” Steven says crisply. “You just like to complain.”

He finally takes pity on Bucky, setting aside the cloth and leaning closer to blow air on the cut. The sting lessens immediately, and Bucky makes a low sound of relief. Steven smiles, before sucking in another breath and blowing again.

Sweeter balms are applied to the worst of the bruises that mottle his skin, though Bucky insists that they are unnecessary. Steven ignores him, taking his time as he applies salves and works his thumbs into the knotted muscles between Bucky’s shoulders.

He feels lax and loose-limbed, but somehow energised, as if the weight on his shoulders has finally sloughed off.

“You’ll turn me soft,” Bucky murmurs, tilting his head to one side so Steven can dig a knuckle into his shoulder and work loose another ache.

“Would that be so bad?” Steven asks. He sounds genuine, curious as to how Bucky might answer.

“No.” Bucky blinks slowly. “No, it wouldn’t.”

Steven seals up the last bottle, sitting back to admire his work, fingers slick and sweet-scented with oil.

It is a good thing, Bucky thinks, a good place to come to. A good chance to catch their breaths. He turns to Steven to say as much, but his throat seems to close up, an ache in his chest too sweet to give name to.

Steven reaches out to touch Bucky’s chin, thumb pressing into the dimple there. “There,” he says softly. “You’re not so bad when you’re cleaned up a little.”

Bucky’s mouth twitches up, and Steven brushes the tip of his thumb against a bruise just under his lip, stroking it lightly.

Maybe he leans in intending to blow on the dark smudge, like he had with Bucky’s shoulder. Maybe it was to get a closer look, Bucky isn’t sure. He only knows that when Steven leans down he raises his head, lips parted to receive the kiss when it finally comes.

Steven doesn’t recoil when their mouths meet. He doesn’t flinch away, alarmed by his own desires and Bucky’s welcome. One kiss becomes two, becomes four, becomes countless, though Bucky tries to mark their number, one blending seamlessly into the next. Steven cups his hand to the nape of Bucky’s neck, tilting his head back as he draws closer. His thumbs press to the hinge of Bucky’s jaw, though his mouth is already open, impatient for more kisses deep and sweet.

When they finally break apart, starved of air and reluctant to withdraw too far, Steven caresses Bucky’s cheek with his fingertips, gaze flicking back and forth from his left eye to his right.

Bucky grasps him by the waist, pulling him into the water, and Steven lets out a startled curse, kicking and sending water crashing over the sides of the pool. He regains his balance in Bucky’s lap, straddling his thighs, and glares down at him.


“I’ll show you sting,” Steven huffs, wrapping his arms around Bucky’s neck and kissing him again. True to his word, his sting is sharp and sweet, teeth pressing to Bucky’s kiss swollen lips and biting down. The sensation charges down Bucky’s spine and coils at the base of his pelvis, heat radiating out in a spiral and making his cock twitch and stiffen. Emboldened, Bucky slides a finger under the strip of cloth around Steven’s waist, and with a gentle tug sends it floating away. He drags the palms
of his hands up Steven’s thighs, pale honey and silk, divining his pleasure from the way his tongue darts between Bucky’s teeth, and the sting of his kisses.

As Steven kisses him, tugging at his hair, so Bucky’s own hands explore new terrain. They trace the creases of Steven’s thighs, splay over the cradle of his hips, and finally, finally, settle between his legs. Steven’s cock seems made for his hand, the weight and warmth of it fitting neatly in his fist, the rose crown standing proud. He can drag his thumb along the underside of the flared head and twist his wrist, drawing sounds from Steven’s throat that are almost pained. Steven whines into his mouth, hips stuttering, and Bucky licks the curses up as they fall. His own cock, hard and leaking and desperate, twitches against Steven’s thigh, smearing beads of fluid across his milky skin.

“Wait,” Steven gasps. He pulls a hand from Bucky’s hair, a few strands tangled around his fingers catching and snapping. The sharp little sting brings Bucky to his senses, and when Steven takes hold of his wrist and pushes it back Bucky lets go of his cock immediately, hands moving to his hips.

“What’s wrong?” he rasps. “Did I hurt you?”

Steven shakes his head, pressing kisses at random around Bucky’s mouth. “No,” he mouths, reaching blindly over to the bottles on the poolside. He knocks them over, sending the glassware clattering and filling the air with sweet fragrance as oil spills over the stone and drips into the water. Steven scrapes his hand through a puddle of oil and reaches behind himself, rising up onto his knees. He lets out a sharp little moan, head tipped back to expose the marble column of his throat, shoulders tense. After a moment he sighs, head falling forward as he rolls his hips. The realisation of what he is doing to himself is like a punch to the gut, knocking the air from Bucky’s lungs.

The sight of Steven taking pleasure is one Bucky will never forget, not if he lives to be a thousand. He watches in silence, drinking his fill. The way Steven’s lips fall open as he touches himself, palm cupped against the curve of his ass, twisting his fingers in and out. But Bucky can only be an audience for so long before tilting his head up and pressing his lips to Steven’s exposed throat. He can feel Steven’s soft moans through his skin, feel the rabbit-fast kick of his heart against his tongue. Some base urge to mark, to put his teeth against that marble throat and carve his own name fills him, and Bucky contents himself with kisses instead. His hands work their way up Steven’s spine, tracing the shape of his vertebrae and committing each one to memory before tracking his fingers down again, down to the flare of his hips and the working of his fingers.

It should feel sinful, the way his fingertips glide across oil-slick skin, tracing the stretched, taut rim where Steven breaches himself, two fingers thrusting in a stuttering rhythm. Steven grips his shoulder with his free hand and keens when Bucky runs his knuckles along his taint, drawing them back and forth until he chokes back a sob.

Despite what Steven might say, Bucky is not entirely heartless, and he withdraws before the sensation becomes overwhelming, dragging his own fingers through the spreading pool of sweet oil and taking himself in hand. The air fills with the slippery sounds of oil against skin and the splash and ripple of water, punctuated by Steven’s increasingly ragged breathing.

Bucky would have been happy enough to have it end there, to watch Steven chase his fall while he spilled over himself, but Steven has other ideas. He pushes Bucky’s hand aside, crowding up against him in a way that could not be misinterpreted. He meets Bucky’s eyes as he reaches back to take him in hand, sliding his slick cock against his ass. The world tilts, and Bucky’s heart forgets how to beat, his lungs lock, and the blood in his veins seems to still, waiting breathlessly as Steven bears down on him.

Pressure, insistent and riding the edge of painful, closes over his cock, and Steven’s eyes drift shut. He exhales slowly, thighs shivering where they are braced against Bucky’s hips, and eases himself down.

“Shuka,” Bucky sighs as Steven raises himself up again, dropping down slow and agonisingly sweet.

More words slip from Bucky’s lips, sweet and reverent, his hands cradling Steven’s hips and guiding
as he rises and falls, rolling like the incoming tide. Steven drapes his arms over Bucky’s shoulders, hands crossed at the wrists, and tilts his head to one side, lips kiss-swollen and inviting. And Bucky would kiss them, would kiss them ten thousand times if he could.

Before long Steven’s rhythm begins to falter, the tremors in his thighs increasing, and he whines in frustration, exhausted and close to the edge. Bucky wraps his arms around him, supporting his weight as he rises to his feet, sloshing water over the edge of the pool. Steven clings and utters a low curse when Bucky’s cock slips out of him. A day bed is only a few paces away, and Bucky carries Steven over, laying him down with care on the sun bleached silks. Steven sprawls out, knees drawing up, and Bucky skims his palms along the cream of his thighs, easing them apart to lie down between them. Steven, ever impatient, reaches down to grasp him, and Bucky’s cock pulses and aches in his hand.

“Come on,” he urges as Bucky presses against him. “Come on, damn you!” Bucky shushes him, sucking kisses that mar the pale skin of his throat as he pushes in, Steven’s body opening to him sweet and easy.

He has missed his wasp’s sting, and offers up his mouth, delighting in the flick of tongue and press of teeth that receives him. Steven nips and laps at his skin, taking his lower lip between his teeth and worrying at it, making Bucky yelp. He soothes the bites with gentle kisses and licks, the sheets under them rucking up with every thrust.

As Bucky’s rhythm falters their kisses turn rough and frantic, whatever grace he might have lost in the heat of the moment. Every thrust ruts Steven’s cock against his stomach, and Bucky presses the flat of his hand to its length, offering a little more friction to push him over the edge. Steven’s teeth draw blood as they catch and bite down, until even he is spent, panting into Bucky’s mouth in a desperate, exhaustive exchange of breaths somehow more intimate than the motion of one body within another.

As the day draws on Bucky dozes, half waking when Steven slips out of his arms. Somewhere between sleep and wakefulness he listens as Steven crosses the floor to the pool. Water splashes, the sound of him washing, gentle ripples and drips, soft inhales as he touches something tender. Footsteps again, damp this time, and the sigh of linen as he dresses.

The chamber is quiet, that careful silence of someone going to great pains to not make a sound. Steven avoids the bottles still piled on the floor, and the hanging drapes, and the fallen leaves that litter the pathways, the faint tread of his footsteps receding…

He’s leaving.

“Where are you going?” Bucky calls out, wide awake and sitting up in the bed. It comes out sharper than he intended, but Steven reappears a moment later.

“I’m hungry,” he says, pointing to the trees by the balcony. “I saw a pomegranate tree over there.” Bucky sighs, scratching his hands through his hair. He feels well-rested, and yes, hungry too.
“Give me a minute,” he mumbles, and wipes himself off on the sheets, taking a vindictive kind of pleasure in soiling the rich silks so thoroughly. Before anything he walks over to the pool, washing himself before going over to search through his clothing. Everything is as he left it, the darro tucked safely away, and he pulls a wrap of dried fruit from a pocket, opening it up and picking out a strip to eat before handing the rest over to Steven.

“What is this?” Steven asks, taking the package and carefully picking out a wizened lump of something leathery.

“That?” he asks as Steven holds it up. “Apricot maybe?”

“You don’t know?” Steven nibbles at the edge, and seems to find it agreeable enough to eat.

“Apples, pears, apricots, nuts,” Bucky says, pulling on his pants. “Whatever I found in the woods, sliced up and dried. There were cherries too, but Becca had them.”

“You made this?” Steven surreptitiously picks at some pith stuck between his teeth. “It’s good.”

“Thank you.” Bucky gives him a brief smile, and Steven holds out the wrap to him, waving it back and forth until Bucky takes something. Only after does he pick out a slice of apple, grey and wrinkled, regarding it warily before taking a bite.

The armour feels heavy now he has spent time without it, and Bucky straps on the cuirass and vambraces while Steven harangues him into eating, washing down his fruit with sips of cold, clear water from the fountain.

“I’ve…” Steven pauses, folding up the empty wrap. “I’ve never eaten a pomegranate.”

“You’re not missing anything.” Bucky fastens his belts on one after the other. “A lot of bitter pith and a few seeds.”

Steven unfolds and refolds the wrap, a frown marring his brow. “At the palace, in Khorasan, the guests used to spend hours in the baths, telling stories and gossiping while they had me running back and forth.” Bucky takes the wrap from him before he wears it in two, and Steven gives him a quick, brittle smile. “I used to hide in the back just to hear the stories of Seharezard and the Arabian Nights, eating lokum and sherbert cooled with snow.”

Bucky takes up the dagger and slides it into his belt, and finally the little choora in his boot.

“We should get moving,” he says. “We’ve wasted enough time.”

Steven nods, pointing to the far end of the baths, where Bucky can see an arched doorway beyond the drapes and columns.

Steven doesn’t follow as he starts walking, and after a few moments Bucky turns around, approaching him slowly. He looks troubled, fingers clenching and releasing, head bowed.

“Steven?” Bucky says softly, reaching out to lay a hand on his arm, a hand that a few hours before grasped far more greedily.

