### The Unbearable Weight of Staying

**by** herrealname

**Summary**

"The chaos and the pain of watching him relive his nightmares, on top of recurrently reliving her own, had been the unbearable weight of staying, but she bore it anyway. To do it with him, to do it for him, it had felt as light as dust on her two small, dread-beaten shoulders."

This is a story about the end of a relationship, that was never meant to be.

**Notes**
“I ask, did you ever love me?
You say ‘of course, of course’ so quickly
that you sound like someone else.”
— *The Unbearable Weight of Staying* by Warsan Shire

See the end of the work for more notes.

She hears the news from a chain of command, beginning high above her head and ending right at
the balls of her feet. She digs her bare toes into the linoleum; it feels cold to her touch, amongst
other things.

They sit in a shoebox room, a room that they share from time to time when it doesn’t spark any
suspicion. She sits on the edge of the bed, toes curled into the floor. He sits beside her. They sit
quietly, her — out of despair, and him — out of his mind. The paraphernalia serving his habit sits
on the table directly across from her.

Whitewashed by sickeningly bright fluorescent lights to a room with no window, she can see the
prescription plain as day. It comes in the form of an ampoule, and the needle used lays right beside
the emptied-out glass capsule.

The small working desk is further detailed with writing utensils, a handful of loose paper
documents rolled into crumpled blueprints, and the only thing well-kept amongst the clutter is the
stack of dog-eared paperbacks, worn out from use but dust-free and perfectly arranged. She can
make out the overexposed yellowing pages between each cover, and she thinks of how he’d used to
rest a page between his thumb and pointer.

He used to say that it helped the mind. Reading, it exercised what little was left of his mind, helped
him remember where he couldn’t. He would work her through stacks of his books, a well-kept
secret, and tell her to use this as much as any other weapon. In fact, more than any of their
weapons, and machines, and devices.

Fitzgerald would be guns, and Brontë would be bullets. Tolstoy would be the trusty kalashnikov of
any well-assembled arsenal, and Dostoyevsky would mimic the German sniper rifle that she knew
her way around with expert ability, courtesy of his stellar training. Steinbeck would be her favorite
hunting knife. Austen, a garrote wire. Hemingway always sat in the corner, at the bottom of the
pile.

She’d seen glimpses of his past self in the way his eyes used to skim over and digest each word on
every wood-pulp page. Sometimes, if he had held the page between his fingers long enough, it
would leave a blotched mark in the shape of the calloused pad of his right thumb. What a way, in a
world that didn’t make sense, for someone that supposedly didn’t exist to leave a mark on the
earth.

She looks at him — finally, after long last — and doesn’t question why he doesn’t look back. The
answer is already there, in the pinpoint pupils that dot the very centre of his beautiful set of eyes.

Since the day that they had reconnected, after a little two-week trip to Istanbul that had lasted two
years instead, his warm affections had become elusive as compared to the blatant gestures he’d
used to share almost a lifetime ago. She didn’t blame him. They had switched up his medication,
fueled a worse habit from oxycodone pills to fentanyl drips, and she had just found out too little too
too late.
She still doesn’t blame him. To have to curb a pain like the ones he has to experience, time after time after time, and the adverse effects that always come after, who can?

Natalia watches the way ease ripples through each steady breath he takes. Every rise and fall of his chest, calm. She quietly wonders about the quality of the thoughts in his head now. She wonders if it’s quiet now, or still loud like hers.

She recalls nights when he wakes up screaming, the expanding of his chest erratic, where he can’t tell the difference between a mild headache and a phantom zap of electricity through the frontal cortices of his brain. She recalls the mornings where he can’t collect himself off the bathroom floor because he can feel the racing in his chest when he sees the world in her sleep-heavy eyes, but he just can’t seem to remember her name.

She recalls his fingers around her throat as he crushed her trachea in his sleep; she recalls watching him wake like a living room light being switched on, and then immediately wanting to go off again to dissociate from the gravity of what he had just done. She recalls a choked voice begging her to stay, even when she had, and then telling her to go instead. He would repeat his heartfelt apologies over a million times even after she’d told him time and time again that she was okay, and that it hadn’t been his fault.