Steven looks up at him, as if startled by the touch. “Do Rom ever…” He hesitates. “Do you take up with those that are not like you? Do your women take Persian men for husbands, or Ottomans, or… or Northmen?”

“No,” Bucky says honestly. “Nor do our men.”

“Oh.” Steven’s fingers still, his mouth quirking up, though it trembles as it does so. “Of course.”

“Steven-”

“No. No, I understand,” Steven talks over him, and there is so much Bucky needs to say. “I made no demands when I kissed you, I can hardly do so after the fact.”

“Steven-”

“I’m sorry,” Steven continues in a rush. “I threw myself at you without thinking of the consequences, and-

Bucky takes him by the chin and kisses him, firm and brief, and Steven leans into it, as if he could keep them from separating again. Bucky pushes him away as gently as he can.

“There is suffering enough in life,” Bucky says. “Do not go seeking it out.”

Steven closes his eyes, relief and bitterness at war on his features. “Be thankful for what I have,” he mutters.
There is a darro in Bucky’s pocket that is not worth one tenth of the man before him. And hope. Hope that fills his heart until it can barely fit beneath his ribs.

“When this task is done, will you come back to Dobruja with me?” Bucky asks, and Steven gives him an odd look.

“I thought outsiders were not welcome in your family?”

Bucky nods, shifting his weight from foot to foot as he slides his hand into his pocket. “They can be persuaded.”

“And what would I do in Dobruja?” Steven asks, wary as Bucky reaches out and links their fingers together.

“Whatever you wished to,” Bucky tells him, pressing the darro into Steven’s hand. Steven looks down at their joined fingers. “What’s this?”

“It’s not a fish.” Bucky’s smile grows wider. “Or even half an onion.”

Steven opens up his hand and lets out a sharp sound, almost agonised, as if Bucky had struck him instead of proposed. He holds the diamond up to the light, staring at it and Bucky in turn. “This… this is for me?”

“We go to the treasury,” Bucky tells him. “And when it is done we find your mother and your friends, and leave this place, never to return.”

He is not afraid of what lies ahead now, his wasp is with him.

“Is it enough?” Bucky asks, and Steven doesn’t answer, just pushes the stone back into his hand and curls up against him. His heart stutters and kicks, Bucky can feel it pounding against his chest, and he wraps his arms around Steven, holding him close. The darro cuts into the palm of his hand, and Bucky holds Steven tighter, trying his utmost to soothe the tension in his shoulders.

“Is it enough?” he whispers, suddenly uncertain, and Steven nods. He raises his head, cupping Bucky’s jaw in his pale hands, and kisses him with a damp cheeked ferocity, their teeth clacking together. His eyes are fever-bright, his teeth bared like a berserker on the eve of battle.

“Yes,” he rasps between bruising, savage kisses. “Yes.”

Chapter End Notes

If you want to fixate on minor details in you historical au's, here's some info on Persian soap manufacturing [Here](#)
The Well

Chapter Summary

“I love you,” Steven whispers, and Bucky wishes he could see his face. “Remember that. Will you remember that?”

To Bucky’s surprise, Steven turns them both around and starts to head back the way they had come. “Wait,” Bucky calls, gesturing to the path ahead. “You said it was this way.”

“And now I’m saying it’s this way,” Steven tells him impatiently. “Keep up.”

Bucky watches as he disappears beyond the columns and silks. At least there will be no surprises from the palace defenses this time.

“Come on,” Steven calls, his voice taking on an echo that suggests he has reached the passageway. Bucky hums to himself, hands on his hips, the darro safe in his pocket.

He walks between the waterfalls and pools, past the scattered bottles and soiled sheets, only pausing briefly before joining Steven again.

“What took you so long?” Steven asks, and in answer Bucky holds out his hand, a pomegranate resting in his palm.

The smile Steven gives him is sudden and bright, and seems to light up the dull passageway.

“Go on,” Bucky murmurs. “It’s for you.”

Steven takes the offered fruit, leaning against Bucky’s side. “You were listening,” he says, half to himself.

“Always,” Bucky replies, pressing a kiss to his temple and dodging the elbow that jabs at his ribs.

Steven lifts the fruit to his mouth, as if to bite into it like an apple, and Bucky is quick to snatch it away again.

“Hey!” Steven yelps, and Bucky digs his thumbs into the thick skin, ripping the fruit in half with a spray of sweet red juice. Inside is filled with tiny, ruby red fruits encased in thin membranes.

“Here.” Bucky holds out one half of the pomegranate. “Eat the seeds, leave the white parts.”

Steven nods, picking out a jewel-like fruit and eating it, the seed crunching between his teeth. Because whatever has transpired between them he is still him, Steven tastes a little of the white pith. He grimaces, spitting the bitter flesh onto the floor, and ignores Bucky’s chuckling.

They walk in silence along the narrow passageway, Steven picking at seeds and sucking on his fingers, sticky with nectar. At his insistence Bucky eats the other half, though he does not bother with picking out the fleshy seeds one by one, instead tearing at seed clusters with his teeth and chewing on sweet fruit and fragments of bitter pith. The taste is pleasingly complex, bitter and fragrant and sour, and all the sweeter knowing that Steven’s mouth tastes the same.

Steven is quiet, and when he has finally eaten his fill he is quieter still.

“Are you alright?” Bucky asks softly. “Are you in discomfort, or-”

“What?” Steven looks at him askance. “Do you think you were too much for me? Don’t flatter yourself.”

Though the words are arch the tone is teasing, and Bucky ducks his head down, taking the hit with good grace before regarding Steven with such affection it makes his cheeks colour. “I doubt there is a force on earth that could outmatch you, Steven.” He sighs theatrically. “I must come to terms with marriage to a scold.”

“Hey!” Steven swipes at him. “And I’m lumbered with a horse’s ass!”

Bucky takes hold of his hand, if only to keep from being beaten senseless with it, and links their fingers together. “And what a pair we must make.”
Steven clasps his hand tightly around Bucky’s. “A fine pair.”

They walk on, Steven leading them through a maze of narrow passages. Bucky quietly marvels at the quality of his mind, to know the whereabouts of so many winding paths in the Etemenanki. When he brings this up Steven only shrugs, and mutters something about having a good memory. Deeper and deeper into the ziggurat they go, turning one way and then the other until Bucky can barely keep his bearings. The further they go, the darker it becomes, the sunlight that leaks in through the stones from outside fading as the day draws to an end. The torches that had lit the larger passageways are nonexistent here, and it is not long before they find themselves stumbling single file down a passage so narrow it might as well be a ventilation shaft. Steven leads the way, one hand out to brush against the walls, feeling for the opening to the next passage. The other hand is still wrapped firmly around Bucky’s, their fingers intertwined. He is still tacky from eating pomegranates, and Bucky has a faint urge to lick the last traces of sweetness from his fingers.

When he does lift Steven’s hand to his mouth Steven doesn’t scold him or tell him to stop, his breaths unsteady in the darkness as Bucky draws his tongue over his scented skin.

The taste of pomegranate is faint in the creases at the base of Steven’s thumb and between his fingers, stronger on his lips as Bucky draws his tongue over them, savouring.

When Steven’s lips part there is barely a hint of it, only the warm saline taste of himself. He twists his fingers in Bucky’s hair, and with some reluctance gives a firm tug. Bucky needs no other warning, pressing a last kiss to the corner of his mouth before withdrawing.

“I love you,” Steven whispers, and Bucky wishes he could see his face. “Remember that. Will you remember that?”

Love should not sound so wounded, and Bucky would kiss him again if he could, but Steven’s grip on his hair has not lessened.

“I will remember.” He curls his hands around Steven’s wrists, slender and resolute. “I swear it.” He feels Steven relax, fingers easing their grip and stroking through his hair. “Good, because I think we’re lost.”

“I don’t understand it.” Steven runs both hands along the wall, cursing under his breath. “It should be here,” he says for the fifth or sixth time, Bucky has not been keeping count.

“It’s alright,” Bucky soothes. “Maybe we should keep walking, see if it’s further ahead.”

“It’s a dead end,” Steven says irritably. “Maybe ten paces ahead you’ll hit stone. There should be a passage leading up to the treasury right here.” He slaps the stone wall in frustration. “Where is it?” Bucky rests a hand on Steven’s shoulder, drawing his thumb over the knotted muscles. “Wait here while I check ahead,” he says gently, and fumbles his way down the passage.

Just as Steven said it ends abruptly at twelve paces. The ceiling is low and the width barely past his shoulders, but he takes his time feeling around the walls and floor, searching for anything in the smooth stone as he inches his way back.

His fingernails catch on an odd indentation in the stone, just to the right of where Steven is standing. Bucky runs his fingers back and forth, feeling his way up and down the wall. A notch, maybe? A score mark where some hidden blade could scythe out at the unwary? It reaches all the way up to the ceiling, and there is a corresponding seam further along the wall, just beyond Steven’s reach. Why would anyone cut into the stone like that? Why would they mark out the space… Bucky curses, low and furious. “It’s been bricked up!” he snaps, reaching over to take Steven’s hand and move his fingers over to the markings. “Can you feel it? The passage has been blocked.”

Steven falls still, his fingers unmoving beneath the press of Bucky’s hand.

“Steven?” Bucky asks carefully. “Was this the only way?”

A shudder passes through Steven’s body, and he shakes his head vehemently. “No.”

“Steven?”

Bucky can feel it under his fingers, the shift in Steven’s body as he reins in his fears, as he casts around for another way.
“There’s another way,” he says at last. “The well. It’s a long climb, but it’s another way.”
Bucky nods. “Then we climb.”

*

The mood is subdued as they double back through the narrow passages, Steven taking care to retrace their steps until they reach some hidden marker and he strikes out in a new direction. Their path runs parallel to the main corridor through the ziggerut for a while, intricate wooden lattice work the only thing keeping them from being out on the open. The halls are lit with braziers and torches, illuminating their hidden passage with warm light and casting a delicate shadow on the walls.

They keep silent as they walk these paths, signalling to each other through hand gestures and shared glances. The Etemenanki is as silent as a grave, no courtesans gather in the richly furnished rooms, no palace slaves walk back and forth with platters and flasks. But they are not alone. Guards stand in doorways. They pace back and forth along the wide, well lit hallways, passing close enough that Bucky could reach out and touch them, if he was foolish enough. And somewhere above them something paces back and forth, a great weight that shakes the walls and sends rains of dust and sand down on the guards.

With guards so close at hand Bucky doesn’t voice his concern, or ask what manner of thing could make such a noise, and from the way Steven pales in the torchlight at its passing, it is doubtful he knows the answer either.

It weighs on them both, the shifting and settling of the ziggurat around them.

At last the passage turns away from the main halls, and they ascend into darkness again. Steven’s hand finds his once more, firm and familiar. The passage opens out to a hallway, lit by torches set in sconces overhead. By the torchlight Bucky can make out an arch ahead, and beyond a vast chamber.

“Careful where you step,” Steven says, climbing up to take one of the torches. “It’s a long way down.”

He walks to the arch and holds up the torch, casting a circle of light into a great round wellshaft, maybe fifty feet across. On either side of them are more ornate arches, spanning the diameter of the well. Some are sealed up, while others lead to other parts of the ziggurat. A narrow walkway links the arches together, leading to a set of steps spiralling down into the depths of the well.

The light reaches far enough to reveal another ring of arches on a lower level, and no doubt beyond that is another level, and another, all the way down to the base of the ziggurat and then deeper still. Steven raises the torch up, and Bucky can see more levels above them, though hopefully not as many as there are below.

The air is damp and chill, and though it should bring relief from the desert heat it only gives Bucky a sense of foreboding.

“I mean it when I say be careful,” Steven warns, his voice echoing oddly in the chamber.

Bucky nods once, mouth pursed, and follows Steven to the stairs. The steps themselves are narrow, and slick with algae and moss. Steven takes the lead, holding the torch up to light the way ahead, the steeply cut stairway spiralling up into darkness.

They walk in silence for a time, conserving their breaths for the climb, the stairs climbing up without end. Bucky finds excuses to stop as often as he can, passing the water skin up to Steven to drink while he holds onto the torch, and staring over the edge when embers drop down into the well, flaring out long before they ever reach the bottom.

The silence that fell upon them in the passageways lingers on, but now and then Bucky catches Steven looking at him, readying himself to speak, but nothing comes of it.

They pass another level, a ring of blank-faced arches overlooking the well. One or two are lit with torches, and Bucky can see empty hallways much like the one they crossed to get here. He suppresses a shiver, telling himself that it is only the cold he feels, nothing more.

They climb a little further, Steven’s breaths loud and rasping in the dank air, and Bucky is about to
suggest another break when Steven lets out a soft curse.
“What is it?” Bucky asks.
In answer Steven gestures ahead. The steps on the edge of the torchlights are littered with debris.
Chunks of broken stones have dropped down and shattered on the stairs, greats cracks formed in the steep steps and along the mossy wall. Bucky looks up, and sees the cause. The stairs that should be spiralling over their heads has vanished, with nothing but jagged, crumbling stone where it had once been. What lies before them are the last few fragments, the rest lost to the depths of the well.
The gap is too wide, to unstable for Bucky to cross, let alone Steven.

“Damn it all!” Steven kicks at a piece of stone, glaring after it as it clatters over the edge. It falls for a long time, striking the wall occasionally, but they never hear a splash.
“This wasn’t by chance.” Steven goes to kick another stone, but Bucky reaches out to stop him before he slips. “First the bricked up passage, now this?”

Steven is right, it is no accident that the way has been blocked twice now. Bucky closes his eyes, just for a moment, and curses his misfortune.

“The Esagila,” he says softly. The funeral pyre they had built together. “The Shah knows that I’m here, the captain of the guards said as much. He must be cutting off all ways to the treasury.”

Steven turns to face him, torch swinging out over the wellshaft in his haste. “Then we leave. Forget the hourglass, forget the sands. We turn our backs on this cursed place and never return.”

“Steven,” Bucky says, low and firm. “You know I cannot. The sands of time must be stopped.”

“Why does it have to be you?” There is desperation in Steven’s voice, and Bucky skims his palm along Steven’s shoulder, trying to soothe what cannot be. “Why can’t it be someone else?”

“This task has fallen to me,” Bucky murmurs, pressing his hand to Steven’s cheek. His thumb traces his cheek, every sharp line and hard angle dear to him. “And I will see it done, or die in the attempt.”

“You’d die for what?” Steven asks bitterly. “Honour and glory?”

“No, drágo,” Bucky says gently, caressing his cheek as if he could wipe away the hardship like fallen tears. “I would die to keep my people safe.”

Steven curses, low and frustrated, and Bucky eases him into an embrace. It seems like a thousand years ago when Steven had held him, in the desolation of the Esagila, and offered him words of comfort, of courage, and Bucky can only try to do the same.

“The arches we passed,” Bucky asks. “Would one if them takes us to the treasury?”

Steven shakes his head, and then after a moment he nods, a sharp little jerk of his chin.

“Yes, but it’s dangerous. It leads to the guardpost, we can reach the treasury from there.”

“Then that is what we will try next.”

“And if that way is blocked too?” Steven asks, eyes cast downwards as if he already knows the answer.

“Then I will scale the walls, and reach the treasury from outside.”

Steven huffs, humourless and bitter. “Idiot.”

“Most likely,” Bucky agrees. “Will you show me the way?”

For a long, terrible moment he thinks that Steven will say no, that he has reached his end, and can go no further. And what would Bucky do without his wasp?

“Yes,” Steven says at last.

“Thank you.” Bucky kisses his forehead, and Steven leans into it, his body tense as a bowstring.

Bucky takes the torch from him, holding it up to light the way, his other hand wrapped around Steven’s. Slowly, each foot planted with care, they retrace their steps.

Steven seems subdued as they walk down to the arches. Perhaps it is frustration, every path he maps out leading only to a dead end. Perhaps he doubts that they will succeed. It makes Bucky’s heart ache to see him despair, and that is what loosens his tongue.

“My people do not often marry for love,” Bucky’s voice echoes off the damp stone. “We do so to strengthen bonds between families, to gain alliances. Once in a while a young couple will run off
together and marry in secret, and return hoping the kumpania will accept their union.”

He wonders if Steven is even listening, glancing back at him. Steven meets his eye, mouth twisting up.

“Like us?”

Bucky smiles back at him. “Like us.” He turns his attention back to the stairs. “I’m afraid you will be marrying beneath you. There is no place for us at the table when the council meets, and I am only called upon when…”

He stops. Though there is nothing unexpected about a man keeping secrets from his spouse, the idea seems distasteful to him. There are truths he has carried for too long, and he is tired of the burden.

“How do you call yourselves?” Bucky’s grip on his hand tightens.

“We call ourselves nátsiya, but in truth we are many people, gathered under one name. We follow the paths marked out by our fathers, only striking out on new roads when the old ways die out. Some of us are goldsmiths, like my poor brothers. Had they lived, they would have passed down their knowledge to their sons, and their sons, as the Zargari have done for generations beyond counting.” Bucky sucks in a breath, and the cold well seems like the place to tell the story, to cast each word into the cold depths to drown unmarked. “Musicians, horse traders, smiths, there are many trades, passed down father to son, and mother to daughter.”

He waits for the question to come, and it does not take long.

“And you?” Steven asks. “What is your trade?”

“Lur,” Bucky says softly. “We are mercenaries.”

Bucky steps out onto the narrow walkway, the dark arches looming over him. He turns to face Steven as he steps up after, offering his water skin while Steven catches his breath.

“I do not wish for children,” Bucky says as Steven sips at his water. “I will have no sons to teach the ways of death.” His mouth twitches. “I had thought love was beyond my grasp, and yet here you stand.”

Steven’s eyes flit to the sword at Bucky’s side, but return to his eyes. “Here I stand.”

There is his wasp, stubborn and brave and bright as the sun.

“I told you of my sister,” Bucky continues.

“Yes, Becca.”

“Yes, Becca.” Steven hands the water skin back, and Bucky swallows down a mouthful. “I would like to see her wed to one she loves, and who loves her. I would like her to have children, daughters and sons that I will teach how to fish. And my sword I will cast into the sea.” He seals up the skin and returns it to his belt. “I loved my father. I love my sister more.”

If he had expected the fire in Steven’s heart to diminish at these words, he would have been wrong, it only burns brighter.

“And that is why you must reach the treasury,” Steven utters, almost to himself.

“Yes.”

Steven purses his lips, taking on all that Bucky had said and shouldering the weight without complaint, and points to a crumbling arch. “This way.”

Though the arch was as wide as all the others around it, the hallway it leads to is dark and narrow, the air stale. They walk in silence, side by side, and through the walls they can hear the sound of stone on stone, a heavy weight moving back and forth.

“That noise again,” Bucky whispers. “What is it?”

“I don’t know,” Steven admits. “This path leads to the barracks of the Shah’s personal bodyguards.” Bucky hisses in irritation. The guards quarters. They will be walking into the lion’s mouth. But every other way they have tried has been blocked, so he rests his hand on the pommel of his sword and nods to Steven to keep going.

By some stroke of fortune, or perhaps not, the way is clear, and Steven gestures for Bucky to be still as they reach the doorway. There is a raised tile on the wall by the door, a design painted in gold on the glazed surface.
“Are you ready?” Steven asks, and in answer Bucky draws his sword.

Steven presses on the tile, and with a grinding of stone on stone loud enough to wake the dead, the door opens. Beyond lies a hall with a hearth at one end, though the fire has long since burned out. Racks of swords line one wall, and suits of armor and helmets the other.

Three guards, dressed in golden armour and pointed helmets, turn to the door as one, their weapons raised.

“There he is!” the first one rasps, and they stalk forward, their movements odd and disjointed, their eyes burning with unnatural fire.

“So much for stealth,” Bucky mutters, pushing Steven behind him and raising his sword.

He charges forward. There is no time for stealth or strategy, only stopping the guards before they raise the alarm. The first guard rushes up to meet him, mouth open unnaturally wide in a roar of challenge. Bucky cuts him down, pinning him to the floor while he draws out the dagger and plunges it into the creatures chest. It rasps in defiance, its challenge cut short as it crumbles to dust.

There is no time to dwell, not on the pile of dust that remains or the sound of stone scraping against stone. The other guards bear down on him, and Bucky brings his sword out in a wide arc, slashing at both of them, wounding but not enough to kill. He slashes again, trying to keep them at bay, but Steven yanks Bucky’s choori from his belt and jumps onto the back of one of the creatures, bringing the blade down again and again. Bucky curses loudly, forcing the dagger through the other guards exposed throat and withdrawing it before the wretch disintegrates. He turns quickly to Steven’s foe, sword ready to intervene, only to watch as the creature turns to sand, dropping Steven onto the floor.

The scraping sound draws closer, and Bucky turns to see the cause, his mouth dropping open in shock.

“What the hell is that?” Steven gasps.

In their travels through the city Bucky has seen many men turned into sand creatures, but he cannot imagine what creature had been transformed into this. A great stone brute, four times the height of a man, with thick arms and legs, pitted and coarse as granite. It wears a mask of beaten gold in the shape of some hideous beast with long ivory tusks. Behind the golden mask are a pair of baleful, glowing eyes, and the creature slouches towards them, its feet scraping gouges in the stone floor.

It has no sword or armour, and nor does it need them, raising both stone fists in the air and bringing them crashing down where Bucky and Steven stand.

“Háide!” Bucky yells, leaping to the side. Steven rolls the other way, racing to the racks along the wall to fetch a sword. The creature lumbers towards him, and Bucky charges after it. The beast is so immense that the top of his head barely reaches its knees, so he makes for the wall, feet finding their purchase as he runs straight up, one step, then two and three. He launches himself out as the brute reaches for Steven, stone fist missing by inches as he dodges out the way, dragging a sword with him. Bucky strikes out with the dagger first, the blade embedding in the creatures hip down to the hilt. The brute throws back its head with a roar. Below them Steven raises the sword and slashes at the back of the brute’s leg, and it drops to one knee, swiping at him again.

Bucky takes advantage of the creature’s distraction, as well as its bowed head, yanking the dagger free and clambering up its back. The brute straightens up again, raising its foot to stomp down on Steven as he darts away, and Bucky drives the dagger into its shoulder, gripping the handle and holding on for dear life.

The strike is enough to distract it again, and it swings around, hands grasping behind it as it tries to grab the irritant crawling on its back. Bucky dodges the huge, crushing hands, twisting this way and that, and below them Steven strikes at its legs with the sword again.

The brute roars, swinging around to attack, and Bucky pulls out the dagger one more time, driving it into the base of the creatures skull under the lip of its mask. It doesn’t scream out, there is no howl of pain, only the creature falling to its knees and tipping forward, and Bucky drops to the ground in a shower of sand.
He lands easily, knees bent to absorb the impact, and spins around to check on Steven. He is unhurt, thank Del, standing with a stolen sword in his hand and dust in his hair. Bucky should be rejoicing, they faced down their enemy and together defeated it, but it is fear that fills his mouth and spills from his tongue.

“What were you thinking?” Bucky yells, grip on his sword too tight. “Don’t you ever do anything that stupid again!”

Steven, still gasping for breath, rears up to sting. “I’m stupid?” he spits back. “You’re the one running into the arms of a pack of guards.”

“You could have been crushed!” Bucky’s hands are shaking. He’s scared. He’s scared and he can’t understand why.

“Crushed by what?” Steven scoops up a handful of grains, letting them fall between his fingers. “Sand?” Bucky stalks towards him, sword raised. “If we see anything like that again you stay back, you hear me?”