It’s never his fault.

She recalls calming the voices and the phantoms and the ghosts in his head with her touch and her voice, and she recalls wondering just how loud they scream. Because hers always resound like a gunshot right next to her ear, and whenever he isn’t there to ground her to the present, she worries that she’s just shot herself in the head.

He used to be there to convince her that she wasn’t a walking head wound. He used to be there to remind her that she was alive.

The chaos and the pain of watching him relive his nightmares, on top of recurrently reliving her own, had been the unbearable weight of staying, but she bore it anyway. To do it with him, to do it for him, it had felt as light as dust on her two small, dread-beaten shoulders.

He sleeps better now. She’s glad that he sleeps better now. But it’s just that he’s less present these days and sometimes it feels a whole lot like waiting endlessly for the other shoe to drop. Even the feeling of his hands around her neck is better than the suspense of this endless wait, than the feeling of nothing at all.

This — the news that would’ve changed both their lives, that he had never once thought to tell her — this is the other shoe. And it’s dropping faster than she can try and salvage.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

Her fingernails have the painful urge to dig themselves into her thigh, where her palm rests face-down on her lap. Whenever she’s having a bad dream or a bad trip, the pain helps her in differentiating between what’s real and not real. She wishes this was a bad dream, but she knows that it isn’t.

He guides a warm hand over hers and weave his fingers into the spaces in between. His thumb strokes the slender length of her smallest finger.

She swallows hard against the lump forming in her throat. “That it’s happening, or that you knew and didn’t tell me?” It’s a loaded question.
There’s a moment of hesitation. The split second drags on for what seems to her like hours, and she notices that his hands still, before James is able to formulate an answer.

“I don’t know,” he admits. What a terrible answer to a loaded question. Then, “which answer would make you feel better?”

Natalia pulls her hand away from beneath his grasp and keeps it to herself. She’s hurt, not by his indecisiveness or by his shipwreck of an answer, but by the fact that she can’t decide whether this answer sounds exactly like James Barnes, or like someone else entirely. Perhaps they’re the same thing.

She turns her face away from him, off to a side, and a stray tear threatens to roll down her cheek. She blinks it away as quickly as she can.

The world could be on fire right now — and it is on fire, their world, so don’t even for a second be mistaken that it isn’t — and the man sitting beside her now wouldn’t bat an eyelash. Unlike her, he wouldn’t be scared. He isn’t scared, and she, her head and her heart and every inch of her body and soul, is unquiet.

They breathe, not in tandem with each other like they usually do. His breaths are slow and steady, and hers catch in her throat every now and then but she tries her best to play it down.

Her panic creeps up the length of her throat, from both inside and out, and it burns. Her panic burns when she doesn’t breathe, burns even more when she does, and it has its whetted talons so deep in her throat that she feels like she’s choking on her own blood.

“I’m sorry. I should have told you,” he says this time around.

“Yeah.” It’s a response she barely chokes out. Her sinuses are backed up like heavy traffic on a highway. Her voice wavers, thin and flimsy and not really there. It’s hoarse.

“You need to know this isn’t your fault. None of this is your fault.”

“It is,” she says. Because for the life of her, she has wracked her brains over a thousand times to figure this out, but she just can’t think of any other reason to explain why they’re in this predicament right now.

So, it must have been her fault. Maybe she’d let something slip. Maybe she hadn’t been careful enough. Maybe she did this to them.

“It’s not.” James’ tone takes an edge. Somehow it sounds like him, more than anything else. It only makes her feel worse. “You helped me feel human again, Talya. You did a good thing, the best thing I could’ve ever asked for, and now they’re punishing us both for that.”

Then, she feels a worn palm rest over her thigh. The callouses on his skin of his flesh fingers form intricate grooves that tickle her skin. He feels so... human. “It’s not your fault,” the man repeats.

Natalia’s chest aches. She stops each sob in its track, and it works well at first, like blinking her tears away before they manage to fall. But she can’t seem to make them stop coming.

With each sentence and each gesture that he has made tonight, he’s becoming less the man with a habit and more the man she loves from deep within her core. Knowing this, feeling this, only makes this even harder. She feels that maybe she would have hurt less if he’d been the same distant man that he’d been just two hours ago.
Her whole world seems to be falling to shambles in her arms, and it’s as if all she can do is take a seat in the front row of a viewing gallery to watch it happen. Gunshots become explosions in her head and she can’t hear her own thoughts. She presses both eyelids shut. An almost guttural sound, that she can’t rationally make out, escapes her throat by accident.

She wants to apologize for being a wreck, for just being, for making this hard, but he cuts her short. “Hey,” he murmurs under his breath.

Even with all the noise, even with a voice as soft as his, his gentle call cuts through the flurry of explosions in her head and she hears him sharply. Even with her eyes closed, she can recognize the attention that his watchful eyes give her every now and then, the attention he’s giving her now.

The soldier intertwines his flesh fingers back into hers, and she doesn’t fight it. It just feels right, yet so wrong, yet she wants it there. He squeezes lightly to draw her away from the noise, as always, and it only hits her then and there that she can’t do this without him.

She thinks, this is the last time he’s going to remind her that she’s not a walking head wound. So, what comes after? What comes after him?

She can’t fight it any longer and her tears race down both cheeks quietly. She doesn’t sob. She’s not that kind of person, not anymore because she can’t be, so she weeps. She inhales a trembling breath through her nose, and lets it out through her mouth carefully. She can feel her chest shake, as much as her hands tremble. Natalia leans into him defeatedly and rests her forehead on his shoulder as her tears flow unchecked; she wears what’s left of her heart down into his sleeve.

His grip tightens around her hand, working to calm her stroke after stroke. She lets loose a small and quiet whimper by accident, and she immediately feels a comforting coldness against the skin on the inside of her knee. He presses a quick, tender kiss into her hair.

The cool touch of his prosthesis then shifts to her fingers as he straightens out. A cold fingertip traces the outline of the creases in her fingers with a light hand. Funny how years ago, he hadn’t dared lay a cool metal finger upon the surface of her skin, fearful that the arm that he’d thought of as a weapon would hurt her irreparably. It’s ironic, even, that something so lethal could turn out to be so light-handed and gentle, and comforting.

“This isn’t fair,” Natalia mumbles tinily into his shoulder. Her hair gets caught on her tongue and sticks to the side of her face where her tears had been. It isn’t pretty, but she doesn’t care. None of what’s happening is pretty in the slightest.

“I know it isn’t.”

James’ voice is calm and collected when he speaks. With her eyes closed, the lull of his voice brings her back to when they had shared their ideals, their hopes and dreams. His had taken a lot of work, from absolutely nothing at all to a faint something. She remembers it: in a perfect world, they would’ve gotten out.

They would have run away together to the most obscure parts of the world that the Red Room and HYDRA could never reach. It would’ve been a cottage at the summit of a small hill, acres of nature surrounding them in all directions. They would live by a lake that no-one would hear about. It would be warm throughout the year, to banish the very thought of freezing Eastern European winters. He would walk the vast fields that surrounded them, and indulge in the warmth of the earth beneath his bare feet.
With utmost adoration and affection in his eyes, he would watch the way she’d lean her head back to bask in the warmth of the sun. He wouldn’t have to look anywhere else to see the world, no globetrotting itch to scratch, because he would’ve had his entire world lying right beside him in bed, under a warm light and beneath woven blankets.

They would’ve had kids. If he’d managed to get them both out before it was time for her to graduate, they would’ve had kids.

But Natalia knows all too well that these are just dreams. Stories that belong more to the wood pulp pages of pressed paperback novels, than they do to real life. She just can’t come to terms with the idea of letting these dreams go, even though they’re not even hers.