“I’m not going to stand back and watch you die!” Steven yells back. There should be colour in his cheeks, but he is pale, he is afraid.

“I don’t need your death on my conscience,” Bucky snarls.

“And you think I do?”

Bucky stops, and lowers his sword. His throat aches, and he only now can feel the ragged gasps of air sucking between his teeth.

“I’m sorry,” he says, and there is no part of him that doesn’t ache as he puts the sword back in its sheath and the dagger in his belt. “You fought well, and bravely. And you’re right, I could not have faced that thing alone.”

Steven says nothing, his breast heaving as he struggles to draw breath.

“The thought of you being hurt,” Bucky says slowly, pulling apart the tangle of his thoughts. “It frightens me, and I acted in poor judgement.” He takes a step towards Steven, wary and hopeful.

“Can you forgive me?”

Steven nods, stumbling towards him and throwing his arms around Bucky’s waist. Bucky hugs him in return, pressing his cheek to the dust-strewn silk of his hair until their breaths are even and matched again.

Steven takes up his new sword and gestures to a doorway beyond the empty hearth. “This way,” is all he will say.

They walk down a wide passage, keeping close to the walls, and whenever Bucky spies a guard up ahead, he motions for Steven to stay where he is, and goes on ahead to deal with them.

Sand coats his sword and creeps under his clothing. It catches on his tongue and clings to his boots, hanging in the very air he breathes.

At long last the passage opens out to a great hall, the floors polished to a high shine and set with intricate mosaics. The walls are marble, etched with ornate designs chased in gold, stretching up to a vaulted ceiling. At the far end of the hall stands a great wooden door, its surface decorated with bands of gold. Etched into the gold are scenes of great battles, of Shahs riding chariots drawn by oxen and hunting lions across grassy plains.

“The treasury,” Bucky breathes, and starts towards it.

“Wait!” Steven says, reaching out to grab him by the arm. “We can’t, not through there.”

Bucky glances back at him, scanning the room. “The door is right here.”

“No!” Steven’s eyes, wide and blue as the sky, regard the door with fear. “We have to go back.”

“This is the way,” Bucky says firmly.

Steven shakes his head again. “Bucky, please,” he whispers. “Let us leave this place. Please?”

Steven clings to his arm, and Bucky realises too late that he is not the only one with secrets.

“It’s a trap.”
It was fortunate, was it not, Steven happening upon him when he did. Fortunate that he knew exactly where Bucky needed to go, and how to get there.

“Bucky,” Steven says, and there is that tremor in his voice again. “If you go in there you’ll die.”

No. God of stone, god of iron, please no.

“It’s a trap.”

Steven’s grip on Bucky’s arm does not lessen, his knuckles bone white as he tries to keep Bucky from going to the door.

It must be a mistake. He must have misunderstood somehow. “What?” is all Bucky can ask, his voice rough to his own ears.

“They said a ‘Gyptian was coming to the city, intent on killing the Shah. That you were a thief and an assassin, sent by his enemies.” Both Steven’s hands curl around his bicep above the vambrace, leaving pale marks on his skin that quickly fade. “The Captain of the Guard sent us out into the city, to look to your coming. He said whoever brought you here… he would…”

“Grant you your freedom,” Bucky finishes.

That is what Steven has said, the first time they met. I will take you to the treasury. And you will set me free. Bucky had not known how truthful he had been.

“My mother,” Steven continues, the words pouring out in a desperate rush. “She fell ill on the journey from Khorasan. They work us on the walls from dawn to dusk, and she’s getting weaker. The Captain himself swore if I brought you here, he would let her go.”

“Get off me,” Bucky snarls, dragging his arm away. For all Steven’s fire he is smaller and weaker than Bucky, and easily forced away.

“But you’re not a rogue, Bucky. You’re an honorable man and—” Now that he has opened his mouth and let the truth spill out, Bucky cannot bear to hear it.

“And what if I wasn’t honourable?” he snarls. “What if I was a rogue? A thief? Would that justify your sending me to the slaughter?”

“I tried to make you leave,” Steven pleads. “And when you wouldn’t give up I tried to find us another way in.”

How could he have been so blind? How could he have forgotten what he was, what Steven was? So desperate for kinship, for kindness, that he would walk into the lion’s mouth.

Steven takes a step towards him and Bucky draws his sword, the sharp sound of metal drawing from sheath enough to freeze him in place.

“You didn’t know me,” he seethes, because anger is easier than hurt, and he hurts so much. “You heard ‘Gyptian and that was reason enough to have me killed. Oh, but now you’ve gotten to know me, even deigned to lay with me. And now you have decided I am a man of honour, and deserve to live.” Bucky steps back, trying to put some distance between them.
“Yes,” Steven whispers, and for such a small word it word costs him to say it.
What did we do? What did we do that was so terrible, so unforgivable, that condemned us all? From
the ancestors, dead before their time, and all the ones yet to be born, run into the ground like foxes
and left to rot in the churned earth.
“Is being a man not reason enough?” Bucky snarls, and it’s not just Steven he’s asking now, it’s
every stone-faced farmer that turned them away, every town that forced them to move along until
their backs were to the sea. “Is our being alive not a reason to let us live? You think us monsters,
drive us out of your towns, force us to abandon our ways for your own, and still it is not enough for
you.” Tears prick at his eyes, frustrated and helpless and hopeless. “We are people, just like you.
Good and bad and greedy and kind, the same as everyone else.”
“You said you would do anything for your family.” Steven shakes his head desperately. “She’s all
the family I have.”
“You had me.”

Bucky turns away. He cannot bear to look upon Steven a moment longer, and his words hang heavy
in the air between them.
He feels old, older than the years weighing down on his shoulders, as though he were made of the
same stones as the city walls. He closes his eyes and offers up a prayer: god of stone, make me cold.
If I must shatter under the hammer then make me into stone. Break my bones and tear my skin, but
make my heart a stone.
“Bucky?” Steven takes advantage of his silence and reaches out to him. “Bucky, I’m so sorry—”
“Get out of my sight!” Bucky rasps, turning back with his sword raised and slicing the air between
them. “If I see you again I swear I will cut you in two.”
He makes to spit at Steven’s feet, but it dries on his tongue as Steven stares up at him, distraught. His
throat aches, torn to shreds by his splintering heart.
Steven’s lips move, forming words Bucky understands but refuses to hear, and he turns away from
them again. It is all lies, nothing more than gazho lies.
When he looks back Steven is gone, and he is alone once more.

His grip on his sword tightens, and Bucky bows his head, teeth clenched to keep from screaming.
Give him another stone brute, a hoard of sand monsters to strike down. Let him die fighting and be
done with it, the rest of the world be damned. Give him anything but this ache in his chest, this
wasp’s sting.
He looks to the great wooden door, and the golden bands that cross it. With nothing else left to him,
he will do what he came here for. Destroy the hourglass, or die in the attempt.
His boots ring out on the polished stone floor as he approaches the door. There are no locks in place,
nothing barring the way. He reaches out to press a hand to the stone and feels a faint tremor, a
susurration like the shifting desert sands, and pushes.
The door creaks and groans as he forces it open, the hinges stiff with the weight of so much wood
and gold, and Bucky steps into a hallway of marble walls and high ceilings. He walks slowly, alert to
the presence of guards, but finds the way deserted.
There are signs of opulence here and there, decorative vases depicting battles against strange
creatures are put on display in alcoves along the walls, and plush rugs line the floor. At the end of the
hallway is another door, much like the last. On the golden bands stretching the length of the wooden
doors lions run rampant across grassy plains, mouths open, teeth bared. Bucky puts his shoulder to
the door, and forces it open.

If the Hanging Gardens are one of the great wonders of the world then the Shah’s treasury must be
another.
Golden stairs lead down to a vast chamber, where every inch of floor strewn with golden coins and
gemstones. High above the vaulted ceiling is held aloft by tall, intricately carved pillars, and lanterns
of brightly coloured glass and silver hang overhead, throwing light tinted rose and lemon across the
wealth scattered carelessly below. It might as well be stones washed up on the shore for all Bucky cares. What good is gold now? Or jewels, or a single diamond hidden in his pocket?

In the center of the chamber stands the hourglass. Within a latticework golden frame sits the glass itself, twin bulbs connected by a narrow neck, and within the sands of time.

Guards stand watch over the glass, a dozen or more. Their armour shines under the lantern light, and their hollow eyes glow with unearthly light from within their grotesque masks.

There is a low sound, like the grinding of stones, like a sword striking against a mountain, and a shape comes sloping around the edge of the chamber. It stands twice the height of a man, four weighted paws dragging along the floor. A lion. A great stone lion.

Bucky ducks behind a pillar as the beast slinks past, raising its massive head and opening its jaws wide.

A terrible creature, a monstrous thing. It roars, its voice an earthquake, a landslide. It shakes the foundations of the ziggurat.

Bucky sucks in a breath, sword heavy in his hand, and waits for the beast to pass.

The first guard is easy enough to kill. Bucky sneaks up behind it and grabs the beak of its foul mask, pulling back its head and slashing its throat. When the wretch has turned to sand between his fingers he drops down low, using a mound of golden lamps as cover as he creeps over to where the sand creature watches over the hourglass, ever aware of the lion stalking the perimeter.

The second guard dies just as quickly, as does the next. With each one his chance of success, of survival, creep upwards. To think he had been ready to cast away his sword. To turn his back on his past and live as a man who has not been shaped by his skill with a blade.

Bitterness rises up in his throat, and Bucky swallows it down, choking on it. He had been a fool, a child, so easily led by the promise of love. He stalks towards the next guard, clumsy in his wrath, and drives the dagger through its exposed neck, taking savage triumph as it disperses, dust tracking through the stale air.

Little by little he makes his way through the chamber, skulking around the perimeter. Past the guard standing out in the open, and moving on to the one on a platform overlooking the hourglass. The wall beneath it is ornately carved with depictions of the Shah battling the Moghuls, but Bucky cares less about the artwork and more about it providing purchase for his climb up. The carvings provide good handholds, and he scales the wall quickly, bracing his boots against the stone and launching himself up onto the platform. The guard spots him, but Bucky’s dagger finds his throat before he can call out a warning.

The platform offers a clear view of the chamber, and he takes a moment to sight the remaining guards, as well as the stone lion, before moving on. He runs along the wall to his right, dropping down behind a guard and striking out. The creature crumbles to dust before it knows it has been struck. Another guard notices, turning with a grunt, and Bucky draws his sword and slices its head clean off its body.

Whatever baxt that had been with him finally fails, the sight of the guards head rolling dredging some long-hidden memory to the fore, and Bucky falters before it. He retreats to the shadows a moment too late, a guard across the chamber catching the movement and sounding the alarm.

Bucky curses as the remaining guards shout back and forth, coming together to surround him, and with a ground shaking roar the lion follows suit.

No Rom would choose to die backed into a corner, and Bucky strides out to face them, a weapon in each hand.

“You want me? Come get me,” he snarls, slicing the air as the first guard charges. As much as he wants to wade into the fray, swinging wildly at everything in his path, Bucky stands his ground and waits for them to come to him. He retreats to the shadows a moment too late, a guard across the chamber catching the movement and sounding the alarm.

Bucky curses as the remaining guards shout back and forth, coming together to surround him, and with a ground shaking roar the lion follows suit.

No Rom would choose to die backed into a corner, and Bucky strides out to face them, a weapon in each hand.

“You want me? Come get me,” he snarls, slicing the air as the first guard charges.
raining down as they fall, until one guard stands before him. The creature wears a helmet topped with three spikes over hollow, glowing eyes, golden armour scored and dented. It raises its sword with a dull rasp, and Bucky spits out the blood filling his mouth, gesturing for the creature to come closer.

A great stone paw slams down on the guard, crushing it to sand, and the lion towers over him, teeth bared in a low growl.