His life as he knew it had ended, and his life itself will soon end. And her own life will be over even before it’s even begun, in that he’ll be gone from this earth and she’ll be stuck here forever, all alone, until she can’t tell herself apart.

That has always been the fact and the point, the one that they’ve been trying so hard to avoid.

“You’ll be okay,” he says.

She’s far from convinced. “You can’t know that.”

“I trust you, that you’ll take care of yourself. You’ll find a place that deserves you, and you’ll get as far away from here as you can.”

“We were supposed to do this together,” she counters. She pulls away to look at him. His eyes are a little more bloodshot than she had originally thought. “I don’t know how to do this. I can’t.”

“You’re the only person in this whole place who can. You’ll figure it out, I promise.”

Natalia feels a certain heaviness to her breathing. She knows the important question that she needs to ask, and the answer she doesn’t want to hear. “Are they going to kill you?”

Honestly, there are no good answers to this question. It’s a catch-22; if they kill him, she’ll be devastated. If they don’t, she can’t help but think about the horrors that they will put him through instead. All she knows is that it’ll be horrid enough to leave her wishing that they’d killed him in the first place. He already thinks that.

That, she’s sure of.

For a moment, he is a little apprehensive. She notices his mouth is dry and his lips are chapped. He licks his lips before replying. “I don’t know. I don’t think so. But I don’t where they’ll take me.”

Natalia’s stomach somersaults in her abdomen, and while her heart begins to race in her chest, her blood runs absolutely cold. There’s a sour taste in her mouth and she feels genuinely sick, like she’s about to throw up. Hot tears prick the back of her eyes yet again, burning their way through to the front of her lids.

She has read his files before, and everything bad that has ever happened to the weary soldier has happened in torture mill after torture mill. It’s not even a matter of where he ends up, because they’re everywhere.

Feeling weak, she rests her head back onto his shoulder, into the crook of his neck. “Oh god.”

“Hey, it’s nothing you need to worry about,” he mumbles into her hair.
“They can’t do that to you,” her voice grows flimsy and tapers out towards the end.

“Do what?”

She shrugs, albeit a little desperately. “I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. Either way they’re going to hurt you.”

James sighs quietly. “I’ll be fine.”

“They’re going to tear you apart.”

Over, and over, and over again, she knows; she can imagine that it’s the feeling of having teeth sink deep into flesh, like a lion picking apart its prey. Except the lions are his aggressors, his handlers, and the prey is his skin, and his personality, and his mind.

It’s hard to think about it now, but she can imagine seeing him again in ten years’ time, completely devoid of all personality and not even an inch of autonomy towards himself. They had already taken so much over the past many years. The thought leaves her feeling absolutely sick.

Yes, it’s definitely worse than being dead.

“They haven’t done before.” He tries to sound as nonchalant as he can, but she can recognize the uneasiness in his voice immediately. He’s scared. How can he not be? How can anyone? Then, he sounds more settled, more certain. “At most, they’ll put a bullet in me.”

“Please don’t say that.”

“As long as they don’t hurt you, that is all that matters to me,” he continues, this time more assertively.

Natalia weeps to herself at these words, feeling completely distraught over what’s about to come. The panic begins to gnaw at her yet again, and she feels it in the tips of her fingers, traveling up her wrists and elbows. She feels it all the way up to both sides of her neck, and her mouth turns warm and sour. Her ears ring. She doesn’t realize that she’s held that breath for half a minute.

She keels over, pressing her knees as far into her chest as possible, and her head against her knees. Dark spots begin to poke holes into her vision, but when she shuts her eyes to ride out the dizzy spell, all she hears are gunshots right beside her ears.

Blink, bang! Blink, bang! Blink, bang!

She’s about convinced that she’s going to lose her mind, as if the downward spiral hasn’t already started. Her dark days ebb and flow like waves on a shoreline that she hasn’t seen before, coming and going and yet always constantly, frustratingly there. It exists in her like a parasite and reminds her time and time again that she has absolutely no place and no value to this world, and nothing to live for.