Bucky takes a wary step back, keeping his movements slow, his body tense. He refuses to think of Steven, of how they were able to take down the sand giant together, how even this creature would fall before their combined efforts. He shoves the thought aside, and raises his sword with a shout.

The lion roars, rearing back and raising a paw to swipe at him. The stone claws may not be sharp but they would crush him on impact, and Bucky rolls out of the way, crashing through a mound of gold coins and into a marble pillar. The blow misses, striking through the mound where Bucky had been a moment before, sending golden coins clattering across the floor as the lion strikes out again. Bucky raises his sword to meet it, bracing the pommel against the pillar. The sword should shatter at the strike, but it does not, piercing the great beasts paw. It roars, dragging its injured limb to its chest, and Bucky hisses in triumph. If he can cut it, he can kill it.

He charges forward, dodging the paw that swipes at him and ducking under the creatures stomach, forcing the blade up between its ribs. The beast howls, twisting to the side and striking Bucky with its tail, knocking him off his feet. He lands on a jumble of decorative urns, the ceramic shattering under his weight, and throws himself out of the way when the tail swipes again.

Bucky swallows, tasting blood as he staggers behind another pillar, and fights back the urge to slump to the ground. His ears ache, his balance off as the room tilts and turns oddly, and if he lies down now he will never get up again. The lion roars again, striking at the pillar and bringing it down, and Bucky runs as chunks of marble tumble down around him.

The beast chases him, its weight cracking the tiled floor as it leaps and pounces. Bucky looks up at the arched ceiling, a half-formed, desperate plan coming to him, and he lurches to the side, making for the nearest high pillar that hold the roof aloft. The lion gives chase, striking down every pillar and every column that Bucky hides behind, until the ceiling begins to shift and crack above them, and it rains golden sand.

Pieces of stone begin to dislodge, dropping down and smashing on the ground around them. The lion roars as one shatters directly beside it, and Bucky takes advantage of the beasts distraction. He attacks, ignoring its underbelly and climbing onto its back. It twists around, stone jaws snapping as Bucky runs the length of its spine to the head and drives his sword between its shoulder blades. The blade sticks, and no matter how hard he pulls Bucky can’t remove it. He struggles and curses as the lion yowsls, rolling onto its side, and Bucky throws himself clear before he is crushed under its weight. He lands badly, slamming into the marble floor. Pain lances up his spine, bright spots of light flashing behind his eyes, and when they finally clear the lion is looming over him, teeth bared.

Bucky yells as the beast lunges, jaws open wide. All he has left is the dagger clenched in his left hand, and he strikes up blindly, burying the blade in the roof of its cold hard mouth. He waits for the moment the lion bites down, for stone teeth to sink into his flesh, crushing his shoulder and wrenching his entire limb from his body. But the moment doesn’t come.

The dagger, forced up by the weight of the lion bearing down, tears through its skull. With a final growl it crumbles to sand, almost engulfing Bucky in the deluge.

He crawls out of the mound of golden sand left in the beast’s wake, finding his sword amidst the ruin, and stumbles towards the hourglass.

To wield the sands of time is a terrible gift, to relive every second of your existence stretched into an eternity. Every joy and every sorrow, every shameful deed laid before you. Every choice that was never made, every mistake that cannot be undone you must bear witness to. Time does not cast judgement, and a heartless man may pass through unscathed. How cruel it seems
to Bucky that he is burdened with a heart, even one so ill-used as his. The hourglass towers over him, and Bucky a mere ant before it. There is no part of him that does not hurt, from his cracked heart and his aching head, radiating out to the slashes and bruises on his skin. There is no sense in lingering, in delaying the inevitable. Let the sands take his wretched form, and the matter be ended.

He walks up to the golden case, casting his gaze over the hourglass itself, its wide bulbs and the pinched neck joining them. Golden sand swirls within, spiralling like a dervish, and Bucky presses his hand to the glass, feeling the reel and motion of the forces contained within. How strange it seems, for it to be sand, when time itself flows like water.

At the very top of the hourglass there is a recess, and it is there Bucky needs to be. He steps back, taking in the golden filigree cage encasing the hourglass. One hand reaches up, pushing his fingers through the shining lattice, and he begins to climb.

The way is easy, too easy, as if the gold were reshaping under his hands, guiding him up. It is a short jump to the rounded top of the hourglass, and Bucky lands easily, crouching down to draw his fingers over the recess; a simple circle inset with a shape like a stylised hourglass, a twisted band that loops back on itself infinitely. Around it the glass seems to undulate, as though affected by the sandstorm that swirls within.

Bucky draws out the dagger and slowly pushes it into the glass.

The hourglass is whole, but the sands are no longer contained within, rising before him and spiralling outwards until there is nothing but the pale blur of its motion. Faces form in the spinning grains, gone almost before he can comprehend the shape of them. The stone brute, Loki, watching him from the deck of the Bifrost with studied indifference. The callow eyes and pursed lips of every gazho that refused him work, forced them to move on, took what was rightfully his.

Becca, her arms around his neck as he climbs. Bark cutting into his hands, the smell of pine resin clinging to his skin. She laughs, tipping her head back and nearly throwing them both to the ground far below, and tells him to climb higher.

The remaining marble columns begin to crumble, eroded away by the sandstorm. Dust and stone chips are swallowed up by the sands, and flung out at the treasury walls.

“I was sent by the council,” the Lăutari tells him with wide, frightened eyes. “A matter of honour.”

He throws down the bag as if it burned him, coins spilling out on the dirt.

The Bucky of that moment takes up the bag and counts out the coins. “What are their names?”

The dagger shudders in Bucky’s hand. He holds fast, bracing his knees against the hourglass. If he loses his grip now all will be lost.

“I will take you to the treasury, and you will set me free.”

With no columns to hold it aloft the ceiling begins to shift and resettle, leaning into the weight of the storm.

_He found Pietro first, while out in the woods hunting rabbits. They were starving and numb with cold, and the girl wouldn’t wake, slumped before the charred attempts at a fire. They were not Rom, but Bucky took her in his arms and carried her back to camp, the boy following through the snow, for no Rom would leave a child to die._

The storm gains momentum, a great column of sand spinning faster and faster. The gold scattered on the marble floor drawn up and cast out again. The sound of gold hitting stone is light, almost musical, and in the eye of the storm it sounds like rain.

Steven’s thumb drawing back and forth across his chin, as if he could soothe away the bruises. The dagger slices into his skin, bucking against the glass and Bucky forces it in, his mouth open in desperate roar.

_They didn’t even know why at first. The Rawlings never showed at the Atchin Tan, nor did the Coulsons. There was talk of Evans swinging from amblayimásko-kasht, and what excuse did gazho need to turn on them once more? There was no warning, no proclamations, only men with ropes and knives._
They had already abandoned the tents, Da making the decision to scatter the kumpania and leave for Persia. People said there were no slaves there, that once the Sasanian Shah had given Rom land and oxen in return for music. (and the Shah cast them out when they ate the oxen and left the land fallow, because they were musicians and not farmers)

Days of walking, nights of walking, and the men still found them. Da was the lucky one, he got to die first. They strung him from the tree, deaf to the screaming of his sisters, and Bucky stared as his father twisted and spun, his eyes bulging, his feet kicking out for a purchase that wasn’t there. It was as if he was under a thrall, a nightmare that he couldn’t shake himself awake from, and as long as his eyes were on his father they were not on their possessions strewn about the ground, or the man forcing his mother to the ground while he wrestled with his belt.

It is the gazhe’s grip on Becca’s arm that wakes him from the spell. Becca, who has not yet seen nine summers and the hand tugging at her skirts drags him up from the depths like a pale, formless creature that has never seen the sun. He scrambles amid their belongings, searching for his father’s bag.

The sword, a Rajput blade long and curved, passed down from father to son. The weight is too much for his hands, his fingers too small to wrap around the grip as he drags it over to where his sister writhes in the dirt. The man is kneeling over her, and the sword drops as if guided by a fell hand. The head falls into Becca’s lap and she screams, shoving it away and kicking at the body until it stops twitching. Bucky lifts up the sword again, staggering under the weight, and charges over to where his mother lies, too still and too silent, as if her spirit has gone wandering.

This time the cut is not so clean, the man turns, raising his hand in defence, and the sword slices through two of his fingers before connecting with his shoulder. Bucky raises it again, letting the weight do the work, and it takes two cuts to sever his head.

By the time he looks up his father is still, his sightless eyes cast to the unforgiving skies.

The dagger’s hilt strikes the curved edge of the hourglass, and for an instant the world stands still. From one heartbeat to the next the sands are frozen in place, coins and debris suspended in motion. Steven. Time stutters, catching like a worn cog, and the world begins to spin again. Steven with his grasping hands. The sands, a blur of light and fury, close around him, rushing into the dagger clenched in his fist. No gazho can lay their hands on a Rom, they are unclean, mahrime, but Bucky let Steve touch him. Blood runs in thin rivulets down his wrist. The press of his thumb to Bucky’s chin and the press of his teeth on Bucky’s lips.

The hourglass cracks, hairline fractures splintering out from where the dagger has struck it. As Bucky watches the cracks spread out, glass creaking in protest, and he hauls the dagger free as it shatters.

He falls, graceless and stunned, the hand not gripping the dagger grasping at the golden cage, desperate to find purchase. Glass strikes his face and he falls back, striking the golden frame and sliding down to the ground as curved shards spray out around him. Fragments slice his exposed skin, a thousand tiny cuts along his knuckles and shoulders and the bridge of his nose. They catch in his hair as he hits the ground, pieces like diamonds in the failing light, and Bucky can only roll onto his side, bringing his knees up to his chest and waiting until the moment ends.

*Sunlight filters through the swirling dust motes, catching the sharp edges of broken glass and twisted fragments of gold filigree. Bucky’s eyes crack open, his lashes tacky with dried blood, and closes his hand around the dagger. The handle, an opaque vessel of sand glass, shines with a muted golden light. The sands of time.

Bucky lets out a sigh and rolls onto his back, a chunk of stone digging into his spine. It is done. It cost him everything but it is done.

He blinks, brushing sand and fragments of glass away from his face with care, the morning light too bright to his eyes.
Sunlight?
Bucky sits up suddenly, his muscles protesting. The treasury was sealed, with no windows or balconies looking over Babylon, so where was the light coming from?
He looks up, and sees the sky. The arched ceiling that had bowed over the hourglass is gone, blasted apart by the sands. The brick edges around it are worn thin and fragile, and as Bucky stares a brick dislodges, tumbling down and landing in the debris beside him, raising a cloud of dust.
Bucky scrambles to his feet, reeling slightly as his head spins, and stumbles across to the doorway, boots sliding on the gold coins covering the floor.
Stealth be damned, he’ll take the stairway. Another brick drops down to land in the rubble, the Etemenanki is on the verge of collapse, the power that once held it aloft now contained within the dagger.
The fight is not over. Bucky tucks the dagger into his belt, shrugging off the aches and bruises for a little bit longer, and forces himself to run.

Chapter End Notes

Amblayimásko-kasht - the hanging tree
Cháso

Chapter Summary

“You can finally go home,” Steven rasps, his eyes closing. “So can I.”

After days spent traversing the winding maze of service passageways and secret tunnels, walking down the main hallway makes Bucky feel exposed. He preferred the narrow, winding pathways in the dark, whereas a carriage could be comfortably ridden over this wide, marble floor. The great stone lion that fell to dust could run rampant through these halls and not touch the ceiling. There are short, deep marks in the stone here and there, like a vast cat’s paw had raked the marble, and Bucky remembers the sounds they had heard travelling through the ziggurat, of the thundering weight of stone on stone. Steven had been right - the beast had been walking the halls at night in search of interlopers. Remembering his name alone makes Bucky ache, and he forces it from his thoughts. He cannot bear to think of that wasp, that traitor, not when there is still a task at hand. Later, much later, when the dagger is in the hands of the Zagari and the sands destroyed, he will give voice to the pain, bitter and wrathful. But for now he swallows it down, acrid in his stomach.

There is a fountain at the top of a set of stairs, clean water flowing into a narrow stone basin. Bucky drinks his fill, washing down the sand caught in his throat, before scrubbing the grit from his eyes and the flakes of dried blood from his skin. The water flows pink-tinged from the basin to the floor, gurgling down a drain set below it. Fragments of glass and stone gather in the basin. As much as he tries to picture all the hurt and horror washing away with the blood, they do not. They linger over him like restless spirits, the dead and the living haunting his every step.

Above his head the stones tremble, and Bucky hastens away from the fountain, wiping away the droplets of water clinging to his chin and beading along the strands of his hair. He takes the stairs, wide and sharp-edged, down and down to a landing before turning on his heel and taking the next flight down.

On the high walls around him scenes have been depicted on the marble in bold colours, picked out in gold. The Shah in his finery riding a chariot bound for war, the captain of the guard at his side. Bucky recognises him, shying away from the memory of seeing him in the shrine. All this time he had thought the wasp was afraid of being seen by the master of the household, when it was the captain he was evading. The captain who nearly let slip his true purpose.

Bucky shakes his head. Push it down, force it aside, do not linger of the evils ways of the gadjikane. Think only of getting out of the city before it crashes down on you.

The stairs come to an end, leading to another wide hallway, the walls decorated with tapestries and the floor laid with plush rugs. Bucky tracks dust across the priceless rugs, boots scuffing the elegant designs, and moves forward with caution. These must be the private quarters of the Shah. He passes chamber after chamber, each one lavishly furnished and completely deserted, all the palace staff expelled. But where are the courtiers? The extended family, the friends, the advisors? Does the Shah live in isolation, with nothing but his sand guards and his fantasies for company, all his kinsmen fled? There is a scuffle up ahead, around the next corner. Muffled curses and fists connecting with flesh before a sharp, panicked voice hisses for silence. So the Shah is not alone. Bucky stalks forward, flattening himself against the wall, and risks a glance.
The captain of the guard leads a procession of prisoners to a vestibule outside a large, gilt-edged chamber. There are maybe a half dozen of them, a disparate band of colour and creed, each one accompanied by a harried looking guard. Not sand creatures but human guards.

The prisoner in the captain’s grip, a bear of a man with a bristling mustache, is the one making all the commotion. He shakes his shackled hands and yells a curse.

“Be silent!” the captain hisses at him, and the man spits in his face. The captain strikes him in the mouth with the handle of his sword, but the prisoner merely grins at him with bloodied teeth.

“Captain?” another guard calls out, this one hanging onto a Nubian. “We should not be here. Only the… the other guards are permitted inside the palace.”

“Well, the other guards are gone,” the captain snaps. “Which leaves us.”

Another prisoner with the look about him of a silk trader makes a break for it, and his guard scrambles to catch him, shaking him like a dog while the others clamour in his defence. Among them is Steven.

The sleeve of his tunic is torn, and he bears a smear of blood at the corner of his mouth. It makes something jagged and terrible works its way up Bucky’s throat. He clamps his teeth together, covering his hand with his mouth, breath rasping as he fights back the urge to scream.

The master of the household appears in the doorway of the chamber, shuffling towards the group with his shoulders hunched around his ears. His gaze settles on Steven and the older woman huddled next to him. By her fair hair and blue eyes she must be his mother.

The captain mutters something beyond Bucky’s hearing and the master turns, gesturing for the guards to follow him.

There is no reason for Bucky to stay, for him to follow the prisoners and guards into the Shah’s private quarters, but he does.

If Bucky had thought the palace a folly of gadjikane opulence, it is nothing compared to the Shah’s private chambers. The slaves are lead through room after room, each more lavishly decorated than the last. Beneath their feet are thick rugs woven with intricate designs, and the air is perfumed with rot and roses. On the walls are hangings and tapestries; murals of courtesans at rest, and wine pourers tending to the Shah. On the far side of the chamber a balcony overlooks the city, the towers and keeps deserted, the roses climbing over the railing starting to wither and drop their browning petals. With the sands gone the city is decaying.

Every way Bucky glances the Shah stares back at him with cold eyes, ever watchful as Bucky creeps after the now-silent rabble of prisoners.

In the final chamber, obscured by latticework screens and lit by lanterns hanging down from high beams, the Shah lies upon a posteried bed, swaddled in silk and cloth-of-gold.

As the guards bully the slaves into a line before him, Bucky crouches down behind a screen, surveying his surroundings. He can’t see what is happening, or hear the murmured words between the master and the Shah. Up. He needs to be higher up.

Quiet as a mouse, he climbs to the top of the screen, peering through the latticework before crouching on the narrow edge at the top. From there it is an easy enough jump to a beam supporting a lantern, and he creeps his way out until he is overlooking the bed.

From his spar he can feel the ziggurat trembling, the massive stone edifice beginning to fail now the sands are not holding it aloft. He crouches down, one hand braced on the wooden beam as the stone shifting against stone and glass rattling in their lanterns is telegraphed through his fingertips.

Below him the Shah is obscured by the silk canopy of his bed, but of the prisoners and their guards he has a clear line of sight.

Steven stands beside his mother, taking her weight as much as the guards will allow. His back is straight, his head held high, as the captain gestures towards him with the pommel of his sword.

“The slaves, your excellency,” he says. “We found them trying to escape.”

So the wasp had been busy since they parted ways, gathering up his friends and trying to flee the city.
“And your spy?” the Shah asks. He must make some gesture, as a guard gives Steven a hard shove, pushing him forward and away from his mother. She reels, clearly suffering without support, and one of the other prisoners reaches out to steady her.

Bucky can see the tense line of Steven’s shoulders, the notched arrow of his spine. His fingers itch with the memory of them, how they had felt against his hands.

Steven does not cower or beg for mercy, and stands proud and defiant before the Shah.

“Where is the ‘Gyptian?” the Shah demands. Steven remains silent, even when the captain strikes at him with the guard of his sword.

“Show your master some respect!”

Steven’s head snaps to the side under the brunt of the blow, but he offers up no answer.

“Where are my sands? Where are my guards?” the Shah continues, and still Steven bites his tongue. When no answer is forthcoming the Shah leans forward into Bucky’s line of sight. He gestures to another guard, who grabs hold of his mother, dragging her forward.

“You will tell me where the ‘Gyptian is.” The Shah snaps his fingers at the captain. “Cut off her head.”

He sounds almost bored, untroubled by Steven’s scream of outrage, indifferent to Steven lunging for him, only to be hauled back by a guard before he can get anywhere near. The captain grabs the top of his mothers fair head and forces it back, drawing his sword as the other slaves clamour and struggle against their captors.

Bucky reaches for his boot, withdrawing the choora concealed there. The blade weighs almost nothing, the keen edge and tapering point catching the lantern light as he takes its measure. A quick flick of his wrist, and it would be buried between Steven’s shoulders to the hilt, and with all the commotion no one would know from where the blade had come.

So why does he not strike?

“Where is he?” the Shah snarls as a sword kisses the woman’s throat, ready to slice.

“Please!” Steven howls. “Let her go.”

“Speak up,” the captain hisses, tugging the woman’s head back further.

“I don’t know!” Steven yells, and the captain pauses, his grip loosening.

Steven moves towards his mother, but the guard holding him tugs him back, rough and cruel.

“I did everything you asked of me!” Steven struggles, but he is held fast. “Bring him to the treasury, you said. Bring him and I will let your mother go, those were your exact words.”

“Sven,” the woman utters softly. “What have you done?”

“I led him through the city,” Steven continues, ignoring her and straining against the arms holding him back. “I brought him to the door. It’s not my fault you could not catch him.”

“Insolence,” the Shah seethes.

“And you will never find him,” Steven goads, a wild light in his eyes. “He is faster than you. Stronger, and more cunning. He will be long gone by now.” A guard strikes him again, but it barely registers as he stares down the Shah. “You’ll never find him, and those precious sands of yours? They are no more. He destroyed them, just like he’ll destroy you!”

“Enough!” The Shah stands, sword in hand, and flicks it towards Steven. “The ‘Gyptian. Where is he? Where are his people?”

Steven knows about Dobruжа. He knows about the bero. He knows about Becca. Bucky’s grip on his choora tightens. He should let the blade fly, before Steven can betray him again. He should, but he does not.

There is a darro in his pocket, a diamond the size of a thumbnail digging into his hip. Steven opens his mouth, and Bucky fears that his fool heart will be the end of his kumpania. But no truth comes spilling from his lips, no names or cities form on his tongue. He tilts forth, as if bowing, and spits at the Shah’s feet.

The Shah’s features twist, wrathful and corrupted, and he strikes out, forcing the tip of his blade into Steven’s stomach. He does not linger over the murder, does not gloat over Steven’s end or twist the
blade. What is one more dead body to him when he has waded through countless to get to this place? Steven lets out a soft gasp, the only sound he makes, and the Shah wrenches the sword free with a spill of blood.

“Kill them all,” he utters, dispassionate, as Steven drops to his knees, hands clasped to his gut as if he could keep his life from spilling out.

Bucky clamps his mouth shut, teeth clicking, as Steven pitches forward onto the plush rugs, his mother’s scream cut short by the blade dragged across her throat. The spray of her blood draws a sound, high and thin, up Bucky’s throat as she falls to the ground. The remaining slaves, seeing all hope lost, still try to fight their way out even as they are cut down.

The Shah watches in disgust, wiping Steven’s blood from his blade as the bodies before him still. “Send out riders,” he says as the master whimpers in horror. “To every corner of the empire. Tell them to round up the ‘Gyptians, every last one of them.”

“But Your Excellency-” the captain starts, turns pale as the Shah swings around to face him. “Hear me, and hear me well,” the Shah snarls. “The Empire no longer welcomes their kind. Any Gyptian found between the Black Sea and the Hindu Kush will be slaughtered on sight, be they man or child.”

The captain hesitates, before nodding once. “As you wish.” “Send for my chariot,” the Shah yells at the master, passing underneath Bucky’s vantage point as he stalks from the chamber. “I will hunt down this ‘Gyptian thief myself, and wrest my dagger from his corpse.”

The walls tremble, scattering sand over the silks and tapestries, and the master and captain exchange a frightened glance before taking after him, the guards at their heels. Bucky watches them leave, hands gripping the beam to keep from pitching over.

“What have I done,” he whispers. “O Del what have I done?” The guards footsteps are still ringing across the marble hallway when Bucky drops to the floor. The ziggurat trembles, but that is not what makes him stumble as he approaches the bodies, blood spreading like the incoming tide across the rugs. Why do his hands shake when he finds Steven amongst the dead? Why do his eyes itch and burn, his heart kick and plunge as he kneels down beside him?

He rolls Steven onto his back, his frame somehow smaller, more fragile, without his sharp tongue and bold heart. His pale features are mottled with bruises and smeared with blood, clotting against the corner of his mouth and staining his upper lip. One eye flickers open, the pupil dilated until there is only the faintest ring of blue around it. For a moment he seems blind, but his gaze settles on Bucky, and his mouth pulls up into a smile. It is such a tremulous, unsteady thing, and it breaks what’s left of Bucky’s heart to see.

“Bucky.” Fresh blood spills from his lips, and Bucky hastens to hold him steady, hold him close. “Shh,” he whispers as Steven’s hands, far too cold, reach for his. “Stay still.” “The guards. They turned to sand.” His smile grows wider. “They turned to sand and the wind carried them away.” He coughs, wet and rasping, and whimpers in pain. “They turned to sand and I knew you-” “Shh.” Bucky lifts Steven into his lap, cradling him like a child. “It’s done.” Steven whimpers again, and Bucky pulls the dagger from his belt. “Here, look.” He holds up the dagger, and the light of the swirling sands within the hilt turn Steven’s bloodshot eyes to gold. Bucky moves Steven’s cold fingers to the hilt. “It’s beautiful,” he murmurs, tracking blood along the gold filigree and letting his hand fall to his breast. “You can finally go home,” he rasps, his eyes closing. “So can I.” He breathes out, a light sigh, and breathes no more.