And now, without his steady hands to remind her otherwise, she’ll literally have nothing to live for.

“I can’t,” she chokes on her words as she shakes her head. Air escapes her easily. Her face is hot. She looks at him with wide and panicked eyes. “I can’t do this alone. I can’t let them take you and hurt you. I can’t.”

“Natalia...”
“I’m going to die,” she says. She feels her body about to give way any second now. Maybe she’ll die before he leaves. Probably not. “Mmmmm, if they hurt you or kill you, I’m going to kill myself. I can’t stay here alone. I can’t let them do this to you, to us. I’ll shoot myself in the fucking face. I’ll jump off a building. I’ll slit my own throat—”

James’ face pulls into a scowl. “Stop it,” he remarks. “Don’t say that.”

“I want to,” she returns.

She doesn’t even realize the magnitude of what she’s saying, and she doesn’t care. There’s a rot that’s deep down inside her that has begun to show, each breath becoming more antagonizing than the last. It’s so hard to breathe and not feel absolutely cancerous.

He searches her face intently. “Please stop,” he repeats. Now, she sees his panic. “Please don’t say that. You know you can’t say that. You promised me you wouldn’t.”

Natalia holds her forehead in her own clammy palm, feeling physically sick to her stomach. “I feel like I’m losing my mind.”

She is literally losing her mind. And it’s not even a slow unraveling. No, none of that. Her rational mind and any concept of real life are basically barreling straight for a cliff that she can’t climb back up from. Not surprising, with the number of ways that these people have fucked with every inch of her, and most of all, her head.

Her hand rubs the back of her neck, and they forcefully scratch the back of her head. She can’t feel a thing, like she’s hooked up to painkillers, except she’s in so much anguish that she knows that she definitely isn’t. It’s just her stupid head.

Pinpricks race up and down her spine.

His hand soothes her back. He knows what this is. He is what this is, constantly. A waking nightmare, an intense and never-ending anxiety, is what this is. “You need to breathe.”

“I don’t care.”

“You need to breathe,” he repeats. “You’ll feel better if you breathe.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t want to feel better,” she blurts out in whispers. Her throat is so tight that nothing louder gets out. “I can’t survive this. I-I can’t. I can’t. I can’t do this alone. I can’t do this alive. I can’t do this. I’d rather die.”

He sighs heftily. “You can,” he insists. “And if you can’t do it for yourself, if it doesn’t make sense like that, then do it for me.”

James continues to rub the length of her back, but she shies away at the sound of his words. His words feel like a slap in the face, because she’d do anything for him and then some, but he can’t possibly ask her to do this. To get over it, to do it alone, to move on in a life that won’t include him, and feel good about it.

How could he say that? He could he ask that?

She stands on unsteady legs and strikes him the most accusatory look that she can muster. Does he even know how much pain she’s in? How much it’ll take away from her to let him leave and be put through the ringer again? Exactly how much guilt she’ll be ridden with for the rest of her life?
Now, she’s angry. She’s more than angry. On top of her panic and her grief, her nightmarish sense of hopelessness and uselessness, and everything else all at once, she’s fucking furious.

“That’s bullshit!” Natalia bites back, exasperated. She paces the room. He takes her in his stride, eyes never leaving as his gaze follows her up and down the length of the room. He does it kindly, graciously. “How could you ask me to do that? You can’t ask me to do that for you, if it’s forgetting about you.”

Her fingers itch incessantly, and she’s so close to ripping off her fingernails, digging them deep into her skin, or putting her fingers in fist through the drywall. Fire ants crawl beneath her skin and they set her on fire. When she puts her fingers through her hair, she nearly rips strands of them out. She doesn’t know what to do with her hands. She doesn’t want them on her. They’re red with visions of blood on her palms, but her hands are cold and clammy. When she runs out of options of what would feel best, just shy of cutting them both off with a bone saw, she settles on putting them around a nearby book.

He watches calmly as she fingers and fidgets with the paperback. She doesn’t even know which one she’d picked up, except that it’s softened and worn out. “You’re stronger than you think,” he says.

Natalia shakes her head. No, she isn’t.

“You’re stronger than them, and me, and these thoughts, and these odds. You’ll get out, I’m sure of it, and you’ll live a good life and you’ll be fine. You’ll be more than fine.”

“How?” Her frown deepens as she glares back at him. There’s a slight grimace settling into his features — upturned brows, pinched lips, and a half-set jaw, everything that makes him feel so human. “You’re asking me to stay here, alone, alive, for you, who’ll be dead or gone. And you’re asking me to wait for a miracle when good things don’t happen here. James, what the fuck?”

“I just don’t want you to hurt yourself. All I’m asking is for you to stay alive, and stay strong, until you get out.”

“Without you,” she adds sharply. “Because you’d be dead, or they’d be torturing you somewhere.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I trust you, and that you’ll be okay.”

What’s more unbearable than the weight of having stayed in this little relationship throughout both of their worst moments, is this. The weight of staying on without him. The weight of the world on her shoulders, losing him. The weight of having to stay alive, to stick around, when it won’t mean much after him. The weight of being okay when nothing, absolutely nothing, will be okay.

This will be the unbearable weight of staying. She wonders which will kill her first, this unbearable weight that this man is asking her to bear, or her own head.

It’s clear that they’ve placed different bets.

Natalia’s fingers fiddle with the cover of the book, and she can’t feel her fingertips anymore. She cracks a whimper, coming to a standstill in front of him. “You’re acting like this is okay, and it isn’t, and I’m not you,” she weeps frustratedly. He runs his palms along her thighs from where he
sits, and guides her to sit back down beside him. “This isn’t okay, and I won’t be okay. Maybe you’ve done this long enough for you to feel nothing, but I can’t do that. I’m not you.”

“I feel everything, Talya,” James simply corrects. He doesn’t say much else, and lets his correction settle into her thoughts.

Had he meant for it to make her feel better, because it means that he hurts and fears just as much as she does? Or had it been meant to purely be an indication that she’s wrong? That if he feels everything like he says that he does, and he still doesn’t mind what’s about to happen, and if they both feel to the same extent, that she has to be fine with it too?

She’s torn between both. If he feels everything, then he should know how much doing this, as he so says, will destroy her. Obliterate her.

Her fingers have a death grip around the paperback that she now realizes to be the familiar Fitzgerald novel. He trails his own fingers along the inside of her knee and thigh, and he hangs his head low. “But we have what we have, when we have it, and for now, it’s done,” he continues.

She licks her lips, but she’s parched. “I don’t want it to be done.”

Her voice, it’s shattered, just like she is. Envision taking a sledgehammer to a single pane of glass a thousand times, until all that’s left on the ground are little bits and pieces of sharp-edged shards and fine powder. That’s what she is, and how she sounds like.

Because, what does it mean, if this chapter is done? If what they have is done, even for now, that what beholds them both next?

She is constantly stuck in the past, and has too little energy to contemplate the infinite possibilities of the future, and struggles to exist in the present, and so maybe he sees something that she can’t. And if she can’t see it, then what’s the point? What’s the point of staying over something that doesn’t make sense to her?

The soldier leans his heavy head against hers, his shut and resting eyes and sharp nose and busied lips buried in the hair that gathered at the side of her head. It’s intimate, and sometimes she forgets where she ends and he begins, until they pull apart. It’s the last thing that keeps her sane.

He leans into her, and she feels his breath against her scalp. And he takes a moment, two moments, in fact, to gather his thoughts before he speaks: “Promise me that you’ll stay alive, and that you’ll run as far away from here as you can, as soon as you get the chance to. Help me be okay with this.

It’s already hard enough as it is,” he finally admits.

A warm tear pelts onto her rigid thumb as it rolls off the edge of her jaw. Her breath catches at the back of a dry throat.

“I can’t promise you that,” she says quietly, truthfully.

“It’s okay. It’s enough if you try.” And she relents, and she nods, and she feels the slightest smile of his lips against the nerve endings at the root of her hair, where his breaths lay. He thanks her, though she thinks it’s premature.