Bucky feels it, when the moment comes. The tension in Steven’s shoulders, the tilt of his head, as
though he were a moth seeking the moon, gone. One moment Steven is alive and breathing in his arms, and the next he is still, the fire that burned so bright within him extinguished.

“I love you, remember that. Will you remember that?”

“Steven.” Bucky shakes him, as if death was something one could be roused from. It is marimé to handle the dead, to speak their name in case their spirit comes creeping back. But Bucky says his name anyway, whispers it soft and roars it out loud. It is unclean to touch a dead body, but Bucky cannot bring himself to lower Steven to the cold floor, to let him lie with the others. Instead he brushes his thumb under Steven’s lip, wiping away the blood in the same way Steven once did for him.

“Little wasp,” Bucky’s voice hitches, tears tracking down his cheeks and gathering on his chin. He teases his fingers through the tangles in Steven’s hair until it lies straight, and brushes off the tears that land on his cooling skin.

There is a darro in his pocket and no one to give it to.

The stones around him begin to crack, fault lines splitting the murals and spraying flakes of paint. Above him the lanterns rattle and shake, and one by one the lights are snuffed out. Bucky sits up, rubbing the heel of his hand against his eyes, and Steven slips a little in his grip. His baxt, his wasp, who had fought fiercely and loved fiercely and betrayed him. Now that he is gone, the weight of his actions seems to shift in Bucky’s mind. Yes, he had been sent out to find Bucky and lead him into a trap, but he had not sought riches or rewards, only the release of his mother. The men that killed his father, that hunted his people, deserved this death, but not Steven. Not his mother. Bucky turns to where Sarah lies, blood staining her fair hair crimson.

If it had been Becca, would he have done any less?

He lays what is left of Steven next to his mother, carefully folding their hands in the semblance of sleep, and rises to his feet.

The sands of time corrupt the living, but it is not the only poison. Hate. Hate has filled his lungs and poisoned his words and soured his heart. All those people who have shown him kindness; soft hearted Thor and his bold crew. The good people of Dobruja who he has kept at arm’s length. He hated them all the same, the good men and the bad, and the knowledge shames him.

As the ziggurat crumbles around him, Bucky looks down at the dagger still in his hand. If he could live these moments again, what would he do differently?

“Cháso,” he whispers, and releases the sands.

The sands spiral outwards, flowing up his hand, encasing his arm. Bright like gold, like the sun. 

Like a wraith he slips his form, ghostly feet retracing his steps while around him the dead are moved by unseen hands.

The cracks along the walls recede, flecks of paint and sand flying up to return to the walls and ceilings and become whole. The guttering lights in the lanterns overhead flare up and burn, their glass and silver casements reforming around them.

Guards march in reverse, spinning about like marionettes as Bucky feels himself lifted into the air. He hangs suspended, weightless, watching as the events refold, shining like the North Star.

Blood, once spilled, pours back into veins. Flesh, once marred, is healed and whole.

Steven rises to his feet, whole and alive.

The sands spin and wheel like dervishes around each figure as the last grains of sand whirl upwards, sparking and flashing with unearthly light.

Bucky’s body is returned to his control with strange and sudden force, and he tilts forward on his spar, clinging to the carved beam as the world shudders and begins to turn again.

“Where is the ‘Gyptian?’ the Shah demands below him.

The dagger is still clasped in Bucky’s hand, but when he looks at it he sees nothing more than a short blade with a decorative grip. The blade is dull and no use to him, and Bucky slips it into his belt.

Down below the guard strikes Steven, cursing his insolence. Bucky draws his sword and leaps into
The guard reaching for Steven barely has a chance to draw breath as Bucky strikes, sword slashing across his back. He drops to the ground with a grunt, but Bucky has already moved on. The other prisoners are the quick to catch on, taking advantage of the stranger in their midst and turning on their guards. The great bear among them knocks his guard out with a two-handed punch to the face before swinging his shackled hands around, looking for vengeance. Steven twists around, his gaze flicking from the fallen guard behind him to the one who had been holding his mother. Bucky wrestles the man back and slices his throat from ear to ear. “Bucky?” Steven shouts, and Bucky is struck afresh that he is alive and unharmed. It’s enough to stop him in his tracks and stare back at Steven, taking in the warmth of his skin and the brightness of his eyes, until the Shah rises up, pointing their way. “It’s the ‘Gyptian, seize him!” he roars. A guard already reaching for Steven changes direction, lunging towards him, but Steven knees him in the gut, slamming both fists on the man’s shoulders as he doubles over. It’s not enough to stop him, but slows him down enough for Bucky to bring down his sword in a short arc, driving the blade deep and withdrawing it in a sluice of arterial spray. The master has already retreated from the fighting, but the captain heads toward Bucky, shoving Sarah aside when she tries to block him. The Shah roars in outrage, dragging out his sword and lunging towards him. Bucky is faster, spinning around and sinking his own blade into the Shah’s rounded gut. The counter-strike swings wide, and Bucky easily dodges it, shoving the blade in a little deeper and giving it a savage twist. Bucky leans in, locking eyes with him, and hauls the blade free, spilling his entrails on the priceless rugs. The Shah gapes at him, hands reaching up to claw at his face, and Bucky steps easily out of their range, turning to face the captain as tremors ripple through the stones beneath them. The last guard drops to his knees and the bear, teeth bloody, snarls and kicks him down before turning to the captain, shackled fists raised. Bucky adjusts the grip on his sword, swinging it lightly, waiting for the captain to come to him while Steven watches the proceedings, his mother leaning against his side. His eyes are wide, unblinking, drinking in the sight of Bucky brandishing his sword. The master tumbles forward, putting himself between Bucky and the captain, and throws his shaking hands up in supplication. “Wait!” The captain stills, while the master looks to each of them in turn, tongue darting out to wet his lips. “You... bought the services of a... of an assassin, my old friend,” the master says slowly. “To kill the Shah.” He stops, turning to give Bucky a meaningful look. “How unfortunate that he got away.” Bucky hesitates, not quite understanding, and the master raises his eyebrows, almost hopeful. “I did no such thing,” the captain says carefully, holding up his hand as Bucky takes a step towards him. Steven reaches out with his shackled hands to grasp Bucky’s wrist, and he does not have it in him to shake him off. “The assassin was a rumour. A distraction. I did the deed myself,” the captain continues, tilting his head to where the Shah lay. “To end this madness, before the Empire fell to ruin.” He pointedly returns his sword to its sheath at his hip, and gives Bucky a nod. “Well, that’s good enough for me,” the silk trader announces, and starts searching through the guards for a key. He finds one and quickly unfastens his shackles, before moving to each prisoner in turn and releasing them. Steven he comes to last, giving Bucky a brief, nervous smile before pushing past him and setting him and his mother free. Instead of letting go, Steven’s grip on Bucky’s wrist tightens, as though what he couldn’t say in the presence of others, all the things there were not enough words for, he could share through the press
of skin against skin.
“Leave the city,” Bucky warns the captain. “Or be buried beneath it.”
He waits for no answer, and leads the prisoners from the chambers as the ground beneath them shudders.

“This way,” Steven calls as they reach the hallway. For a moment it is as if all that had befallen them since the treasury had never come to pass, that they were just two people making their way through the city hand in hand. But this time they are not alone, and there is no time for stealth and hidden passages. The ziggurat is already beginning to fall apart, cracks appearing along the marble walls and polished floors. The others come out to join them, hesitant and wary.
“Haide!” Bucky calls, gesturing ahead. “Run!”
A chunk of marble the span of his hand dislodges from the ceiling, dropping down and shattering on the marble floor. A moment later it is followed by another, and another, and the prisoners finally understand what is happening and start running.
Sarah falters, lagging at the back of the ragged procession, and before Bucky can turn back for her, the bear scoops her up in his arms.
“Up we get, mistress,” he huffs, and Sarah lets out a yelp. She gives him a swat on the arm, indignant and deeply grateful, and makes a show of calling him a brute.
They are so alike, mother and son, and amid the chaos Bucky finds it in him to smile.

There are guards on the stairs, men of flesh and bone. They turn on the rabble, swords raised, and Bucky races to the fore, releasing his grip on Steven’s hand to deal swift blows to each, cutting down first one then the other. If they are foolish enough to remain in the Etemenanki, he has spared them a death far worse.
“Háide,” he shouts to his people, waving his sword. They are not as quick with his tongue as Steven.
“Go!”
The stairs seem to descend for endless miles, the wide marble expanse splintering and cracking. Behind them the lanterns flare out, the glass shattering, a yawning darkness that seems to snap at their heels as they descend to the next level.
They race down another hallway, passing opulent chambers shaking apart as the ziggurat collapses. Bucky catches a glimpse of the baths, where they had spent such sweet moments together, and sees the rose covered balcony slough away from the building, tumbling down to the city below.
Another wide staircase, the steps crumbling, the guards fleeing in panic, and they descend again.
Beside him Steven’s breath comes in ragged gasps, but he pushes on, sweat beading his brow and soaking his hair.
Sand rains down on them in drifts and showers, lanterns dropping like missiles to shatter on the stairs as they pass.
There is no time left to them, no moments to pause and catch their breaths, and when they reach another landing Bucky urges them on, checking everyone is still together while Steven leads them outside, and the final stairway leading to the city below.

The great city of Babylon falls to ruin once more. As they descend the stairs Bucky can see the devastation spreading outwards from the ziggurat, the towers closest to them cracking and collapsing, sending up clouds of dust and sand. When he risks a glance back he sees the uppermost tier of the Etemenanki is already gone, and the level below shatters as he watches.
The stairway slumps under their feet, and it is only forward momentum that keeps them going, finally staggering onto level ground at the base of the ziggurat. At the foot of the ziggurat a pair of great stone chimeras look out across the city. They have the bodies of bulls, dense blocks of text chiselled along their hindquarters, and eagle wings. Their heads are of men with long, curled beards.
Down on the ground the air is thick with sand and debris, and Bucky can barely see five paces ahead. He pulls the group into the lee of the stone chimeras, and looks to Steven for advice. He
blinks, shielding his eyes as he searches for a way out of the city. There is a low, terrible grinding sound, and as Bucky looks up, following the sound to its source, the stone figure turns to look upon him.

“Háide!” Bucky yells, grabbing Steven by the arm and hauling him into the storm. “Run!”

The city is deserted, the sand guards destroyed with the sands of time and the people fleeing the ruins, and they charge through the swirling sands, heads down, mouths covered. Steven pulls Bucky closer, leaning up to yell in his ear. “The river!”

Bucky nods, understanding, and changes direction, weaving through the disintegrating towers as the Etemenanki collapses in on itself, sending out a shockwave that nearly knocks them to the ground. It blasts through the last of the towers around them, and they burst apart one by one, raining down a storm of sand and stone.

Just when it seems hopeless, that for all their efforts they will be swallowed up by the storm, the Euphrates winds into view. Steven utters a shout of triumph when he sees a boat on the waters, rocking violently in the winds. A fishing boat, barely enough to carry them all, and at the sail is the Nubian who had let them into the city days before.

“Sam!” Steven shouts as he reaches out to help them in. Sam is barely holding the boat afloat, clinging to a mooring rope with bruised and bloody hands. Bucky wades into the shallows, holding the boat steady as the wind buffets it, and the bear gently lowers Sarah down before climbing in after her.