Natalia pulls away slowly, and they pull apart, and her skin aches incessantly for last touches that she knows will have to last for the rest of a lifetime, from this day forth. But she needs this more than she needs his touch. She needs to look him in the eye and implore him to be honest.
She won’t rest if she doesn’t, and if he isn’t. And he tells masterful lies with his words and with his manner, just like she does, but his eyes often tell a different narrative. So, she needs this.

And so, they pull apart and he peers at her, and she holds his watchful gaze with utmost care and precision. She asks: “Are you scared?”

Oddly enough, he smiles. It doesn’t reach his eyes and light him like a bulb, but it doesn’t water away either, and not for a second does he dare to look away.

“I’m terrified, Talya,” James is honest. The most honest that he has probably ever been, most likely. It’s in his eyes. They don’t falter, and it breaks her trodden-down heart even more. “But it helps a lot to know that you’ll be well, and that I’ll see you on the other side one day, wherever that may be, whenever that may be.”

In death, or even beyond that. Hopefully beyond that, in life. In a life outside of this place, this box of horrors, this prison in more ways than one. Hopefully, still alive, and out there.

She thinks of their story with full stop. That’s how she has always been. That’s her nature. Black, and white, and red. Good and bad, right and wrong, then and now, here and gone. Always two solid sides to a coin, tossed into a coin flip, with nothing in between.

Yet he thinks of their story as a comma in the middle of an unfinished sentence, and that’s hopeful, even for him. Especially for him.

Her nature is exactly how she knows that her world is falling apart right before her eyes. It’s either sturdy in one piece, or else it’s in pieces. And now, in this very moment, it’s in pieces. Millions and millions of pieces, in shambles.

And his nature is how he strives to believe in more than two sides of the same coin.

Perhaps he’s seen the world far longer than she has, and knows better. Or maybe he’s just trying to be strong enough to leave tonight, and so he tells himself excuses and lies to get him out the door before they drag him out, along with two bullets between her eyes.

“What if you forget?” She presses.

“I won’t. I’d remember you anywhere.” The man is so sure of his words. It makes her want to smile just as much as it makes her want to cry.

He looks her over like he’s burning the image of her, under this sickly fluorescent light, into the forefront of his mind — the peculiar burnt scarlet shade of her hair, the curve and arc of her nose, the way her lips are a little tucked into her teeth because she always bites on her lip when she’s stressed, the iridescent emerald hues of her eyes that shine a different color under different lights.

He memorizes the keen incline of her cheekbones and her jaw, and he does it with his hands. He is no longer a stranger to the way that her softened locks feel, rolled between his fingertips. The back of her hands, and the front of her hands, as well as the gaps between each of her fingers where they perfectly he fit his own, he burns each dip and groove and wrinkle into memory.

He familiarizes himself with the vivid memory of the way she tastes, and he does it with his lips, soft lips pressed against hers. She figures she tastes like salt, and perhaps that isn’t the most accurate impression to leave, because her lips have been moistened with tears. So, he tastes her tears, and a part of her frets that it won’t be enough.

Yet, he assures that she tastes like more than tears. It’s the savory bitterness of dark chocolate that
she still has stuck in her molars from earlier that afternoon, and the faint taste of good vodka on her
tongue that had been to curb her sadness. There’s a cough drop somewhere in there too, and that
tastes like honey lemon, a little sweet and a little more sour.

He’s amused by it, because she tastes exactly like true love, and he laughs lightly, nose-to-nose
and lip-to-lip. Another quite tear rolls off her lash.

Natalia loosens her white-knuckled grip on the book in her hand, and he takes into account the
feeling of their embrace. It’s evident, what he’s doing. He memorizes chest against chest, and the
way their ribs and their stomachs meet, from collarbone to loin. It’s likely that he can feel her chest
wracked with storms, and perhaps he can also feel her bones break one by one. She hopes he feels
the tremors that reverberate from the string of bombs that have detonated and erupted within her.