“The drawbridge,” Sam yells over the storm, pointing ahead. The barrier is still down, and though it will collapse with the rest of the city, they cannot afford to wait for it to happen.

“I have it,” Bucky shouts back, racing off along the water’s edge, ignoring Steven’s yells to come back.

Steven is alive, and by any gods that will listen Bucky will ensure he stays that way.

The bridge mechanism is housed high up on the side of the bridgetower, a spoked wheel locked in position. There are no guards watching over the water, no spears ready to strike down intruders, but they left the bridge down when they fled.

The storm whips at Bucky’s hair, grit catching between his teeth and stinging his eyes as he climbs up the slippery, water-soaked tower, hauling himself up onto the bridge itself. Downriver Sam has cast a rope around a mooring post, trying to keep the boat from crashing into the bridge. Bucky runs over to the controls, lifting the break level and heaving on the wheel. Little by little the bridge begins to rise, though under his hands he can feel the mechanism straining, the tower’s foundations already beginning to give way. He grits his teeth, grunting with the effort, and keeps pulling.

Down on the water Sam utters a shout of warning, and a gust of wind buffets the boat against the shore, the boards creaking ominously as the mooring rope strains. A last heave and the bridge is up, and Bucky throws the lock back into place, letting the wheel settle against it. He looks back at the ship, cast about by the storm, and sees the sails fill, billowing out. Sam releases the rope and the boat sails on, sweeping under the bridge. Steven searches around for Bucky, catching sight of him on the tower and shouting for him. Bucky cannot jump to the ship, the impact would crack the already strained hull. He climbs down the outside of the tower, grip slipping as the winds batter at his body, and lands on the uneven ground. He races along the water’s edge as Sam hauls on the sail, bringing the ship in closer.

Bucky throws himself into the water, boots sinking into the mud as he reaches for the boat, and a half dozen arms reach out to him. It’s Steven’s hand that grasps his, he knows the shape of them too well. It is the bear that grabs him by the shoulder of his cuirass and hauls him onto the ship. He is dropped on the deck, drenched and limp as a landed fish, and coughs up river water on the bowed wooden boards before rolling onto his back. It is done, it is done. Steven curls up against him, face pressed to his shoulder, river water soaking into his clothes.
It is done.
Chapter Summary

“Shall I tell you a story?” Bucky asks softly as Steven drifts off to sleep, lulled by his voice. “Most people think time is like a river that flows swift and sure in one direction. But they are wrong. Time is an ocean in a storm…”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Later, much later, Sam moors his boat up on the banks of the Euphrates. Bucky guides his bero, rescued from the outskirts of the city during their escape, to the bank but does not moor up alongside the other. He watches as they clamber gratefully onto land and sit on the grass, people whose names he is still learning. The one called Dugan lifts Sarah out, wading through the shallows and setting her down on solid ground with attentive care.

There are many mouths to feed, more than his supplies can muster, so Bucky does not join them on the shore. Old habits are hard to kill, and he keeps his distance, his fishing spear and need for silence excuse enough to keep them at arm’s length for now.

He is aware of Steven’s eyes on him as he stands at the prow, watching the water for a flash of silver. They have not spoken since they left the city, and Bucky was quick to leave the boat.

In truth it is not for lack of effort on Steven’s part, but every time he has turned to Bucky, lips parting to speak, the memory of his death rushed to Bucky’s thoughts, replaying behind his eyes, and he found himself unable to respond.

There is a ripple in the water, and Bucky’s arm moves before his eyes fully comprehend. The spear pierces the surface and is withdrawn, a bright fish twisting on the point. Bucky strikes it against the boards and tosses it into a bucket of water before taking up the spear again.

Time passes and he does not mark its passing, his eyes on the river from surface to sandy bed. He is vaguely aware of a camp setting up on the shore, of a fire being built in the shelter of the stunted tree that provides the wood.

They are resourceful people, hard-working and kind. From the way Sam handles a sail it will be easy for him to find work, and Bucky knows a good captain who would gladly take the extra crew. And if not? There would be a place for him in Dobruja. For all of them.

A shadow passes beneath the surface, and Bucky drives the spear down, bringing up another fish, this one dark scaled and fat. The spear struck it behind the eyes, and the poor creature is dead. He adds it to the bucket, feeling the tension in his shoulders loosen. They’ll not starve tonight.

He looks up at the sky. The setting sun is obscured by the distant dust storm, the sky bruised purple and crimson. There is still light to see by, and he balances the weight of the spear in his hand, returning his gaze to the water.

The bero tilts, ripples disturbing the water as someone climbs onto the boat. Bucky knows who it is without looking up, would know his shape in the world blindfolded, and doesn’t flinch when Steven stands beside him.

Bucky raises a finger and Steven clamps his mouth shut, arms folded across his chest. He keeps his tongue while Bucky tracks movement in the water, waiting for the moment to strike, and the soft gasp in Bucky’s ear when he spears the fish is sweeter than honey.

“How are they?” Bucky murmurs, pulling the fish from his spear and striking its head on the deck.
“As well as can be hoped,” Steven answers, watching as Bucky drops the fish in one of the buckets around them. “I think we have enough fish, now.”

Bucky’s mouth twitches up. “Even Dugan?”

Something not quite a cough and not quite a laugh bursts out of Steven’s throat. “I’m sure he would rise to the challenge?”

Bucky huffs, setting down the spear at last. “What we don’t eat can be cured for another day.”

Steven doesn’t answer, twisting his hands together and watching as Bucky tends to the catch.

The silence is weighted, heavy with promise, and Bucky looks out as the first stars appear on the horizon.

“I wanted to thank you.” Steven’s words are clumsy, hesitant, lacking in his usual fire. “For getting us out of the city. For… for coming back for me, even after I…”

The words trickle to a stop, and when Bucky looks back Steven is staring at his feet, unable to meet his eye.

“Steven.” Bucky tilts his head to one side, a slow smile drawing up his mouth.

“I don’t…” Steven shakes his head, forlorn and braced for a blow that won’t come, that will never come. “What happened at the treasury. I betrayed you. I betrayed you and I’m sorry, and I can’t ask you to forgive—”

That is more than enough gazhe nonsense, and Bucky silences it the only way he can, ducking his head and pressing a kiss to Steven’s still moving lips.

Steven lets out a muffled sound before surging up to meet him, grasping hands mapping the gold emblems of his cuirass before settling on his shoulders.

As Bucky’s hands drop down to Steven’s waist, drawing him closer in a firm grip, his lips part. His wasp regains its sting, teeth catching Bucky’s skin in persistent little nips and tugs. Steven sighs into Bucky’s mouth, blissful and welcome, and draws in Bucky’s darting tongue like he is welcoming it home.

The bero rocks again, but Bucky cannot find it in him to care, hands curling around Steven’s hips possessively, Steven’s fingers digging into his shoulders in return.

“Sven?”

Steven recoils, stepping back from Bucky heavily enough to make the bero tilt and splash, and wheels around to face his mother. Bucky’s hands stay where they belong, bracing Steven’s waist while he regains his balance.

Sarah regards them both impassively, and Bucky ducks his head down, the falling curtain of his hair shielding him from her stare.

“Well, that explains a few things,” she sighs.

“Mother?” Steven wipes his mouth on his sleeve. “We were just—”

“I saw,” she replies, and Steven flushes pink around the ears. He can see Bucky’s grin, and pokes him in the ribs for it.

“Ow.” Bucky squeezes his hip in retaliation, and Steven grabs hold of his wrist.

“When you two are quite finished?” Sarah’s tone is light, teasing, and Bucky has a sudden vision of the future, when Sarah and his mother become friends. He will never know peace again, and it is a thought worth savouring.

“We’ll be just a moment, mother,” Steven promises, and she turns away, picking her way across the deck.

“Sven?” Bucky asks as he picks up one of the buckets, mouth pursed to keep from laughing.

“Shut up,” Steven mutters, taking up another and following after him.

Bucky vaults onto the shore, landing lightly on the sparse grass. He sets the bucket down before offering a hand to Sarah. Her fingers are pale against his but strong, and she murmurs a thank you as she steps down to the bank.

Bucky lets himself be led to the campfire, bucket knocking against his knees, and the arrival of fish is met with a ragged cheer.
After the sun has set in a riot of colour, and the remaining fish cleaned and strung up over the fire, Bucky takes himself off into the dark. He does not stray far from the camp, walking the flickering line between light and darkness as though marking out a perimeter. If he offers up a prayer, it would be to let no malevolent spirits or ill tidings cross the line, to let the people in the circle of light rest easy for once. But there is no one listening in as he paces, and whatever he utters is a matter for him and the stars alone. He finds a rock overlooking the desert and climbs up, settling down for the night. He does not expect the captain of the guard or the master of the household to come after them, assuming they lived through the fall of Babylon, but he watches all the same. The dust storm still rages over the city, and will do so for days to come. The night sky above it is obscured, as if the stars refuse to shine down on such a cursed place. Though the desert is stifling in the day, it is cold at night, and the heat of the camp fire does not reach up on his rock. Bucky lets himself doze a little, his body weary and with many miles still ahead of them.

The footsteps are not unexpected, nor unwelcome, and he shifts along to make space when Steven climbs up onto the rock, the blanket Bucky had wrapped him in hours earlier still around his shoulders. “I thought you might be cold,” Steven explains, unfurling the blanket as he sits down. He shifts and pushes, forcing his way into Bucky’s lap, back pressing to his chest. His slight frame radiates heat, and Bucky wraps the blanket around them both as Steven’s head tips back onto his shoulder. Steven squirms, uncomfortable, and Bucky reaches under the blanket to retrieve whatever is digging into his back. The dagger. Bucky holds it up, the starlight reflecting off the empty hilt and the curved blade. Steven regards it sleepily. “Is that what you came all this way for?” he asks. “It was,” Bucky nods, and hands the dagger to him. Steven runs a thumb along the blade curiously. “It doesn’t look that valuable.” “It’s not.” Bucky wraps his arms around Steven’s waist. Without the sands it is just another dagger, not even sharp. Steven closes his free hand over Bucky’s wrist, idly stroking the back of his hand. “You’ve been careless,” he scolds lightly, holding the hilt up. “See, there’s blood.” For a moment, a sliver of time between tick and tock, Bucky’s heart forgets how to beat. It never happened, Steven never handled the dagger with bloody hands, but Bucky remembers it. Remembers losing him as the world crumbled to dust. How close he had come to his own end, his people’s end, anger burning through him until there was nothing left, and all he was and would ever be buried under the shifting desert sands. Steven takes Bucky’s hands in his, checking them for injury and finding them scratched by the shattered hourglass. He presses his lips to each healing cut, and when he is done with Bucky’s fingers Steven moves on to his wrist, lips brushing the leather of his vambrace. Bucky finds it deeply unfair that his hands should get so much attention while his mouth remains untouched, and tilts Steven’s chin up, seeking out his stinging lips. In the darkness they trade kisses back and forth, sweet embraces that chase each other in circles, until Steven yawns. He puts a hand to his mouth, apologetic, and Bucky shushes him, drawing him close. “Go to sleep, Drágo,” Bucky murmurs as Steven curls up against him. “I’m not—” Steven yawns again. “Tired.” Below them the others, his kumpania, sleep soundly, sparks from the campfire rising up into the sky like a scattering of golden sand. “Shall I tell you a story?” Bucky asks softly as Steven drifts off to sleep, lulled by his voice. “Most people think time is like a river that flows swift and sure in one direction. But they are wrong. Time is an ocean in a storm…”

Chapter End Notes
Many thanks go first of all to the incomparable Layers for reckless enthusiasm and flawless beta reading. To 264jana's gorgeous manip that can be found Here and to Krycek and Zee for boundless enthusiasm. I love you guys.

If this fic has gotten you interested in Romani history and culture, then I can direct you to The Romani Archives and The Patrin Webjournal

You can find me on Tumblr and the erratically updated A handful of sand

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