He learns the hook of her arms around the back his neck, the exact weight that it descends down
onto his shoulders, and how his arms begin to wrap increasingly tight around her. He has an arm
around what she assumes to be her fifth and sixth rib, and his cool fingertips caress the whole back
of her head with a tender, light-handed touch. He plants a kiss by the side of her neck, over her
hair, right beneath her ear, and quietly learns the sweet scent of lilac and pheromones.

She’s sat on and against his hip, in a straddle.

Just like her cheek buries itself into his collarbone, her open shoulder fits beneath his chin like a
tailored glove. He presses another peck against the skin of her shoulder, and she can feel him
swallow thickly after that. They don’t have to be looking at each other in the face for Natalia to
know that he’s trying his absolute hardest not to cry.

She doesn’t know if he’s succeeding or failing, though, but they exist in the moment quietly and
attentively for what seems like hours nonetheless, so incredibly still.

And James forgets words sometimes. Most times, she means. Usually, it’s the first thing that goes.
The sound of his words, the sound of her voice. The sense of sound is the first one that dissipates in
his memory, and the last one to come back, but he remembers key words of which he’s heard
before.

32557038. The Howlies. Winter Soldier. Asset. Der soldat. Talya. To quieten the ghosts. Яша
(Yasha). James. Love of my life.

Душа моя (my soul).

Before he pulls away for the last time, before he breaks her heart a thousand times over, that’s what
he calls her.

James whispers it softly into her ear, and savors the shapes that the words form on his lips as he
does. He says, “Remember I love you, Душа моя.” And she nods. He reminds, “You’ll never be a
walking head wound.” She nods again. Then he continues, “I’ll see you soon,” and she knows that
this is it.

They pull apart. He keeps his hands, and she keeps her legs, and her bare toes curl back into the
cold surface of the floor. Her hands are on the paperback yet again, and she holds it with a death
grip because it’s either it or him, and she wants so much for it to be him. They sit as two separate
people on the edge of the bed again, together, but so alone. Isolated above, connected below. So,
so, so very much down below.
Like, at the foundation of the universe, below. One might even call it subatomic, below.

James heaves a sigh that she doesn’t want to hear. *I’ll see you soon,* will be the last words she hears from him, she’ll make sure of it. If she can’t control her world in the way that it’s coming apart, then she’ll control what she can, by way of what she makes of these last moments instead.

Last words, last touch, last kiss, last thought.

Her eyes glide over the cover of the book that rests in her hands, and she knows the words on each page by heart. The film cover has greyed beneath her touch, and longer under what used to be his. What used to be his, that will now devolve into a has been.

*The loneliest moment in someone’s life is when they are watching their whole world fall apart, and all they can do is stare blankly* — F. Scott Fitzgerald, she remembers. Funny, how words on a dusty old page in a book that she’s read one too many times can describe this moment perfectly. It’s almost like foresight, or foreshadowing.

It depends on how you want to see it.

He gets up from the edge of the bed, she sinks even lower into her seat. His fingers brush the edge of her shoulder one last time, and then a soft stray lock of her hair as he slots it behind her ear, and then she clutches the paperback with rigid fingers as she listens to the crunch of his boot as he turns on his heel. Natalia doesn’t dare to look up to watch it happen, and so she only looks at his feet as they shuffle to the door.

And all she can do, as the wood pulp pages say about people like them, is stare blankly.

She lets him leave, leave the room, leave her, leave to his hurt and death and demise, leave probably forever, whilst she struggles to come to terms with a lonely lifetime learning how to stay.

But still, she tries, and she stays.

End Notes

Y’all, I know that the Fitzgerald quote isn't actually a Fitzgerald quote, despite the internet widely crediting it to *The Great Gatsby.* Super sorry about that, but let's just assume that it’s in a Fitzgerald novella somewhere in this headcanon. :’)

Anyway, glad to have recovered this little BuckyNat gem from 2 years ago. A post-CW continuation of this will be coming up soon!

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